

The mid-career information professional: Managing your own career

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Abstract

This article examines the career options available to mid-career information professionals. The article initially sets out the current context for employment, careers and career planning before moving on to comment upon the various options available to the mid-career information professional.

Keywords

Careers, career capital, career planning, mid-career information professional

Introduction

The world of work is changing – as it evolves to become ever more diverse, the traditional and structural models have given way to much more flexible forms of employment, and the days of a ‘job for life’ are very much in the past. Employees today are now likely to have a range of careers before they retire, many in fact will have ‘portfolio careers’, a term coined by Handy (1994) to describe people who simultaneously work for different employers and/or mix salaried employment with freelance work.

Globalization, technology, demographics and expectations about work/life balance are all driving new ways of working. A recent Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) report (2015) broke down the make-up of the UK workforce into four categories – veterans, baby boomers, generation X and generation Y (millennials) with a fifth category due to join the workforce soon — generation Z. All have different demands. At one end of the spectrum, the veterans and baby boomers are wondering how much longer they need or want to remain in employment and, at the other, we see people trying to carve out a career path that satisfies their demands for flexible working. Throw into the mix the uncertain economic climate, the potential effects of Brexit and turmoil in emerging markets, and it is easy to see that challenging times no doubt lie ahead.

The business world will continue to go through great change, and the issues faced are likely to become more complex, more demanding and more competitive. In order to survive, businesses need to learn to adapt, and employees need to learn to adapt so that together they can face up to the challenges presented in the 21st century.

Using data, information and knowledge effectively will help businesses to gain a better understanding of key issues, and this is where the role of the information professional can have a significant impact. Skilled and knowledgeable information professionals, across all sectors, ought to be in demand and ought to have a voice at the highest organizational level.

If this is so, then what are the career considerations that information (and knowledge) professionals should be thinking about? How do information professionals progress their careers in ways that make most of the skills and qualifications they have spent time acquiring and enable them to play a key role in helping organizations meet the challenges that lie ahead? How can they ensure that their skill set is recognized and valued?

Career ownerships

What is a career? It can be defined as a succession of related jobs, arranged in a hierarchical order, through which a person moves during their working life. The roles undertaken lead to increased levels of responsibility, increased status and increased rewards (both financial and non-financial). This definition of a career can be applied to either one that is organization centred or one that is individual centred. Given the changes alluded to above, the norm these days is for careers to be individual centred.

In times gone by, careers were typically characterized by a defined structure – salaried employment, secure employment, transfers within an organization, ladder-like promotion and, eventually, retirement on a defined date. Career development and succession planning were very much seen as the employer's responsibility who guided, directed and influenced the career path of the individual employee.

In recent times, this certainty has been turned on its head, and careers are characterized by insecurity of employment, unpredictable job moves, sideways 'promotions', careers across national and international boundaries, zero-hour contracts, the concept of employability and individuals really taking ownership for their own career planning. Professionals managing their own career and seizing new and often different job opportunities to obtain training, to enhance their human capital and to remain employable, are referred to as pursuing a boundaryless career (Arthur et al., 2005; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Sullivan and Arthur, 2006). Here, the individual takes advantage of new (employment) opportunities in which they can obtain valued returns in exchange for performance. By pursuing such opportunities, individuals cross physical boundaries by moving between different organizations and cross psycho- logical boundaries by believing they have the ability to succeed across different sectors (i.e. not be tied to, or defined by, a specific career path in the same industry).

Baruch (2006: 128) explains that the boundaryless career is where the 'actual career or meaning of the career transcends the boundary of a single path within a single employer'. This implies a series of jobs where meaning is not only derived from inside the organization but also from the external labour market (Lamb and Sutherland, 2010). The boundaryless career is one that is independent from the organization, where the knowledge worker (information professional) is the career actor, driving and navigating their path, rather than the organization, making career- related decisions on behalf of the individual (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). This means that the career becomes more focussed on the external thus increasing the boundaries. The removal of the job for life scenario has led to individuals looking beyond their current organization to seek personal and professional development and growth in the external labour market (Stahl et al., 2002).

Consequently, many of those who have entered the workplace during the last two decades will enjoy a variety of careers and a variety of job moves (Cheremie, et al., 2007). There is an acceptance of insecurity of employment, less than predictable job moves, careers across industries and sectors, lateral movements, individual career owner- ship and maintenance of employability (Herriott, 1998). Employees have developed a high sense of consciousness around their individualism, thus becoming their own career managers (Lamb and Sutherland, 2010).

There can be little doubt that the nature of the information professional's work has changed enormously; new challenges must be addressed, seemingly almost daily.

Major influences are the increasing quantity of information and the manner in which information is accessed. Commentators suggest that information professionals will need to continue to develop their skills sets and that leadership will become ever more important. The (information professional) leader of the future will be someone who is more than a good manager or someone who has attended the right training courses. A leader must have experience, vision, integrity and an understanding of the potential of the organization and the people within it, desiring to take his/her place as part of the (information) profession (Ashcroft, 2008)

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Career capital

For the information professional having to face new and emerging career challenges means keeping up to date, but not only that, it also means planning for what the future holds career wise. Career paths need to be nurtured accordingly.

DeFillippi and Arthur (1996) were largely responsible for popularizing the idea of career capital. This can be described as the value created through ongoing improvement in career position and recognition in the competitive external labour market (inter-organization recruitment) as well as in the internal labour market (intra-organizational staffing) (Gunderson, 2001). Information professionals should therefore consider carefully how to build their career capital.

DeFillippi and Arthur's (1996) model for career capital consists of three dimensions: (1) knowing-how, (2) knowing-whom and (3) knowing-why.

1. The knowing-how career dimension refers to career-related skills and job-related knowledge. These skills and knowledge, build up, over time and cover a broad and flexible skill base and emphasize occupational- rather than job-related learning. These capabilities provide an individual with the career-relevant skills and work-related knowledge and understanding that is needed for performance.
2. The knowing-whom career capabilities consist of the professional and personal relationships formed over the course of a career – the 'network'. This includes relationships with others on behalf of the organization (such as customers and suppliers) and personal contacts (such as professional and social acquaintances) (Parker and Arthur, 2000).
3. The knowing-why career capabilities relate to the individual's identity and the fit between identity- and career-related choices (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994), which can change as a result of changing circumstances (Inkson and Arthur, 2001). This includes the values, meanings and interests that determine how a person's career develops (Jones and Lichtenstein, 2000). The knowing-why currency is what most careers demonstrate in the earliest stages where the individual identifies with a sense of reason and purpose in his or her actions (Lamb and Sutherland, 2010). This gives individuals a sense of purpose, energy, identification and direction in their work.

Other researchers have further developed the concept of career capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coff, 1997; Gardner, 2005a, 2005b; Lamb and Sutherland, 2010; Trevor, 2001). Trevor (2001) explains that on a continuum of usefulness, 'movement capital' is seen as a highly tradeable and transferable currency and asset of the knowledge worker (read – information professional) in the globalized world of work.

One therefore draws the conclusion that individuals in today's labour market, very much, need to take responsibility for their own career development. Build career capital and understand how this can help you survive in an environment that is changing constantly and rapidly.

Career planning for the mid-career information professional

Many information professionals will have entered the industry after obtaining a discipline-related degree and after time, having applied their studies in the workplace, some will have gone on to acquire further academic credentials. By pursuing professional accreditation and post-graduate qualifications, they will have used these credentials to show that they have mastered their intellectual disciplines. By applying the theoretical learning to address issues in their organizations, they have proved themselves to be very capable employees who are well educated and highly committed. This is recognized through promotion and rewards. Such professionals may then seek to move to key leadership positions. How might they then prepare for the next stage of their career path?

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Sculfor (2015) writes about the development of careers in information giving good advice to the aspiring information professional. In this article, I want to focus on those mid-career information professionals and the qualifications they might next pursue as they develop their career through different experiences.

The mid-career stage is often regarded as an opportunity to refresh skills, to take a sabbatical and to pursue up-to-date qualifications and/or change industries.

Refreshing skills

Refreshing skills through attending training courses, either internal or external, is a good short-term option. Many larger organizations have developed training academies or in-house 'universities' where employees can access a variety of programmes. These courses build and develop knowledge, keeping employees' skills up to date with the latest changes and topics in the industry. Professional associations, such as the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professional or the CIPD, offer a portfolio of courses and workshops. Commercial companies such as TFPL also offer short courses aimed at the information professional. It is important to keep up to date with any changes in the regulatory and legal environments impacting on the work you do. Keep up to date with new developments in the industry by attending conferences and show-cases. Mentoring, by a more senior work colleague, could also be pursued as a way of keeping skills current. Self-development and professional improvement should be ongoing.

Taking a sabbatical

A sabbatical is a break from employment, usually for a period of 3, 6 or 12 months. It differs from a career break in that the employer agrees to keep the job open so the employee knows they have the security of returning at a future, agreed date. During this period, salary and other benefits such as pension contributions and private health cover will usually be withheld. However, you may find that your organization offers paid sabbaticals if the time is going to be used to pursue work-related research, additional qualifications or to develop new job-related skills.

With working lives being extended, the opportunity for a mid-career sabbatical is becoming ever more attractive. The days of working constantly for a 40-year period and then retiring no longer applies – many employees would benefit from taking time out away from the workplace. Employees taking sabbaticals often use the time to re-evaluate their careers and return feeling refreshed, revitalized and newly motivated.

Consider why you want to take a sabbatical – it is important to have some clarity about your motivations so that you can approach your employer with a soundly thought-out request. You want to present a case that shows how you both will benefit from the sabbatical. Show how your absence can be covered; talk to colleagues who can support you by agreeing to take on a share of your day-to-day responsibilities. Plan, if it is an unpaid, how you will manage your finances, for the duration of the sabbatical.

Employers are more ready, these days, to offer sabbaticals (there may be a minimum requirement in terms of years' service to date), recognizing that it has a positive effect on the retention of good employees. During times of recession and profit downturns, companies have found that sabbaticals are a way of reducing costs, yet retaining good employees for when the upturn occurs.

Most sabbaticals are positive experiences for both sides. That said, sometimes, the employee decides not to return to their previous role but may have to come back to work out a notice period. Much depends on the agreement made at the outset.

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Pursuing up to date qualifications

In most cases, the pursuit of up-to-date qualifications would see the mid-career information professional studying for a masters in business administration (MBA) or completing a doctorate. Here, I have assumed that the information professional already possesses a bachelor of science or bachelor of arts and a master of science or master of arts in their subject discipline.

The MBA is an internationally recognized qualification, typically studied by people looking for career advancement, in either the private or public sectors. Most MBA curricula include 'core' modules in subjects, such as accounting, economics, marketing and operations, as well as elective modules that allow participants to follow their own personal or professional interests.

Generally speaking, most business schools require that candidates have at least a few years of professional work experience before starting an MBA programme, hence it being ideally suited to the mid-career information professional who is seeking to enhance their career.

The MBA is currently the most popular professional postgraduate degree programme in the world. Most are offered in English with the United States being the most popular destination closely followed by the United Kingdom. MBA programmes have evolved to keep up with the demands of the times in both content and mode of study. Part-time MBAs vary between 2 and 3 years in length depending upon the institution; these are particularly attractive to professionals who are unable or unwilling to take time out to do a full-time MBA.

The market for postgraduate part-time higher education has, in recent years, been affected by the economic recession, and this has had a marked impact on the willingness of employers to sponsor students to study for additional qualifications. Higher education providers are cognizant of this and have worked to address such issues by offering the mid-career individuals a flexible study programme that minimizes absences from the office. A good illustration of such is the flexibility offered by the University of Brighton's MBAs.

The University offers different MBA pathways – the International MBA, MBA Public Service Management, MBA Leadership, MBA General Management and MBA Knowledge and Innovation Management. Part-time students can join the programme at any time during the academic year and are therefore able to choose the order in which they study their modules. This level of flexible starting dates allows students to study at times beneficial to their organization's specific needs. This 'design your own MBA' scenario has proved to be very popular with student cohorts.

Postgraduate students across the pathways join together for the core modules, which are delivered in block study mode, and the opportunities this provides for peer-to-peer learning are invaluable. A mixture of assessment mechanisms is used with coursework assignments, allowing the student to apply the knowledge gained to real business issues. This provides the student with a rich, vibrant and challenging learning environment and one that has a very practical business focus.

If the information professional is looking to enhance their career in the industry, then the MBA in knowledge and innovation management may be the one best suited as a course of further postgraduate study. It was originally developed in response to a niche international demand but has attracted students from different sectors in the United Kingdom as well as the international market.

This university has responded to employers who would like to support staff to gain further qualifications but in a flexible way where the student continues to remain in full-time employment while developing their career. The flexibility of attending study blocks at a time to suit the student allows employers to retain staff, supports them to develop in-house talent and, by using work-based assessments, provides the organization (and the student) with sound, up-to-date business knowledge.

Career changers in the information profession would still benefit from this MBA pathway but if wanting to broaden their knowledge of leadership, as preparation for the next stage of their career, may opt for the

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leadership pathway. Leadership in organizations is a key topic with new techniques being developed in response to more flexible working patterns and how to best develop the next generation of employees.

The University of Exeter's Centre for Leadership Studies is one of the leading centres for leadership studies in Europe, offering education and research in this complex and diverse subject. Leadership studies are also offered by other academic institutions, so choose the one that is right for you and your career aspirations.

Further academic development will appeal to some mid-career information professionals especially those who have achieved chartership of their professional association and want to progress to achieve fellowship. Such individuals may well go on to consider studying for a PhD as part of their ongoing development. Those in academia and social work have typically pursued doctoral level research, but the notion of the boundaryless career has brought PhDs into sharper focus in other industries, particularly in research institutions (stand-alone or within organizations), the scientific sector and in government agencies. A doctorate in information management could be a very successful mid-career option for the information professional.

Universities, particularly those post-1992 universities, offer opportunities to study for a doctorate in information management. To apply, a student will have to meet certain criteria, which normally require them to already hold a master's degree from an accredited university, relevant to the proposed programme of the study. Students who do not possess a postgraduate qualification may still be considered if they can demonstrate that they have already undertaken appropriate research or have professional experience that has resulted in published work, written reports or other appropriate evidence of accomplishment. To apply, a research proposal has to be submitted in which the potential student outlines the research idea; the research methodology and critical approaches; their experience; the proposed original contribution to the existing body of knowledge and key themes, concepts and ideas.

Choose your research area wisely – is there something that you have always wanted to explore in much greater depth? Is there something that might benefit your current or potential employer? Are you thinking of branching out on your own or thinking of a career change? What would be the most useful research topics for you?

Guidance on how to write the research proposal will normally be provided by the university. Given the research-based form of study, most information professionals will be very familiar with the content of the initial modules to be studied for a doctorate, as they typically focus on research methods and methodologies. The next phase of the study would be to undertake a literature review on the research area, and, again, information professionals will be familiar with this concept.

Completing a PhD will take a few years, but it will expand your career options by opening doors to different fields. If you have a natural curiosity and a thirst for new knowledge, then the PhD route is one that you may find appealing.

Summary

The world of work is changing – it is busier, it is fast paced, it is more demanding but if the mid-career information professional proactively takes responsibility for their own career planning, then the future has much to offer.

Where are you now? Where do you want to be in 3, 5 or 10 years' time? How will you build your career capital? What do you need to do to nurture your career?

Invest in yourself. Become your own career manager; show initiative, explore options and become that in demand employee, the manager, the leader, everyone wants to work with.

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