

## Micro Careers

The common view has been that we have one career. Typically, it was defined by both our occupational field—we are an attorney, a salesperson or a logistics professional—and our employer—we work at IBM or at Coca-Cola. Although we were often told otherwise, many of us believed that we would spend our entire career working for that one or, at most, two or three different organizations. In other words, we were convinced our careers would be relatively stable and long lasting.

While that was probably not true in the past, it is definitely not true today. This Great Recession has changed the nature of our careers forever. I know you don't want to hear that. It's hard enough to find a job in the current economic environment without some putz telling you that the rules of the game have now changed. But they have. And sticking our heads in the sand won't undo what has been done.

On the other hand, if we can learn the new rules quickly—if we can get our arms around them and figure out how to play by and win with them—we can turn today's difficult situation into a much better one. We can capture the upside in a down economy. We can put these new rules to work for us so we can find the work we want and hang onto it.

So, what are these new rules? They are a response to the traumatic and wrenching devastation of business now underway in this country and around the world. From GM to Citigroup, from Hertz to Microsoft, employers are shedding jobs and the workers who held them. These are not, however, your father's or mother's layoffs. They are not reductions in force that will eventually be replaced by rehiring in force. They are, instead, reductions in structure. The American employer is becoming leaner and determined to stay that way.

This shift in organizational philosophy holds several implications for those of us in the workforce.

- First, there will be far fewer permanent jobs available to us. Companies will shrink down to a relatively small number of core roles and hire very selectively to fill them. Gone are the days of offering a position to a qualified applicant. Today and for many tomorrows to come, only the best qualified candidate for each opening will get the nod.
- Second, employers will increase their hiring for “defined outcome positions.” Unlike traditional contract or project work, these situations will have the look and feel of permanent jobs, but have a fixed duration determined by the accomplishment of a specific objective established by the employer. Defined outcome positions will have the same organizational prestige and seniority as core jobs, but without the commitment to long term employment.
- Third, employers will attempt to be much more nimble and quick acting. The competitive dynamics of a highly integrated, global marketplace have shortened the life cycle of products and services, sales and marketing strategies, and the organizational staffing requirements that flow from them. The kinds of talent required to execute an organization's business plan last year or the year before may be—indeed, often will be—entirely different than those it needs today or tomorrow.

If those are the new rules, how do we play them?

The answer is as simple as it is challenging. We will have to shift our own employment philosophy. We must change the way we think about our careers. We have to accept that they are no longer relatively

stable or long lasting. From now on, our careers will be episodic and short. They will be “micro careers.”

Micro careers are defined by two kinds of impermanence:

- Instead of working for one or two employers over the course of a thirty year career, we will now be employed by 10-15 organizations over the course of a fifty year career. We are living longer even as the staffing needs of employers grow shorter and less enduring.
- Instead of working in a single occupational field, you will work in 3-5 different professions. They may all draw on a common foundation of expertise, but each will require a specific and additional set of knowledge, skills and abilities.

This continuous changing means that we can no longer aspire to be complete and fully formed workers. The old industrial era paradigm of moving from novice to journeyman to master is over. In today's knowledge-based economy, only masters survive. So, our new strategy must be to act as “masters-in-progress.” We must never stop moving toward a better, more capable, more effective version of our best selves.

Now, I acknowledge that such incessant self renewal is a new and potentially uncomfortable way of working for some, maybe even many of us. We worked hard to get to a certain point in our careers, and now, we would like to coast. We would like to sit back and enjoy the fruits of our labor. And that's no longer possible. In the 21st Century workplace, managing a successful career is like riding a bicycle. We can coast for a short period of time, but we're going to have to peddle and sometimes peddle very hard if we want to keep from crashing.

While that may be difficult to accept, there are some advantages to this situation. It enables us to escape from the imprisonment of dull jobs and dead end employers. No employment situation is forever and as long as we keep preparing ourselves for what's ahead, each new job is a chance to move on and up. We get to start fresh on a regular basis, so mistakes are less harmful to our progress and risk is less dangerous. We have, in short, more freedom and opportunity than we have ever had. That's the key point we should remember. Because that's the power and the promise of micro careers.

Thanks for reading,  
Peter

Visit me at [CareerFitness.com](http://CareerFitness.com)

© Copyright 2009 WEDDLE's LLC. All Rights Reserved.