

Advancing Beyond an Entry-Level Job

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Key Takeaways

- People have different views of what constitutes a successful career.
- Upward mobility is the rise to positions of greater authority, responsibility, and salary.
- Because training facilitates advancement, the first item to assess in a prospective employer is how much it invests in developing its people.
- Confidence is essential for advancing one's career; employees must believe they can learn and grow into more advanced roles.

Entry-level positions are a gateway into the workforce, yet advancing beyond an early-career role is necessary to broaden one's professional experience and earn a higher salary. Whether following the traditional path of moving up within an organization or developing extensive expertise, there are a variety of career paths and concepts to consider. This fact sheet provides strategies and insights for advancing to higher-level positions within organizations.

Multiple Career Concepts

Brousseau and others (1996) found that people pursue careers in fundamentally different ways, guided by different ideas of what constitutes a successful career. Because no single path fits everyone, they assert that responsibility for careers should be shared; both individuals and organizations need stability and change and should work together to meet their respective goals, while adapting to each other's shifting demands. To support this, Brousseau and colleagues (1996) describe the following four patterns of career experience, called *career concepts*, each reflecting a different idea of career success and a different set of motives:

Linear Career

In this traditional, upwardly mobile path, a person climbs a structured "corporate ladder," changing jobs mainly to gain greater authority, salary, and/or status. The driving motives are power and achievement. This looks like an accountant who rises from staff accountant to controller to chief financial officer, taking each promotion for the added responsibility it brings.

Expert Career

This concept means a person chooses to stay in one field for one's whole career, with little promotion. The individual builds expertise over time, motivated by a desire for mastery and job security. An example of an expert career concept is a research scientist who spends a career refining a single specialty rather than moving into administration.

Spiral Career

In this path, periodic moves, roughly every 7 to 10 years, into related fields build on skills learned in earlier jobs. The motives are personal growth and creativity. This could be an engineer who shifts into product development, then later into project management, with each role drawing on the last while developing new skills.

Transitory Career

The transitory concept includes frequent moves, roughly every 3 to 5 years, into unrelated fields, driven by a desire for variety and independence. An example would be a retail associate who moves into an HVAC technician role, then later into a medical assistant role.

Rather than sharing a single goal, each career concept reflects a different definition of success. Researchers (Brousseau et al., 1996; Ali et al., 2023) also found that the more closely an employee's career goals align with an organization's culture, the more committed and satisfied that person tends to be. Recognizing these concepts helps individuals and organizations align a person's motives with the right opportunities, rather than assuming everyone wants to climb the same ladder. Of the four career concepts, the linear path most closely relates to upward mobility.

Upward Mobility



Upward mobility is the rise to positions of greater authority, responsibility, and salary. For someone starting in an entry-level job, upward mobility usually means advancing within the organization where one already works rather than leaving for a higher title elsewhere (Campion et al., 1994; Ray, 2024). However, one can also achieve upward mobility by moving between organizations (Weng & Zhu, 2020). Those other career concepts advance differently; for instance, those with an expert career preference grow by building a specialty, and those who intentionally pursue spiral or transitory careers move sideways into new fields. However, upward mobility is the linear way to get ahead, and training is essential to this climb.

Employees who begin in entry-level roles and gain additional training open the door to promotions and higher salaries, often moving into managerial or technical positions (Lynch, 1993). However, when an organization offers minimal training or development opportunities to its entry-level employees, they find themselves in dead-end jobs (Lynch, 1993). Because training facilitates advancement, the first item to assess in a prospective employer is how much it invests in developing its people.

When considering an employer, look for formal training programs, tuition support, mentoring, defined career pathways, and internal job postings. An organization that funds career development and maps out how roles progress is exhibiting true upward mobility (Shaito, 2019). One that offers none of these indicates the opposite, despite what its recruiting materials might say. Consequently, it is reasonable to determine whether an organization promotes employees from within or fills its senior roles with talent from the outside. These are known as internal and external labor markets (Cho & Kim, 2024).

Regardless of which hiring practice an organization chooses, there must be open roles for candidates (Cho & Kim, 2024). Current managers and directors who started in lower-level positions at the same company can be indicators of internal advancement (Althaus, 1989). A

search on LinkedIn and on the organization's website will show if the ladder is real and whether employees are climbing it. Leadership development pipelines, internal first-job postings, and long employee tenure point in the same direction. In contrast, when most senior roles go to outside hires, and few employees rise through the ranks, the organization tends to recruit talent rather than grow it.

Career Advancement

- **Career advancement = economic**
increase from upward mobility
- **Career development = lifelong**
process of moving toward a career goal

With career advancement playing a significant role in career development, these two concepts are integral to understanding how to advance beyond an entry-level job. Career advancement is economic advancement resulting from upward mobility that leads to higher job satisfaction (Rawat et al., 2023). One way an organization can provide career advancement opportunities, especially for entry-level employees, is through job rotations (Brousseau et al., 1996; Campion et al., 1994; Mlekus & Maier, 2021; Shaito, 2019). Job rotation involves moving an employee within the organization to gain more extensive work experience and institutional knowledge, usually requiring a moderate amount of adjustment (e.g., a change in job title; Campion et al., 1994; Mlekus & Maier, 2021). The intent is to keep that employee deeply rooted in the organization; however, this does not always include a pay increase (Campion et al., 1994; Dodson, 2023). Job rotations progress along a linear path, in which employees pursue training and internal job promotions to advance their careers (Brousseau et al., 1996; Komiti & Moorosi, 2020). Career advancement opportunities highly complement career development strategies.

Career Development

Career development is the lifelong process of continually moving toward a career goal, wherein employees must take the initiative to identify the goal they want to reach, while organizations should provide opportunities for advancement (Shaito, 2019). Establishing oneself is crucial for career development, whether through job rotations or learning the required skills (Campion et al., 1994; Shaito, 2019; Super, 1980). This is due to the value of extensive work experience in career development, especially for entry-level employees (Campion et al., 1994). However, career development is not limited to job rotations; it can also be achieved by premeditating a

desired career path, learning the required skills, and taking advantage of opportunities as they arise (Shaito, 2019; Super, 1980). Being mentored by someone already in the career position one desires to attain provides highly valuable, context-specific guidance (Komiti & Moorosi, 2020). Mentors who encourage individuals to apply for higher-level positions complement an employee's work experience and skills (Komiti & Moorosi, 2020). However, confidence is essential for advancing in one's career because employees must believe they can learn and grow into more advanced roles. Work experience gained through job rotations or other methods further increases this confidence (Komiti & Moorosi, 2020).

Summary

Careers can develop in several directions, each pointing to a different approach to advancing beyond an entry-level job. Upward mobility follows the linear approach, the climb into roles of greater authority, responsibility, and salary, typically within the organization where one already works. Career advancement builds on that climb, often through job rotations that add work experience and institutional knowledge within the same organization. Before accepting an entry-level position, however, it is worth exploring which labor market an organization follows: an internal labor market that promotes from within or an external one that fills senior roles from outside. Asking directly in interviews, reviewing the career histories of current leaders, and noticing whether openings are posted internally before they appear publicly all help reveal which it is. Each of these components feeds career development, the lifelong effort to reach a career goal. Reaching that goal is primarily the individual's responsibility, and while organizational support is preferred, it is not required. To improve one's chances, employees should research the skills and experience the desired role requires, seek out mentors along the way, and build the confidence to believe they can grow into the career they want.

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