

# Younger Workers Need a Career Narrative

by [Heidi K. Gardner](#) and [Adam Zalisk](#)

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Two senior management consultants are chatting with each other between meetings:

*“I heard we managed to staff the new project in New Jersey. Sounds like a good team — I don’t know the junior guy, do you?”* says the first.

*“I don’t know Greg yet either,”* says the second. *“But I’m relieved we were able to secure somebody, given how short-staffed we are. I know he’s got lots of experience doing this type of assignment, but I’m not sure if it’s something he loves or if he’s just in a rut. I’m hoping it’s the first, of course — it could be like pulling teeth otherwise, since this is going to be such a tough engagement. We’ll see, I guess.”*

Senior executives in professional firms aspire to match the right people to the right work, but here, these senior executives don’t have enough to go on. Facing pressure to staff a project quickly, there’s little to stop them from assuming that Greg wants his next assignment to be just like projects he’s done in the past.

But what if that’s not so? How would they know? They have no idea how his past achievements relate to his future interests and development goals. Greg has not done a good enough job telling his own story in this company and so he’s allowed other people to define him.

Greg, in short, lacks a career narrative.

This is not surprising. In recent years, much has been written about the importance of career narratives for mid-career and senior professionals, particularly those making a career transition. But, we'd argue, they're even more important for younger professionals who don't yet have a multipage CV or a high-powered headhunter in their corner. What, then, makes for an effective narrative?

**First, it should be easy to remember and retell.** The whole point is to give your colleagues a narrative that quickly comes to mind whenever they're asked about you, preventing them from making assumptions and drawing conclusions on their own. Two or four sentences, maximum.

**Second, it should meaningfully link your past successes to your near and long-term development needs and suggest the kinds of assignments that would help to achieve those objectives.** Those goals might certainly be developmental (to test a particular skill; gain experience with a certain tool or methodology; explore a specific industry). But they can also be more personal (limit travel to spend time with family, for instance). Think of it as a "sound-bite resume" — on hearing it, senior professionals should have two reactions. First, they should be interested in working with you. Second, they should know if it makes sense for you to work with them.

**Third, your narrative needs to hang together with the right combination of honesty, humility, and personal flavor.** Doing so creates an authentic and compelling career narrative. Narratives that just articulate a string of successes are not credible and are not likely to be repeated. Similarly, boilerplate chronicles without any personal flair rarely get traction.

An example of a poor narrative would be this:

*"I wanted to work in biotech, so that's why I joined the firm. I've had a lot of experience in labs, and I'm still considering graduate school."*

While it has the virtue of being short, this narrative doesn't connect this person's experiences to any goals that could be furthered by work within the firm. He mentions his initial interest in "biotech" but doesn't explain how that interest is evolving and what additional experience he's therefore seeking. As a result, it fails to make clear what type of assignment he would ideally be staffed on.

Make a few tweaks, though, and we have a powerful career narrative:

*"I worked in labs through college and entered the firm with a strong interest in health care clients. I've had the opportunity to develop my quantitative financial skills in the comfortable context of health care. Now I'd like to test those skills with other commercial clients to determine what industry most interests me over the long term. That said, given my wife's and my family commitments, I'd really like to work locally if possible."*

The narrative now clearly demonstrates a string of successes (experience in labs, completing several project assignments, a growing family) which lead to a development goal ("determine what industry most interests me over the long term") and a need ("I'd really like to work locally"). And all this in four sentences!

**Fourth, once you've crafted your narrative, the next step is to share it, in the course of meeting and getting to know your colleagues.** Seek out informal opportunities to tell your story. A reflective moment sitting in the airport with a senior colleague or sharing a cab with a teammate are occasions when people might ask, "How's everything going?" And when they do, they'll be giving you a perfect opportunity to share your career narrative.

As you talk to more and more people, it will become increasingly likely that the kinds of conversations they'll be having about you when you're not in the room will work in your favor. Perhaps a senior exec will hear your story from one of his juniors and identify a development opportunity that perfectly fits your needs. Maybe a senior partner will hear about your set of skills and geographic constraints from one of your managers and offer you a perfect, local project assignment.

**Finally, once developed, your narrative should never be set in stone.** It needs to be regularly updated, as you achieve more and your needs change. Ensuring that senior staff understands the logic behind your career aspirations — and that they are not surprised by them — will go a long way toward maintaining top executives’ respect and support.

Sharing your personal narrative isn’t just good for you — it’s good for the people who hear it, too. As Heidi Gardner’s research on teams shows, an important factor that can depress team performance is a phenomenon known as “expertise dissensus” — that’s when team members who actually have markedly different views nevertheless think they all agree because they’ve made unwarranted assumptions about one another. By disseminating your story, you can give people a far more accurate view of who you are, which can avert potentially crippling coordination challenges, interpersonal friction, and misunderstandings down the road.

Too often, junior professionals rely on formal mechanisms for getting the word out about their achievements and needs — in particular, formal staffing processes, periodic performance reviews, and professional social networks. While these are all excellent resources in career development, they are rarely a match for the informal chatter that’s already going on in hallways, rental cars, and restaurants. By inserting your career narrative into those conversations, you can help ensure that when people talk about you — and they will talk about you — they’re saying the right things.

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