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Career Management Equals Career Development

Your career should be something you manage, not something that manages you. If you’re like most people, you’ll spend more time on work than in any other waking activity for three or four decades in the prime of your life. Few endeavors are capable of providing more pleasure and fulfillment—or the opposite! But many of us fail to realize—or realize too late—that we can play a major role in creating positive career outcomes.

You can avoid that mistake. Start with a few questions. How might you assess your potential for leadership? How could you develop it? How do you know when you’re ready for a bigger challenge? How can you strengthen and showcase your abilities and put yourself in the best position to compete for your ideal job? Where can you get good advice and counsel?

Answering these questions can help you manage your career more intelligently and yield a lifetime of professional satisfaction, excitement, and fulfillment. For some people, the greatest personal measure of career success is whether they’ve made a difference. Many of us work in higher education for precisely that reason—to make a difference in something we care about passionately. This chapter explores how career management and development can increase your satisfaction and fulfillment and perhaps even lead to that wonderful outcome.

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It Takes Careful Planning

If all you need to know about real estate is “location, location, location,” then all you need to know about career development is “planning, planning, planning.” We schedule regular medical and dental checkups, take our cars in for periodic servicing, and manage our personal finances monthly, yet many of us pay little attention to systematic career development. How can you avoid that mistake and get started?

Self-assessment is a first step in career planning. A number of tools and techniques can help you better understand yourself and your abilities. An Internet search, for example, will return countless sites offering Keirsey, Myers-Briggs, and other self-assessment tools. One of the best sites we have found is <http://www.FastCompany.com>, which has tools and links to useful assessment resources. The Office of Personnel Management, the federal government’s human resources agency, lists 27 desirable leadership competencies at <http://www.leadership.opm.gov/content.cfm?cat=LAW-CEL-FEI#key> and offers a rich set of self-assessment resource links at <http://www.leadership.opm.gov/knowlinks.cfm>. The National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO) Web site at <http://www.nacubo.org/> includes a knowledge network for IT professionals that may help you better assess how your competencies map to those of your peers. Colleges and universities offer diverse resources for career planning and career development, including many opportunities for assessing interests and capabilities. Seminars, conferences, and institutes sponsored by EDUCAUSE and other professional associations offer additional opportunities to invest in career planning. Whatever mechanisms you choose, remember that self-assessment is the essential starting point for career planning.

Simple self-reflection is important, too. An interesting starting point for career planning, particularly for aspiring leaders, is the question of nature versus nurture. Are leaders born or developed? How much “raw material” must be present for a professional development process to succeed? Promotions don’t make leaders—they merely fill positions. Have you thought through what is required of a leader, and your own potential to meet the demands of leadership?

Just about any bestseller about the characteristics of great leaders provides a laundry list of important leadership attributes. For purposes of illustration, we’ll restrict our own list of examples to motivation, internal strength, and competitiveness, but any published list will do. The important thing is that you take your attributes list and do something with it.
Let’s take motivation, for example. What drives you to develop your career? Money, prestige, authority, family, security, best use of your skills, escaping a career cul-de-sac, relocation to a better climate, altruism, or some combination of the above? This isn’t a test with right and wrong answers—and nobody’s recording grades—so be realistic. Trying to be something you aren’t consumes an enormous amount of mental and emotional energy, and you can’t sustain the effort for long. So take your time and consider your answer carefully: What’s your motivation for developing your career?

The reason we include internal strength, or courage, on our short list of leadership attributes is simple: Successful IT leaders must be agents for change and continuous improvement. Change requires the strength and courage to progress in the face of resistance. That sometimes requires decisive—even courageous—action. We assume you have the intelligence required of a leader, but can you make tough decisions when you must?

Consider a final illustration from our short list: You must decide whether you have the competitiveness required of a leader. There is much to be said for working together to achieve the proverbial “win-win” situation, but competition surrounds us. Universities face stiff competition for students, faculty, resources, partnerships, and image. As a professional, you competed to win your present job, must compete to retain it, and will face even broader competition if you elect to move up to a higher level. You must be prepared to compete successfully and then to use resources available to help your institution compete effectively. Do you have the drive to compete? Answer the question for yourself, not for anyone else. In career development, you don’t get any points for self-delusion!

Once you’ve written your own list of essential attributes, define your goal and conduct a systematic gap analysis of your attributes relative to that goal. For example, if your goal is to become a CIO at a major university, what education, experience, and personal qualities are generally required? A review of current and past online posted positions at EDUCAUSE, the Chronicle of Higher Education, and other national sites can be illuminating. Identifying a person you believe has the right stuff and listing his or her characteristics can also provide useful information. Then you have two questions before you that demand rigor in the answering: What qualities are employers looking for that you do not currently have, and how do you set a course of action to close that gap? More information to help you get started may be found at sites such as the Leadership Learning Community Web Site at

4.3

Cultivating Careers
Closing the Gap: Enhancing Skills and Experience

All of us have gaps in skills and experience compared to that ideal résumé potential employers might desire. Are you aware of your gaps, and do you have a plan to close them? Conducting a gap analysis on yourself, especially if you seek the honest feedback of others, is a humbling but essential experience. You should be proud of your accomplishments, but this exercise is designed to expose your weaknesses and shortcomings, so hang on!

The position of CIO, for example, requires an array of skills and abilities. You must be adept at leadership, systems thinking, politics, fiscal management and budgeting, written and oral communication, strategic planning, and so forth. As discussed earlier, you can construct an inventory of these essential skills by reviewing job postings and examining the qualifications of successful and respected CIOs. You should look at your own professional qualifications and those required of positions you seek, and then identify differences between the two. That’s an important achievement, but only part of the job. Now you have to decide how to close the gaps.

You can choose from a number of ways to acquire the education and experience needed. One of the most straightforward approaches is to take on additional responsibilities at work or in service organizations. For example, if you are relatively inexperienced in fiscal matters, you could get involved in budgeting or account management in your current job or in a local religious, civic, or nonprofit organization. Working at colleges and universities also provides wonderful opportunities for additional training. Taking a class in business or accounting might some day give you an edge over another applicant for a great job.

Another way to gain knowledge and credibility in a particular area is to become involved as a volunteer, speaker, teacher, or writer. It may sound foolhardy to participate when you have limited knowledge, but stay with it, and you’ll inevitably learn—perhaps to the point of mastery. As a faculty member and friend once said, “If you want to gain credibility on a subject, become a speaker on that subject.” Volunteering your time on committees is also an excellent way to explore new fields, gain credibility, and make important professional contacts. EDUCAUSE offers a number of volunteer opportunities, as do other professional, civic, and service organizations.
Overcoming shortcomings in your skills and experiences requires commitment and investment of time and effort. That often makes the difference between who will be qualified for opportunities when they arise and who will not.

What about moving to a new position altogether as a means of closing a professional qualification gap? Sometimes there is no better way to move up in your career than by moving on. Careful consideration may reveal that you have exhausted all reasonable possibilities for professional development where you are, or an opportunity may come along that represents a way to gain important skills and experience. One of the things that aspiring leaders must understand is the high probability of relocation at some point. If moving on to a new job in a new area is not something you are willing or able to do, you should realize this early and plan your career accordingly.

Suppose, though, you decide it is time to make a move. What then?

**Evaluating Professional Opportunities**

Professional opportunities should be approached carefully and from a strategic perspective. Not every opportunity for advancement represents a wise move, even if it offers more money, broader responsibility, or a fancier title. If you’ve been managing your career, you already should have a list of important questions to use in evaluating opportunities that arise. You’ll develop your own set of questions, but these come immediately to mind:

- Are you ready for the opportunity? In other words, do your skill set and experience ensure a reasonable chance of success in the position?
- Does the position contribute substantially to additional professional development, particularly in priority areas you have already identified?
- Would the position lead to other opportunities later, either directly or indirectly?

Effective leaders ask their followers to stretch, to achieve goals that are challenging and seemingly out of reach. You might ask the same of yourself in the context of your career. There is nothing wrong with stretching to achieve those things that challenge you and require you to invest heavily of yourself to succeed.

It helps to remember that just because you can land a new job doesn’t mean it is the right job and that it represents a good fit for you either personally or professionally. A widely held assumption in higher education is the “three-year rule,” which essentially says that the minimum time you must spend in a position to ensure that it is viewed with legitimacy is three years. Those three years can pass very quickly in a position you enjoy and in which you achieve success. On the other hand, three years can seem an eternity in the wrong position or situation.
The path to your ideal job is rarely straight. Career development is more like sailing. It requires patience, a long-term view, and careful navigation in what is often a complex and changing environment. Tacking to one side or the other, the sailing equivalent of taking somewhat indirect approaches to a goal, is often the fastest course. It is sometimes wise to take what might appear to be a lateral position in order to gain the momentum needed to achieve your ultimate goal. For example, a CIO at a smaller school who lacks experience in a larger environment may elect to take an assistant or associate CIO job at a larger school for several years. Not all career moves are—nor should they be—upward. Career development is a journey.

At the same time, opportunities working part- or full-time in environments other than higher education may be very useful in helping you achieve an ultimate leadership position, such as CIO. Working or advising in business and industry, government, and nonprofits may be of great value. Experience transferred from other economic sectors or even other disciplines and professions may help higher education transform to meet the emerging challenges of the 21st century. One successful CIO at a medical university that includes a major teaching hospital left academia and spent the better part of a decade employed by a national, for-profit hospital system. His perspectives on issues ranging from budgeting and supply-chain management to staff development broadened considerably, and he has adapted and applied what he learned during this phase of his career to strengthen his current operation.

Don’t discount a senior staff position as a rewarding step in career development. Leadership contributions are not always measured by the breadth of resources under your control. One colleague, for example, has contributed significantly to the body of knowledge in IT policy and law with little prior experience in IT. Another colleague coordinates rapidly evolving IT professional development programs for university scientists through a research advocacy organization. Both report at senior levels and are nationally visible and influential. Finding your perfect staff position may require a little finesse, but there’s no better way to explore this option and learn about opportunities than to discuss it with your institutional and professional network.

As a final consideration, you may wish to create your own niche. Independent consulting, for example, is not reserved for those who want to remain active in the profession after retirement. Many areas in higher education IT would benefit from a new voice or an innovative approach. Once again, self-assessment is key. Do
you have specialized and marketable skills that would generate sufficient income? Are you motivated and organized enough to run your own small business? Do you know how to create an effective and sustainable business plan? Review checklists for small business planning at sites such as <http://www.americanexpress.com/> for a reality check. Although genuine risks exist that you should not underestimate, opportunities for gaining both valuable skills and recognition abound in these special niches.

If you’re contemplating a move of any kind, consider the following questions and advice from experienced colleagues from around the country:

▶ What opportunities do you have for advancement where you are now? Is someone in your way in your current location? For example, if you feel ready to be a CIO but your present CIO is performing well and shows no signs of leaving, you have a decision to make.

▶ If you want to move, examine context—the nature of the potential institution, its plans and prospects, where the position reports and who it influences, and resources (now and in the future). No university commits big bucks for anyone to come in and maintain the status quo. Where are the problems buried? What is your probability of success in the position? How big is the job, and how long will it remain interesting and challenging?

▶ Examine the community and the region, including cost-of-living and other quality-of-life indicators. A prospective 20 percent salary increase is not nearly so enticing if the cost of housing is 50 percent higher in a new location. Are there IT opportunities in higher education nearby so you won’t have to relocate when looking for new challenges five years hence? There may be compelling reasons to take a position at an excellent university in a small, rural town in the Midwest. There may be different, but equally compelling, reasons to accept a position in a major metropolitan area that offers many diverse, long-term opportunities at different institutions without having to relocate.

▶ Consider the special challenges of families and two-career couples. Professional opportunities must be balanced with personal lives and commitment to others.

▶ Talk to colleagues about your options. Should you opt to apply for another position, never underestimate the power of a strong reference from a respected fellow professional.

▶ Move on gracefully. When you leave an institution, don’t burn bridges. Be thoughtful and constructive in your exit interviews. Transitioning out is not a license to catalogue the flaws and failures of the individuals you worked with.
or the institution that paid you every month. Colleagues will remember how you left long after they’ve forgotten how you arrived.

Moving forward is the key. Positions and opportunities that provide needed skills and experience in particular environments, even if they do not take you straight to the goal, may well represent the fastest and surest course in career advancement. It takes judgment, self-awareness, patience, and sound navigation to recognize the possibilities. In almost all cases, opportunities are far better viewed in the perspective of professional development than professional advancement. Clearly, they are not always the same.

**Career Development: Continuously Building Relationships and Optimizing Opportunities**

Lamar Gordon, a very accomplished and highly regarded CIO at an elite university, faced his annual performance review. A conscientious man, he painstakingly compiled and organized the year’s accomplishments and carefully wrote his division’s goals and objectives for the coming year. He submitted his materials well in advance of the appointment with his superior, Executive Vice President Joe Swenson. The night before his appointment, Gordon spent more than an hour reviewing his materials and organizing his talking points.

The preparation paid off. The appointment went well. Swenson spent a little time probing a major project that was behind schedule and embroiled in difficult politics, but he generally applauded Gordon’s leadership and fiscal prudence and the completion of several important projects. He concluded by promising budgetary and political support for next year’s high-priority objectives. It was a very good meeting, Gordon felt.

As Gordon gathered his materials to leave, he asked, almost as an afterthought, “Joe, is there anything else I should be doing to help the university?”

Joe didn’t hesitate. “Lamar,” he said, “you need to make friends.”

The names and incidental details are fictitious, but the main story is true. And the message is powerful. Joe was not suggesting that Lamar Gordon improve his social life. He was advising him to develop deeper relationships with key constituents who influenced the university’s budget and strategic decisions.

Over the following year, Gordon personally visited each dean and vice president to explain—in nontechnical language—the value of proposed new IT initiatives to the university. He patiently listened to grievances old and new and paid particular attention to relatively minor but annoying hot-button issues that
could be solved quickly by a focused IT response. He beefed-up VIP service so that busy executive offices with computing and networking problems or with specialized applications received fast, high-quality attention. And he placed renewed emphasis on direct customer engagement as a requirement for all of his directors and managers. Not surprisingly, new IT initiatives received broader executive support than usual during budget hearings at the end of the year.

Making friends is not generally a topic in executive education curricula, but it is one of the most important areas of career development. Strong collegial relationships built on mutual trust and an understanding of each other’s high-priority issues are essential for success in your current role, and—inside and outside the institution—for building your future career.

Making friends—engaging people on issues of importance to them or to you—is sometimes described disparagingly as politics. Politics is not a dirty word. In the classical sense, politics is simply the tactics, techniques, and methods used in managing an organization. And political opportunity can come in unexpected places, such as graduation ceremonies.

One CIO reported that he attends at least six graduations each year at his large state university. “First,” he said, “it reminds me why I’m here. I love being part of the celebration of intellectual achievement. I put on my doctoral robes and [proceed] past the faculty and students as a member of the platform party. It’s especially important that the faculty see my commitment to what they’re doing. Besides that, it’s fun! So many happy families!”

There’s additional political value to this participation, the CIO noted:

Some people might think attending graduation is a waste of my time. But the president and provost, all the deans, and many members of the Board of Trustees are in the platform party. For about 30 minutes before and after the processional, there’s plenty of time to mix and mingle and have informal conversations. Everyone’s relaxed. It’s important for these folks to know me, decide whether they can trust me, talk about what’s on their mind. They’ll remember the person behind the text the next time our strategic plans are up for review. I make an effort to have cordial and informed relationships with all of my key customers and partners. That can make all the difference.
Make Career Planning a Habit
You’ve probably figured out by now that planning your career and your professional development is a continuous cycle that involves periodically assessing where you are, reflecting on your goals, and plotting new directions and strategies as necessary. Just as you schedule time to review your retirement portfolio now and then, schedule a quiet time at least once a year to review your current situation, assess your short- and long-term goals, and adjust your roadmap.

Whether you think you’ll be moving soon or you’re committed to your present institution for a lifetime, your résumé or CV merit the same regularly scheduled attention as the rest of your career development strategies. Your résumé is your marketing tool. It tells both friends and strangers what you’ve accomplished and gives them clues about what you may be capable of accomplishing in the future. It’s surprisingly easy to forget invited presentations, development seminars, community service, committee assignments, or even awards and recognitions if you wait until months or years later to add them to the written record of your accomplishments.

A final thought: Career planning is a continuous process and not a discrete event. There is wisdom in Dwight Eisenhower’s statement that the planning process is far more valuable than the plan itself. Professional development plans must be flexible and responsive to changing opportunities and challenges throughout your career. We live in a very dynamic higher education ecosystem where adaptation has become the norm. Make continuous planning a habit, and you’ll give yourself the gift of a great opportunity to watch your career thrive.

About the Authors
William F. Hogue has been vice president for information technology and CIO for the eight campuses of the University of South Carolina since 2000. His duties include development of IT and distance education strategy, policy, and practice for some 43,000 students, faculty, and staff at two-year, four-year, and research institutions within the USC system. Prior to assuming his current role, Hogue held IT leadership positions at Vanderbilt University, the University of Wisconsin System, and MIT. He holds undergraduate and master’s degrees from the University of South Carolina and a doctorate from Harvard University.
David W. Dodd is vice president for information resources and CIO at Xavier University, where he has comprehensive leadership responsibility for IT, the university library, Web development, instructional technology, and strategic information resources. He is charged with the development of an integrated, systematic, and holistic model of information resources and services to support the university. Prior to joining Xavier, he held IT leadership positions at the University of South Carolina at Spartanburg, the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Dodd holds a master’s degree from the State University of New York in Binghamton and is completing a PhD in educational leadership and policy.