

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO TAKE OWNERSHIP OF YOUR CAREER - 7 Key Responsibilities

The challenge for each of us today is to recognize that the only real security we possess is that which we create within ourselves. It's clear in today's work environment that our success depends on our ability to take ownership of our own careers and manage our development opportunities.

This message isn't new. We've been reading about it over the last several years, and companies have been telling us that our careers are our responsibility, unlike the "days of future passed" where both our managers and employers took on much of that role.

Our own work experiences support this new thinking when we see how companies are responding to all of the global workforce business drivers - increased competition, stakeholder pressures, changing worldwide markets and customer expectations. Organizations are reinventing themselves. They are lean and flat; contract labor, restructuring and outsourcing are on the norm; accelerating technology and organization changes are rampant; work roles are being redefined and manager spans of control are much greater.

The result?...you and I must take the lead in charting our own future; no one else can do it for us. The question is how? What are the 7 responsibilities for managing our career development today?

1. Develop self and career management skills

Taking initiative is critical to career success because jobs and requirements will change rapidly. Our workplace is more competitive. After all, we are all a resource or a product in today's market with tremendous skills and experiences to sell. We need to know ourselves, what we have to offer, our skills, talents and attributes; and be able to sell ourselves in our own way with our own personality. Career management is using this new self-reliant attitude in planning and directing our experiences to achieve our work, life, and education/training goals, i.e. our Career Development. (Refer to this Career Development definition and our discussion in "Career Development Today, How Would You Describe It?" - Parts 1 and 2.)

O.K., that sounds good, now where do we start? Developing self and career management skills begin with....

2. Becoming self-aware, create career focus, passion and meaning in your work.

Now that's pretty heavy, but I'm convinced it is our right and challenge. Each and every one of us can and should aspire to this, amidst the claims from others and ourselves of "don't be foolish," "this is just pie in the sky," "I've got a family to feed, and can't worry about loving or even liking what I do." Yet, I work with employees every day that have created or are committed to finding meaningful work opportunities, and who enjoy, even love, their work. Though they are in the minority, they are proof that you and I can make it happen. Career management starts with looking inside ourselves, taking inventory, and answering some tough questions like:

— What are your career goals? Where do you see yourself in one year? five years? 10 years? Are your goals and plans written, including dates? How does your present position fit into your plan?

- Describe your passion. What turns you on? challenges you? Can you find it in your present work? If not, how can you build it into your work? Or is it a hobby, volunteer activity or outside interest? If so, can you make it a career?
- What are your 4-6 most important skills or strengths? I ask this of employees all the time and find very few who can respond positively unless they have been through some self-assessment process. The flip side is what are those weak areas or skills that you need to further develop or strengthen?
- Even more importantly, what are your “motivated skills,” those skills that you not only excel at but that you enjoy using most? Career success can simply be stuffing as many “motivated skills” into your present role and future plans, then sitting back and watching positive changes happen.

Like the talented engineer who identified her motivated skills as working under pressure, participating in “tiger teams,” solving the most difficult of challenges. Yet, she was in a position where she was unable to use any of these, was very dissatisfied and ready to leave the company. Shortly after completing a series of self-assessment skills, interests, values and goal-setting exercises, she negotiated new responsibilities with her boss, found herself back on track and eventually in a leadership role, which was a goal on her career plan. Of course, her career flourished. What a win-win for both the employee and the organization.

- How do your interests, values, mission or purpose, goals and skills match up with your present role, career path or present direction? What about with your department and employer business goals and direction? This is the most complex question in this career puzzle, but one you need to be able to answer. By aligning your knowledge of yourself and your career direction with your knowledge of the organization, you create energy and excitement in your work.

You can begin this self-awareness process by enrolling in the “Personal Career Leadership” and “Five Principles of Career Success” workshop series that we offer in our career consulting and coaching practice (www.recchionandaccociates.com). Like an old friend, “What Color is Your Parachute” by Richard Nelson Bolles has long been another great starting place. John Holland’s Interest Inventory (Self Directed Search), Edgar Schien’s “Career Anchors” Values Inventory, Campbell Interest and Skill Survey (CISS), DISC, MBTI and TalentSmart Emotional Intelligence inventories are solid assessment instruments that are available.

After self-awareness comes...

3. Organizational awareness, the third strategy.

In today’s work environment we must view ourselves as more of a “business partner” with our team, department and organization, focusing on and looking for opportunities to contribute to both our success and that of the company. As a “business partner” with our employer, we also have to understand the business, technologies, customers and services both within and outside of our “cubical.” By understanding the internal (and external) marketplace, trends, new initiatives, growth areas, training and development opportunities and skill requirements we become more knowledgeable of our options, more valuable to the organization, and our marketability increases. Information gathering in today’s rapidly changing workplace is an ongoing process. Empowered, realistic career decisions depend on solid research and organizational awareness.

4. Be a continuous learning employee - become dedicated to personal growth.

Pursue informal training (networking, reading professional publications and books, cross training, teaching and mentoring) and formal classroom, college, or web-based training. Take advantage of every opportunity to build your skills, expand your network and relationships. I remember one client who spent 8 years completing both an Associates Degree and a BSEE from Arizona State University, while he worked full time and supported his family. He recalled the days that he finished work on the late shift at 3 and 4 in the morning, and then traveled to the ASU main campus on the other side of town for an 8 a.m. class. Looking back, he questioned how he was able to do it, but he told me that he would do it all over again if he had to. He continues to demonstrate this same dedication to growth and learning today.

5. Develop a “Career Action Plan” ...

Identify short- (1 year) and long-term (2-3 year) goals in your work, life and education/training. These are the three areas that make up our Career Development definition (see Part 2, “Career Development Today - How would you describe it?”)

On the work side, what are 3-4 most important projects, relationships, challenges, skills, team and leadership assignments that you want to develop over the next 1-3 years at work? On the life experiences side, what roles or relationships at home need your support? What volunteer, church or community services will fulfill your purpose or mission? What are the education and training goals and resources over the next 1-3 years that would enable you to accomplish your work and life experience goals? Identify specific mini-steps, target start dates and completion dates, and people/network contacts and resources that will enable you to meet each goal in work, life, and education/training. Then take action.

By developing your plan, your challenge is to align self-awareness (skills, values, interests, and mission) with your knowledge of the organization (business direction, technologies, industry, training and career opportunities) in a win-win “business partnership,” i.e., linking responsibilities 2 and 3 above. I’ll talk further about building this plan, and share some employee examples at a later date.

6. Build partnerships - We learn through our relationships.

No longer does our technical expertise solely determine our career success as in days past. In today’s flat, team-based work environment where responsibilities, power and authority cross functional, departmental, divisional and business boundaries, our ability to develop and maintain diverse relationships might be one of the most important responsibilities for our career success. Even more important, champion our individual diversity. Recognize that by embracing our individual differences and similarities ranging from education, family background, accent, race, gender, to sexual orientation, our relationships and teams become much stronger. Though we can take ownership of and be proactive in our career management, be self-aware, understand the organization, be dedicated to personal growth and possess a well thought-out career plan, success will elude us if we fail to focus on building our life relationships with family, friends, and in the community, and our business relationships with customers, supervisors, leaders and peers.

In my career management classes we regularly talk about the fact that “we are the architect of our relationships.” Working towards win-win relationships in our work, life and education, identifying the expectations of our internal and external customers, partners, families and friends, then exceeding their expectations is what it’s all about. That’s our challenge. Those of us who recognize the importance of building our “social capital” will flourish in our work and life.

7. Create Career Development balance between work, life

experiences, training and education

In all of the work that I have done, it seems the greatest career development hurdle we all face is...*time*. Our greatest and most important challenge may be trying to manage that delicate balance between the pressures of our family life, the responsibilities of being a single parent, or caring for a dependent parent, the challenges of a fast-paced and stress-filled work environment, and learning and education pressures. Recognizing and prioritizing this balance, identifying goals and boundaries are the first steps in successfully managing your work and life.

Some final thoughts...

As we conclude, let's take a few minutes to inventory each of the 7 Responsibilities. How would you rate your awareness of or abilities in each? First, list the goals or achievements that you have accomplished within each responsibility. Next, identify 1-2 areas of improvement for each. List specific actions needed or goals (with start and completion dates) for all 7 Responsibilities. Incorporate them into your own "Career Action Plan."

As we said at the onset, our success in today's work environment depends on our ability to take ownership of our career by both understanding and taking on the 7 key responsibilities that represent our work, life, and education/training.

Our challenge is to develop our self and career management skills through self awareness and organizational awareness, by becoming a continuous learner dedicated to personal growth, by developing a career action plan, building partnerships and creating balance between our work, life, and education/training.

Go for it!