



YOUR CAREER PATH IS ALL ON YOU -- AND THAT'S A GOOD THING

By Jody Greenstone Miller

+ *Jody Greenstone Miller is co-founder and CEO of Business Talent Group, an independent consultant and executive marketplace for project-based work.*

In the old days “career paths” came from outside. Companies hired you and then defined what you had to do to get to the next level. There were prescribed time frames for advancement, an HR department to nurture your progress, and a recruiting industry that reinforced this view of what a successful career looked like. Those days are gone.

Today you’re on your own. You’re expected to have 11 jobs before you hit 50. Half the work undertaken by major companies in the years ahead won’t be done by the firms’ own employees. Four in 10 of us are likely to be working independently by 2020. And as career paths morph into something resembling individualized mazes, jobs themselves are mutating from broader roles to a set of more precisely defined tasks.

Part of this frame shift is being driven by the usual culprits: rapid technological change, globalization, the fraying relationship between employers and employees. But there’s a newer driver as well—the growing desire of many in the labor force (such as millennials, women, and baby boomers nearing retirement) for a reimagined relationship between work and the rest of life, and for a different work experience to boot.

The demise of the well-crafted corporate career may feel like a recipe for insecurity. But scary can have a silver lining. Once you understand that in the 21st century the arc of your professional life really is on you, you have the opportunity to design your career and life around the values and objectives that matter most. What does that kind of ownership look like exactly? Here are five essential roles you need to master:

FUTURIST

You don’t have to predict the next big thing, but you need a thesis about where the world is going and where you fit in. And because it’s hard to foresee the rise of things like big data and mobile apps, focus on getting skills and experiences that can transfer. If you can, log a few early years at a marquee company to learn what high-quality, high-integrity professionalism looks like.

SELF-ANALYST

Sorry, but the 21st century is no time to put off the hard work of introspection. You need to know what you really want out of your career and when you want it. This will let you dial it up or down depending on what else is happening (you know, kids, illness, triathlons, the

usual). Your career can evolve as you do, and you can sync your career life cycle to the rest of your life.

SKILL BUILDER

Many of the traits (like collaboration) and fields (like cybersecurity) most in demand aren’t taught by any school or company. The skill of acquiring skills, not just degrees, matters. You need to be creative. Gin up a midcareer internship. Seek out an apprenticeship with someone who’s great at what you want to do. Suss out the information to master it on your own.

JOURNALIST

In a world where everyone has 500 LinkedIn connections, being networked won’t distinguish you. Substantive, relevant engagement—the markers of a good

journalist’s relationship with her sources and readers—is the way to be credible and top of mind for your contacts when opportunities hit the radar.

STORYTELLER

Connect the dots between where you are and where you want to go. No prospective boss should be expected to figure out why your gifts at marketing soap can help a firm ship software. Only you can make your path make sense, because it won’t look like anyone else’s. It’s no longer about picking a firm and working hard to move up a well-worn route. “Looking for a job” is so yesterday. Making yourself so invaluable that companies create roles for you along a path you choose is the new frontier for professional success.