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## **ARTICLE** **CAREER PLANNING**

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for You at Your  
Company

*by Dorie Clark*

CAREER PLANNING

# What to Do If There's No Clear Career Path for You at Your Company

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We all know the old script: join a company, work hard, move up the ladder. But it's been decades since that was a reliable path, and not just because of layoffs or outsourcing or [robots](#).

These days, the culprit preventing many professionals from identifying a clear career path at their company is simply that one no longer exists. Given that successful companies must often pivot to adapt to changes in the marketplace, and the half-life of many skills is now estimated to be [five years](#)

or less, companies often have no idea what staffing needs they'll have in a few years' time or who would be qualified to fill them.

As Cathy Benko and Molly Anderson predicted in their 2010 book, we've gone from a corporate ladder to a *Corporate Lattice*, in which professionals' career progress may only *sometimes* be linear — and often, may instead appear diagonal or horizontal. Guidance from companies on how to move forward in this environment is often minimal, because they just aren't sure.

Increasingly, they're relying on individual professionals to take more active control of their careers — a topic I'm frequently called in to [speak about](#) for corporate audiences. Here are four strategies professionals can follow to successfully navigate the new terrain.

First, it's essential to **make yourself aware of the possibilities**. One appeal of the traditional linear career path was that it didn't take much research: while not everyone achieved the end goal (such as a promotion), it was very clear what it was. In the new workplace reality, individual professionals almost have to take a detective-like approach, investigating and vetting opportunities. That may not be hard in smaller companies, but in large global enterprises, information becomes key.

I recently participated in an [Aspen Institute roundtable](#) on the future of work, and one C-suite executive noted that in her sprawling multinational, it would be almost impossible — without proactive research and conversations with leaders — to even be aware of the possibilities. That's why it's essential to cultivate a broad network, both inside and [outside your company](#), so you have visibility into areas of the business that may otherwise be opaque to you.

Second, it's important to **seek out help**. Even if your employer isn't providing explicit guidance about your career path, they're likely to recognize and appreciate the value of an engaged employee who is raising their hand and asking for support. If you go to HR with suggestions about professional development programs or conferences you'd like to attend, courses you want to take, or functional areas of the business you'd like to understand better, they will often be extremely receptive, as you're modeling the ideal, proactive behavior that many of today's talent leaders seek to cultivate.

Third, don't wait to hear about open positions. Instead, **identify your own ideal opportunities**. In my book *Reinventing You*, I profiled a management consultant named Joanne Chang who reinvented herself into a successful career as a chef. Her secret was — instead of waiting to respond to job postings, where she'd be competing with scores of other better-qualified candidates — she wrote personal letters to a dozen high-profile chefs she admired and explained why she wanted to work with them. Her targeted approach set her apart and landed her a job within days, despite her lack of formal credentials.

In many ways, shifting to a new role inside your company can feel as dramatic a career change as moving from being a management consultant to being a chef. In many companies, departments and

divisions may have parochial views about the transferability of skills and experience (“She’s only worked in Asia. What would she know about the Latin American market?”).

That’s why it’s your job to precisely target the opportunities that appeal to you most, and develop a strategy to connect with, befriend, and court those connections. Just as a random management consultant would have difficulty winning a position as a chef, a marketer may be viewed skeptically if he wants to transition into operations. But as Joanne Chang’s example shows, a *particular* marketer — armed with a thoughtful explanation of why he wants to shift functional roles and what he can bring to the table — may be warmly welcomed.

Finally, work to **cultivate influential allies**. It’s always useful to have a [mentor board of directors](#) that can help advise you as you weigh possibilities — and a [sponsor](#), a leader who is willing to exert political capital on your behalf, is even better. But once you’ve landed these key allies, your job isn’t done. As you progress at your company and in your career, it’s essential to keep your mentors and sponsors informed about your progress, so they’re aware of new skills you’ve developed and your current career aspirations. Otherwise, even if you keep in regular touch about other matters, they’re unlikely to question or update their initial impression of you.

One colleague of mine has had a warm relationship with her sponsor for well over a decade, but she discovered— when he made a gentle poke at her for not developing her brand sufficiently — that his view of her was out of date, and he wasn’t aware of several major projects she’d undertaken in the past several years. She requested a meeting to update him on what she’d been doing, and he gladly agreed — resulting in a far more nuanced understanding of her current skillset, allowing him to better advocate for her and steer the right opportunities her way.

It may feel disconcerting if your company hasn’t crafted a linear career progression for you. But it’s also a significant opportunity to build a career that’s uniquely tailored to your own needs, skills, and interests. By following these steps, you can proactively shape your professional future.

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