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Laurence J. Stybel, Ed.D. and Maryanne Peabody

You Can Thrive in a World of Short Job Tenure and Long Middle Age:

First: Master the Art of Unlearning.

We are job search campaign managers. Our professional work frequently allows us to work with senior leaders who are experts in wearing their public masks of confidence. Beneath that veneer is a profound despair.

There are two variations of this despair:

“My college roommate was able to retire at 64. I can’t afford to retire. I feel like such a failure. What did I do wrong?”

And:

“I am looking for employment but can't find full-time work. My neighbor flits from full time job to full time job. The recruiters are always calling this neighbor. But the recruiters do not return my calls. When I was young, they pursued me. The only opportunities I get are for interim assignments. I must be a failure. What did I do wrong?”

This article is based on interviews with fifty senior executives who have been successful in managing their careers during difficult economic times. Our corporate leaders learned the difficult lesson that success often involves the painful process of unlearning old frames of reference that once worked. Unlearning old ideas that have been successful in the past is far more difficult than learning new ideas.

What are some of the lessons our leaders had to unlearn on their road to eventual success?

Short Job Tenure and Long Middle Age.

The individual complaints with which we began this piece are but symptoms of two larger, well-known, health and economic trends impacting all who work in developed countries. The first trend is a shortening of traditional job tenure in line with the collapsing time frame for product life cycles, and corporate life cycles.

Technology has been a driver behind the "speeding up" of business cycles. What economists call “creative destruction” is taking place at a faster pace and conscientious, qualified employees are often its victims. In other words, job tenure within jobs and tenure within companies is decreasing.

Short job tenure plays havoc on retirement savings. The foundation of retirement savings is based on slow and consistent contribution.

Short job tenure explodes that assumption.

At the same time life span is increasing. You can thank the same technological factors that contribute to lowering job tenure. The average life span within industrial societies has increased 12 years since social security was adopted.

It is important, however, to remember that this additional 12 years is not an additional 12 years of old age. It is an elongation of middle age. The old career model was based on long job tenure and death within 10-15 years of retirement. The new career model is based on short job tenure and death within 25 years of retirement.

Implication: do not be critical of yourself if you do not have enough saved for a retirement that will support you for 25 years. It is not your fault. Unlearn your framework for retirement.

The Free Agent Model: never valid for all.

In the last ten years of the 20th century, economists like Robert Reich and popular business magazines like BUSINESS 2.0 began to write about "Free Agent Nation." Under the free agent framework, executives have careers that resemble professional sports stars. Free Agents smoothly shift from one major league team to another major league team through the work of third parties called "Agents."

In the world of business, agents are often called retained search executives. "Once it becomes known that I am on the market, an executive recruiter will call me."

Professional sports players represent an elite segment of the general population. Within this elite group, only the top 10-15% can count on the Free Agent model to work for them.

What happens to the other 85 percent? When their contracts with a major league team are not renewed, it is the beginning of the end of their professional sports careers.

Even for this elite 10-15%, Free Agency will cease to be valid as they age or become injured.

In other words, Free Agency as is valid for a few athletes some of the time and for no athlete all of the time.

Free Agency as a Career Model in Business:

Free Agency says that winners smoothly move from full time job to full time job with the help of recruiters. Like professional sports, Free Agency works for a small group of leaders some of the time. And it works for all leaders none of them time.

Unless you unlearn Free Agency, you doom yourself to individual feelings of failure. Moving from a “good” corporate job that you were placed in by a recruiter to “Temporary Help” as a consultant or an interim executive can make you feel humiliated.

The Case of Jack:

The new model to replace Free Agency is traversing from full-time assignments or W-2 relationships to project assignments or 1099 relationships. And then back again.

Failure to grasp the realities of the traversing can make a complex professional life even more painful. Consider the case of Jack:

Jack was CFO of a company in a declining industry. A larger player acquired Jack's company and he received a one-year severance agreement as part of his exit package. Jack spent the first nine months aggressively networking for a full-time CFO job in his geographic area, while making it clear that an interim or project oriented role was beneath him. By month ten, Jack became concerned about his family cash flow situation. He began looking for interim assignments. Jack found his network unresponsive and the reason was obvious: he had clearly signaled early in his job search that interim assignments were second choice. Jack is now approaching month 24 without either employment assignments or project assignments.

Jack's story is both unhappy and common. It need not have ended this way.

Jack needed to understand and accept that his career may have begun as an employee but it would most certainly end as a consultant. And he is going to have to support himself on consulting earnings once his full time W-2 period is over.

Should I Go Into Freelance Work?

We tell our clients the question should not be “should I go into consulting?” The question should be “When I go into consulting, will I make enough money?”

Think of today’s leaders as managing two distinct professional lives. One life focuses on full-time employment and the other life focuses on project assignments, also known as interim free lance, or consulting assignments.

In a world of short job tenure, even full time jobs need to be thought of as “assignments” rather than long term career slots you will occupy.

Your mission in managing your career is to manage these two professional lives so that you will be successful in both since you will be careening from one to the other over a period of years.

In the next section of this article, we will address why you need to unlearn the notion about “climbing the ladder” of success.

Unlearn “Climbing the Corporate Ladder” as a Metaphor. The new Metaphor is “Ski with Your Edge.”

In the first section of this article we discussed the need to unlearn the idea that there is something wrong with you if you have short job tenure.

We also discussed the need to unlearn the idea that “winners” don’t need to hustle for their next job. Recruiters will always be calling them. If they fail to call, then you are a “loser.”

Climbing Corporate Ladders:

One component of early to mid-twentieth century thinking about careers was the concept of “climbing the corporate ladder of success.” This framework used the corporation or institution as the economic foundation for upward mobility: success means ever increasing levels of job titles, salaries, and responsibilities within the same institution.

This ladder climbing framework may still be viable for large companies/institutions with sophisticated approaches to management development. How many of them still exist? What is the probability of you working for one of them?

Most of the people whose campaigns we manage will end up working for smaller companies with espoused philosophies that “people are our most important product” yet conduct themselves with a “Just in Time” approaches to leadership succession:

Rather than paying the costs of in-house leadership development, when an important leadership role opens up in the company, the company decides it wants someone who can “hit the ground running.” They do this by employing retained search firms to find the most qualified candidates inside or outside the company.

The higher up the organization “ladder,” the higher the bias for hiring outside the company: given the drive for “doing more with less,” in-house employees are struggling to simply perform the jobs they were hired to do. They lack the time and the company does not provide them with the resources to demonstrate fitness for higher level jobs.

The Devil You Know Is at a Disadvantage:

Under these circumstances, promoting in-house candidates to higher management roles can sometimes be perceived as much a leap of faith as hiring an outside person.

Consider the popular term “The Peter Principle.” This refers to promoting a highly competent employee to a level of incompetence. For example, it would be an error to assume that the best sales professional in the company will be the best manager of sales. It would be an error to assume that a baseball team’s best pitcher will be the best coach. As one ascends the corporate ladder, jobs increase in responsibility but they also require different skill sets. Thus a risk for hiring an internal candidate is that the hiring authority violated the Peter Principle.

Another problem for internal candidates is that it is riskier for hiring authorities to promote internal candidates than external candidates. The popular cliché is that “the devil you know is better than the devil you don’t know.” That cliché breaks down in hiring.

Finding out the devil you didn’t know had problems opens the hiring authority to accusations of making bad decisions under conditions of incomplete information. Finding out the devil you know has problems opens the hiring authority to accusations of making bad decisions under conditions of complete information. “You know she came with ‘baggage’ and you hired her anyway???!?”

From Ladder Climbing to Traversing:

The 50 successful people we interviewed did not think in terms of ladders. They thought in terms of traversing. The skiing term “traversing” means moving in a zigzag pattern along different snow terrain. During an Alpine ski run you may traverse over ice patches, powder snow, or come up against moguls.

Moving up a ladder requires steady discipline and persistence in the face of obstacles. Traversing requires discipline combined with maneuverability.

Schools are excellent in educating students about how be disciplined and persistent in the face of obstacles: from kindergarten to Ph.D. ceremony there is a hierarchy of required elective courses one must pass to get to the next hierarchy of mandatory courses. Running through the educational system gauntlet is a demonstration of intelligence, discipline, and persistence.

Traditional schools are excellent in teaching students how to climb ladders that will not exist for them once they graduate. The key skill is not ladder climbing for one's career within one company but agility in an assignment-based economy.

Back to the Case of Jack:

Earlier we discussed the case of Jack:

Jack needed to understand and accept that his career may have begun as an employee but it would most certainly end as a consultant. Jack's career would not be a single career comprised of a series of corporate jobs. It is more like managing two professional lives -- one focusing on employment assignments and the other focusing on project assignments. This is what we call traversing as opposed to managing one single career. The new model may involve zig zag between full time and project work. It involves moving from W-2 to 1099 and back to W-2.

W-2 forms are tax forms given to full time employees. 1099 forms are tax forms given to consultants or interim employees.

We have learned three lessons from our sample survey: traverse with your career edge, master affiliation needs, and traverse between provincial/cosmopolitan knowledge.

Lesson #1: Traverse with Your Edge

In traversing, you lead with the edge of your skis. Your ski edge gives you maneuverability. In career traversing, you lead with your skills edge. Your edge gives you maneuverability through different terrain. James is an example of one of our 50 executives:

After receiving his MBA from Columbia University, James went into banking. Various assignments at Mellon Bank and Bank of America eventually led to James being hired as President/CEO of a California bank. In 2009, James' bank was acquired and he was without employment. There was a consolidation of banks so career continuation was impossible. James created a one-person consulting firm, whose initial focus was on what James called "credit dependent companies." Using his personal relationships with West Coast bank presidents, James was able to negotiate settlements so that both sides could have something of value.

By 2013, the recession had lifted, and one of James' clients came to him for consulting assistance. One consulting opportunity led to an offer to become Chief Operating Officer. His assignment was to double the size of the medical products distribution company and then sell the company to a national player. This assignment was completed within eighteen months. Once again James opened his consulting practice. One of his clients was a nonprofit organization. This consulting assignment brought him exposure to new areas like fund raising and working with agencies in Washington, D.C. This assignment was completed after two years. The contacts James developed brought him to the notice of a board member of a non-profit company in his town. James was offered the position of Chief Executive Officer for a California human services organization with a budget of \$265 million.

James has been a bank president, a distribution company COO, and a nonprofit CEO. Between these W-2 employment assignments, there has been a constant theme of 1099 project assignment work. Each 1099 assignment led him to the next W-2 assignment.

If you view James' career from a ladder climber's perspective, James appears to have had a “hodge podge” career. But that is not how James views his career:

“I have centered my professional life on one strong theme: I solve financial/organizational problems from a perspective of a banker. Had I identified myself as a ‘banker,’ my goose would have been cooked as the banking industry continued its consolidation. Instead I have worked with medical products, retail companies, construction companies, a giftware company, and health care products. It has been fun, a real learning experience. But my core identity remains the same. That never changes: I solve financial and organizational problems from the perspective of a banker.”

The Case of Ted:

Ted began his IT career working with a variety of large corporations. Five years later, he moved to technology consulting firm. Ted’s success as a consultant in an assignment involving ocean cargo issues led to an opportunity to become CIO for a company in the ocean freight transportation industry. Five years later, he was once again consulting. But the consulting assignment helped him gain credibility in the financial services sector. Ted is now CIO for a global financial services company.

In commenting on his professional life, Ted describes his edge as a constant even while the assignments constantly change:

“My skills are coaching and developing people in technical environments. Internal or external, I use the same tools. I just apply those tools in different ways.”

Unlearn the Assumption that You Have All the Professional Relationships You Need. Start Being Strategic About Managing Your Professional Association Memberships.

Affiliation is the desire to be an integral part of something larger than you. It could be as small as being part of a work team that will finish a project this month or as large as being a member of an institution whose mission will make the world a better place.

In the W-2 phase of a career, moderate degrees of Affiliation are helpful: you are part of a corporate team. But when you are in the 1099 phase, you are not really part of a client's team. You are helping a team for a period of time and then you leave.

How do you manage your affiliation needs and your professional relationships when you are traversing between W-2 and 1099 assignments?

The answer is to focus your affiliation needs on professional associations. Professional associations are work-related reference groups outside the corporation. These reference groups can focus on function/profession (American Psychological Association, Financial Executives International, American Marketing Association), industry (American Bar Association, Massachusetts Biotech Council), or geographic (Chicago Chamber of Commerce; Downtown Crossing Association of Boston).

Successful careerists take their association membership seriously as a way of meeting their affiliation needs. This is an important but difficult statement to make, given the time pressure of work and home. But it is important to understand how important associations are for your future. In the 21st Century, associations will have the same role that trade guilds played in the Middle Ages: a source of stable affiliation in an unstable project-oriented world.

The connections you make in such associations will form the core professional network to help you traverse between 1099 and W-2 roles.

Joining associations is not enough. You need to become known within that association. You need to be a committee member and not just someone who sometimes shows up for the occasional cocktail party. That means you need a strategy for each association you join and you need to limit your associations so you avoid spreading yourself too thin.

Unlearn the Idea That You Have Learned All You Need to Know Through Formal Schooling. Start Learning the Difference Between Cosmopolitan and Provincial Knowledge.

In the W-2 phase of a career, leaders are often hired to manage the work of others. Moving up the corporate career ladder means leaving behind technical mastery of “doing stuff” to managing others .

For example, a hospital CEO may have management responsibility over a surgeon yet not know how to perform surgery. The U.S. Secretary of Defense may be responsible for the conduct of the military yet lacks the skill to take apart a rifle. The skills necessary to do “stuff” at a tactical level are referred to as provincial knowledge.

On the other hand, strategic vision and emotional intelligence is increasingly of greater value as one moves up the corporate hierarchy. We call these "cosmopolitan skills" because strategic perspective and leadership can be of value in any industry and any organization. Lou Gerstner took over IBM without skills as an electronics engineer or even an appropriate background in IBM’s technology foundation. George Marshall moved from being a soldier to running the Department of Defense to being Secretary of State to being the President of the American Red Cross. Both were masters of the cosmopolitan skills of strategy and leadership.

When you move from the 1099 assignments to W-2 assignments, you may be retained on the basis of your reputation in mastering provincial knowledge.

Effective careerists in the 21st Century will be strategic about spending time learning cosmopolitan versus provincial knowledge. For example, Bill was Chief Information Officer for a global financial services organization. The organization was going to be acquired and Bill was already thinking about his next assignment. He was anticipating that he would move from CIO to consultant focusing on cybersecurity in the financial services sector. Said Bill:

“I am already thinking ahead to the next move in my career. And that will probably be a consulting position. It is important to keep my technical skills sharp. I am planning to take a course in a technical area at a local community college. I’ll probably be the oldest student in the class.

“I did the Advanced Management Program at Harvard Business School. That won’t help me now. I need to return to community college and learn new things. You’ve got to stay sharp.

“There is another reason I am taking this course: I want to shape the perception others have of me: I may be 60 but I am not stuck in the “old ways.” I am always playing at the cutting edge of what is new.”

Bill understands that his current W-2 assignment will set the stage for his next 1099 assignment. He is at ease moving from a course on strategy at a world class institution of higher education to a course on the new programming language at his local community college.

Exhilaration and Terror:

Traversing down a ski slope requires discipline and flexibility. And so does career management in the 21st Century.

Traversing down a slope is thrilling because of the simultaneous emotions of exhilaration and terror.

Managing careers in the 21st Century is about embracing a new form of exhilaration and terror while unlearning ideas that no longer work.

The closest thing to job security most of us our will ever know in the 21st Century is the security of knowing know how to successful generate income under different conditions.

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Maryanne Peabody and Larry Stybel are co-founders of Boston-based Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc., an Arbora Global Company. The mission is “Leadership and Career Success:” retained search, coaching, and outplacement for senior leaders. www.stybelpeabody.com.

There are 200 Arbora Global consultants in 25 U.S. cities and 30 countries.

Bruce Farr Creative has published Maryanne and Larry’s perspective about managing your professional life: NAVIGATING THE WATERFALL. Check out the book reviews on Amazon.com.

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Companies wishing a free 30 minute consult:

Maryanne Peabody

Stybel Peabody, an Arbora Global Company

Tel. 617 371-2990

peabody@stybelpeabody.com