



Get a Life, Not a Job

Self-Directed Career Acts and the Future of Careers Paula Caligiuri, PhD

There are approximately 152 million Americans working in the U.S. labor force today. On any given day, 75% of them would consider changing jobs. In fact, over 60 million of them are actively looking for a new job at this moment.
Are you one of them?

With the downturn in the economy, the elimination of jobs, and the increased desire for work-life balance, people are looking for more stability, greater fulfillment, and increased satisfaction from work. Unfortunately, most people are still operating with an old set of career rules that no longer apply to today's employment reality.

Now is the time to take control of your career destiny so you can enjoy greater work-life balance, security, fulfillment and satisfaction. The secret lies in understanding the new employment reality and rewriting the rules of what a career can be.

The Employment Reality Has Changed in Two Important Ways

#1. The High Cost of Human Talent

Have you ever been given the advice to “*work for a big-name company*” for the “*great salaries, benefits, and career development.*”

Human talent costs—otherwise known as employee salaries and benefits—can comprise between 20 and 60 percent of a company’s entire operating budget. I’m certain you *won’t* be surprised to learn that firms have found ways to cut this expense. Unfortunately, there’s a very good chance that you or someone you love may have experienced these cost containment methods firsthand. You may have been laid-off and replaced by an independent contractor. You may have been downsized in a large corporate layoff. Your position may have been outsourced to a country where labor costs are lower.

These cost-containment methods will not subside when we recover from this recession. They are here to stay and part of this new employment reality as companies try to remain competitive globally. This is part of the new reality.

In addition to cost-containment, most companies now have a far more strategic approach to managing their human talent.

#2. The Strategic Value of Human Talent

You may have heard business leaders proclaim that their *employees are their firm’s most critical assets*. In this climate of high unemployment, it sounds a bit like corporate double-speak, doesn’t it? You see, companies are shedding the expense of positions not critical to their competitive advantage—but then they are *differentially investing more* into the people who occupy their most critical or wealth-creating roles.

Human talent *is* highly valued—the number one asset. Some *roles*, however, are more valuable than others. This is great news, if you are in one of those roles but there are not many of those roles in any given company.

Have you ever been given the advice to “work hard and pay your dues?” Well, your outstanding performance is necessary—but no longer sufficient—to shield you from corporate downsizings or career stagnation. Today it is about the critical and unique skills you bring to the company. While we all need to build skills before we can advance our careers, toiling away over time is not the same as gaining skills. Too many people believe that tenure is a metric that still matters in the employment equation.

“Working for a big name company” and *“paying your dues”* are lousy pieces of advice without understanding the strategic relevance of the role you occupy and the criticality of the skills you possess.

Now is the time to take control
of your career destiny...

These changes in the employment reality have created the need for you to own your career destiny:

- #1. You own your career but not your job. Your employer owns the work and will configure competencies to remain competitive.
- #2. Your professional stability and financial security will likely come from your overall career, not any given job.
- #3. Your professional fulfillment and satisfaction will come from the career you build, not the job promotions you receive.

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Own Your Career Destiny through Self-Directed Career Acts

Just as the riskiest financial investment strategy is to have all of your money in one place, the riskiest career management strategy is to have all of your income be derived from one organization, unless, of course, you are certain your job is secure.

Too many people believe that tenure is a metric that still matters in the employment equation.

Career stability, financial security, satisfaction and fulfillment are well within the reach of most people who are willing to manage their careers as they would their financial portfolios—across multiple career acts. Career acts are simultaneous and stimulating, profitable activities comprising of what people (who enjoy what they do) engage in for a living. Multiple career acts are liberating because they enable you to allocate your time across those career acts you enjoy and shed those career acts you don't enjoy. Multiple career acts are also financially rewarding, given that your total income is derived from multiple sources. Having multiple sources of income—and not solely relying on any one company or employment situation—is mentally liberating, especially when organizations are going through downsizing and layoffs.

Under the old rules of employment, those with multiple career acts would be chastised by a parent, spouse, or nosy mother-in-law for “*not having a professional focus,*” “*not being serious about your job,*” “*not sticking with it*” and “*being too distracted.*” They confidently ignore these criticisms because they are changing career acts purposefully, and not spinning their wheels hoping for an employer to provide a situation they will find satisfying. They are happy and confident because they are doing what they love and owning their career destiny. **They have lives, not jobs.**

If you have ever worked on a project you found interesting, you know the joy and energy the right career act can give you. While I don’t believe you should work more hours, I do believe you should devote more energy to building desired or ideal career acts, or one amazing career act, to achieve greater fulfillment. Career acts also supply a stress-easing sense of security that comes from knowing if one act of your work-life becomes stale or disappears entirely (as we have seen in many corporate downsizings) that you have other sources of stimulation and income. Your career becomes more nimble and less stressful as your attention can be redirected positively, for personal and financial gain.

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The Foundation for a Successful and Fulfilling Career

Stop obsessing about what is on your resume. Start building a plan to develop your

career acts. If you rely solely on your organization to plan your career through promotions and organizationally determined succession plans, start owning this process and manage your own career plan. Promotions and succession occur when organizations need progressive experiences from their employees. You are moved because of the skills you bring and the skills you are expected to develop in the future. If you own this, you take more ownership of what you really want to be doing in the future—whether with your current employer, a different employer, or working for yourself.

I suggest you *own* your career destiny by crafting financially rewarding career acts that place your interests, needs, talents, and motivators *above* those of your next employer.

Don't stay marketable for an employer. Manage and grow your portfolio of career acts.

We have convinced ourselves that, by “staying marketable,” we will be desired (and hopefully courted) by future employers. We are, in many ways, trying to recreate the old psychological contract in a serial sense, across successive employers (i.e., *if I perform well in my field, I'll be employed long-term*). Part of this statement is true, but only if you possess the most highly sought-out skills. It is difficult to stay in control of your career because maintaining predictable marketability in a dynamic employment system is very difficult. Rather than a preoccupation with where to work next and what your next employer might want to see on your résumé, I suggest you *own your career*

destiny by crafting financially rewarding career acts that place your interests, needs, talents, and motivators above those of your next employer.

Don't focus on improving your weaknesses. Leverage your passions, strengths, and talents. In today's employment reality, the happiest career professionals allow their talents across multiple career acts to propel their success. Self-development becomes critical in multiple career acts, and is generally most effective when you fully understand your personal strengths and talents and leverage them. If you rely on your organization for training and development, begin enhancing your skills outside of the organization, on your own, chosen by you and shaped by how you want to grow your career. Employers pay for (hire and promote) the people who possess and can demonstrate the skills they need. The more unique and necessary your skills, the more employable and promotable you are. Corporate training budgets will always be limited, so I would not recommend relying solely on your organization for development. Invest in yourself by gaining the skills you want to add to your repertoire (i.e., those that will help advance your career acts).

Stop hoping for work-life balance. Start creating a rich and full life that includes a career you enjoy. Many of us value personal freedom and work-life balance, but unfortunately, still expect these to be fulfilled through traditional employment relationships (i.e., the myth of the old psychological contract). Many are not comfortable owning their career destiny because they either believe it will take too much time (infringing on their highly-valued personal freedom and work-life balance) or they lack the efficacy and do not believe that this is possible (no one ever gave them the license to have this type of bold relationship with the idea of work). The latter is much easier to address because I believe we all can have the careers and lives we want, as long as we are willing to make some fundamental changes in the way we approach our relationship with work. The former concern (it takes too much time) baffles me because we will spend the same amount of time (more or less) working in jobs we dislike when compared to working in a job we enjoy. Crafting a career is an active process requiring more *engagement*—not necessarily more time.

Conclusions

I propose that you continually develop yourself for the work activities that you, not your hypothetical next employer, want to have in your career. When coupled with action to engage in these personally rewarding, income-generating alternatives, this new way to relate to work offers a highly attractive degree of freedom. You can work for others while maintaining a commitment and loyalty to yourself and your own professional development. You can leverage the benefits of the new psychological contract by creating your own options—simultaneous, stimulating, and secure career acts.

I do not advocate working longer hours or toiling in multiple jobs. Multiple dull career acts would still result in a dull (and more stressful) life. I also do not advocate running yourself ragged trying to do multiple jobs (even if they are engaging). I advocate finding multiple wealth-creating activities that you sincerely enjoy, that fit with your life in a fulfilling, balanced way— and that offer you financial freedom, because you are not relying on any one employment setting.

Professional and financial freedom has never been as critical as it is today. As I write this, the unemployment rate in the U.S. is hovering around 10%. Even during a period of lower unemployment, having a multiple career act life will enable you to obtain greater fulfillment from work, given that the sources of this fulfillment are spread throughout your multiple career acts.

Nelson Mandela once said “There is no passion to be found playing small—in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living.” Please don’t settle. **Take ownership of your career today and start directing your most important asset to give yourself greater fulfillment, success and security.** 📌



BUY THE BOOK

Get more details or buy a copy of Paula Caligiuri's [*Get a Life, Not a Job*](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paula Caligiuri, Ph.D., is the author of *Get a Life, Not a Job: Do What You Love and Let Your Talents Work for You* (FT Press, 2010). She is also a Professor in the Human Resource Management Department at Rutgers University. She has been recognized as one of the most prolific authors in the field of international business for her work in global careers and global leadership development. For human resource management professionals, Paula has also written (with Steven Poelmans) *Harmonizing Work, Family, and Personal Life* (Cambridge Press, 2008) and (with Dave Lepak and Jaime Bonache) *Managing the Global Workforce* (Wiley, 2010). She has covered career-related topics for CNN and has hosted a pilot for a television show, *CareerWATCH*. Paula holds a Ph.D. from Penn State University in industrial and organizational psychology.

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