

Women at the Top™

Up is **NOT** the Only Way When Mapping Your Career Path



by Regina Barr

How are you faring in the new career economy? Feeling like your career has suddenly stalled, or worse, gone backwards? You are not alone. Downsizing and doing more with less at a time when training and professional development budgets have been slashed, is enough to wreak havoc with anyone's career plans, right? Not so fast.

When I first entered the workforce, the path for moving forward and advancing my career was steep and hierarchical. In some ways, it reminded me of the steps required to ascend the temples in Chichen Itza, Mexico. If you have ever climbed the pyramid at Chichen Itza, you know that it's not too bad at the lower levels, but gets more challenging the higher you go. And as you might expect, it was pretty lonely at the top.

Today, the organizational realm in which we work has been dramatically altered. Organizations are flatter, with fewer middle management positions. Those that do hold those positions now have broader spans of control with more responsibility. Downsizing or "rightsizing" has become an accepted business practice in most companies. We have come to know that we all have limited – if any – job security.

What exactly does all this mean? You can no longer count on anyone but yourself when it comes to mapping out a career path. The days of a steady climb to the top are all but gone. However, for those who are willing to re-evaluate, take initiative, and make some changes, now is a great opportunity to advance your career.

Here are some ways to ensure that your employability goes up even as organizations flatten out.

Develop a "Me, Inc." attitude. Identify your key assets and liabilities. Create a plan to leverage your assets and offset your liabilities. Involve your manager if appropriate. But remember, you are responsible for your own career success. It's up to you to take the actions that will enhance your employability and shore up any deficits.

Invest in your work portfolio. Become a learning addict. Develop a wide range of experiences and desirable skills. Do this internally by taking on new projects at your company or externally through volunteer work. Embrace lifelong development and continuous learning by taking advantage of degreed programs, industry seminars, higher education and company training programs.

Be a change agent. Get comfortable with handling ongoing change. This means not only embracing change but also seeking it out in the form of new and challenging work experiences. Combine this with strong execution and your career will be on the fast track.

Be willing to move around. Move around willingly and proactively. That means up, down, and sideways within your company, and outside of your company when necessary. In addition, be willing to handle 'thankless' jobs, those that no one else wants to do. The goal? Gain new skills and garner favorable visibility within your company.

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Focus on results. Downsizing and de-layering have reduced promotion prospects. With an emphasis on team work, people should be oriented to getting results rather than just climbing the corporate ladder. Take on P&L responsibility for a product line or department whenever possible.

There are still plenty of opportunities for those that want to move ahead in the work world and ascend the corporate ladder. It may require that you change your perspective and develop a new vocabulary. The key is to recognize that in the new career economy we are all free agents. This means that the new job security resides in you, not your position or your company.

Follow these helpful tips and you can expect new avenues to open up for you. And remember, in the new world of work, up is NOT the only way!

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