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CAREER PLANNING

6 Ways to Take Control of Your Career Development If Your Company Doesn't Care About It

by Carter Cast

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We are now in the era of do-it-yourself career development. Companies less frequently offer formal training – a trend that has been around for years. This may be because employees change jobs so frequently (job tenure now averages about four years) that firms don't see the value in investing in people who are likely to

leave. This is a sharp contrast with the investment that senior leaders used to make in employees. During my 11 years at PepsiCo, mostly during the 1990s, “personal development” was treated as a major company initiative.

Unfortunately, organizations today are unknowingly leaving employees with skill gaps and blind spots that can derail careers and organizational effectiveness. And managers aren't helping. Too worried about their own hides, most managers don't have time or energy to focus on anyone else's. In fact, Korn Ferry found that when managers rated themselves on 67 managerial skills, “developing others” came in dead last.

Ideally, organizations would do more to foster career development: encourage more-immediate feedback, develop clear performance criteria, deliver developmental feedback with clarity and tact, and provide resources and incentives for managers to make employee development a priority. But the reality is that the bigger burden is on employees. Workers at all levels must learn to identify their weaknesses, uncover their blind spots, and strengthen their skills.

Here are six things you can do to take control of your career development.

Understand what you're evaluated on. What does success look like in your position? What are your job goals and success metrics? It's best to identify these with your manager, but if that's not happening, then write down what you understand the goals and key performance indicators to be. Take them to your boss to get their agreement, and engage in an ongoing dialogue to ensure you stay on the right track.

Solve for your own blind spots. Top performers are always learning and adjusting, and routinely seek feedback from their boss, peers, and subordinates. If your boss doesn't proactively give you feedback, start the conversation yourself. After a presentation or big meeting, state one thing that you think went well, and then ask

for advice on one thing you could improve. It's best to keep it simple; most people can only absorb one area to improve at a time. Listen to and thank your boss for the feedback.

Codify your learnings. You can capture feedback and learning by keeping a journal. List the five to 10 skills or competencies you need to develop in your position, and rate yourself (either on your own or with the help of a trusted adviser) on each. For example, if you're a brand marketer, you might give yourself an A in advertising development, a B+ in pricing analysis, and a C in trade marketing. Focus on the C's to close skill gaps. Seeking feedback from someone who previously held your job can speed up your learning.

Increase your visibility with the C-suite. It's not always possible to get noticed by senior leaders through your direct work, so you might try volunteering for initiatives, such as charity work, company events, or on-campus recruiting. This is an easy but often overlooked way to rub elbows with senior people who will see you in action and ideally take notice of your contributions.

Become an expert in an area of increasing importance to your company. Your company may be grappling with a disruption from a new technology such as the internet of things, artificial intelligence, or cloud-based computing. Become the expert person in your department on an emerging issue. Conduct research and literature reviews, attend conferences, or write on the topic. Developing expertise in a nascent area of growing importance can lead to promotions and other career opportunities.

Seek good counsel and mentoring. The perspective of a senior person is invaluable, but pouncing on someone – “Will you be my mentor?” – is likely to scare them off. Try to meet in an informal way: in the coffee shop in your company's lobby, or at the company picnic or golf outing. Know the person's bio, and be prepared to ask a few good questions related to their area of expertise. If

things go well, you'll hear, "If I can help you, let me know." A week or so later, you can extend an invitation to "continue the conversation" over coffee. In time, a mentor relationship may develop organically.

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Strong functional skills take time to develop. In most positions, whether it's enterprise sales, brand marketing, supply chain logistics, or corporate finance, being competent often consists of having deep functional knowledge in four or five key job areas and a good working knowledge in another four or five. Without the willingness to take multiple assignments, or even strategic lateral moves, a well-rounded skill set will be elusive. It takes patience.

Earlier in my career, I was still at the manager level within PepsiCo while a good friend moved up to vice president

by moving to another company. But as my skill set solidified, I understood how the pieces of the business fit together, and my career progression accelerated.

Your skill set is ultimately your career capital, so take the time to develop your functional skills. Jumping from job to job too quickly (say, in 18-month or two-year increments) won't allow you to develop the functional expertise you need to advance your career. With time and patience, and by taking the initiative, you're far more likely to thrive in this DIY world.

Carter Cast is a clinical professor of innovation and entrepreneurship at Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University and author of *The Right (and Wrong) Stuff: How Brilliant Careers are Made – and Unmade*.

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CAROL ANDERSON 9 hours ago

The advice here is very good. I do, however, take issue with career development being the sole responsibility of the organization. It has been my experience, both in organizations and academically, that those who take the lead in their own career advancement do very well. Why would we kill that learning spirit by blaming the organization for not "training" them?

Organizations today work hard to identify skills, skill gaps, and provide content for learning. But as we know through the academic studies of andragogy, adult learning has to be immediately relevant, and adult learners have to be self-directed. Why not put the energy toward helping leaders help employees?

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