Career Pathways: Engineering Your Career to Last Decades

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Career pathways are the blueprint for how an individual can create a career of their lifetime by synthesizing personal passion with the pursuit of academic credentials integrated with on-the-job professional development. This white paper explores the genesis of the career pathway concept and provides insight into how one can empower themselves to engineer a fulfilling career.

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1 Opening a path

Imagine wanting to pursue advancement in a high growth, high demand industry like healthcare, business, or cybersecurity. There is increasing demand for workers who can fill skilled occupations within these fields, but many Americans today don't know how or where to get the education, training, and experience to move forward with such a career.

The solution lies within a cooperative initiative called career pathways that are presently being developed through collaborative initiatives between institutions of higher education, industry training providers and employers.

A career pathway integrates credentials, knowledge and experience into a dynamic blueprint that helps an individual create a career of their lifetime.

If an individual identifies their personal passion and then combines it with the pursuit of recommended academic credentials integrated with on-the-job professional development, a life-long professional journey can begin!

By utilizing a career pathway, an individual can transition their personal perspective away from working at a job to a paradigm of integrating a complex network of professional roles, responsibilities, and credentials that help one grow within their selected industry. This white paper explores the concept of a career pathway and provides insight into how one can empower themselves to engineer a fulfilling career.

2 What is a career pathway?

A career path showcases a life-long progression of education, training, and jobs that form a sequence outlining short- and long-term career goals one can expect in a specific industry.

Career paths typically refer to either a path through an industry or, on a smaller scale, one's path through a specific organization. In its simplest iteration, the career pathway approach targets occupations with a lot of job openings and works with employers to grow a pipeline of skilled workers. For example, if a worker's goal is to become a principal, a typical career path would first identify the education and credentials one would need to obtain a teaching job. As one gained experience in the classroom, an effective career pathway tool could potentially outline administrative credentials one would need to acquire in order to move to the next milestone position. The pathway would then repeat its information as it outlines the steps to follow between subsequent milestone positions until the ultimate role – in this case a school principal – was achieved.

Guided by practical career milestones, the effective and well-designed career pathway will approach its goal by connecting progressive levels of education, training, support services, and credentials. It is common to find career pathways across different industries to be diverse and unique, showcasing unique needs of the industry they represent. However, there are some commonalities among many including three essential features of most career pathways, which often feature:

1) Multiple entry points, so that individuals can begin their career path at the most appropriate skill level and not necessarily always at “entry level,”

2) Multiple exit points so that individuals have several options to re-enter the workforce at various milestones and easily return to further their education when they’re ready—either between jobs or simultaneously while they are working,

3) Well-connected and transparent education, training, credentialing, and support services to facilitate progress along the pathway and ensure participants can get credit for their education and experience in the future (Clarkson University, 2020).

In addition to these three common characteristics, many well designed career pathways will also integrate these following four key functions that are made available to anyone utilizing the pathway:

1) Quality education and training leading to credentials which can be recorded as objective and measurable gains in relevant skill,

2) Consistent and non-duplicative assessments of participants assets and needs,

3) Support services and career navigation assistance, and

4) Employment services and work experiences.

A career path showcases industry-specific jobs a worker will need to secure in order to achieve one’s ultimate career goals within the discipline, but this movement doesn’t always have to happen in a straight line or linear fashion.

Career paths traditionally imply vertical growth or advancement to higher-level positions, but they can also include lateral (sideways) movement within or across industries. There’s simply no universal blueprint or timetable for climbing the career ladder. It is dependent on a variety of things. This is where perhaps many people may become frustrated.

Even though on paper a career pathway often invokes the notion of a linear flow from milestone to milestone, in practice movement a worker may find themselves potentially skipping levels based on market demand, moving laterally due to employer dynamics, or even moving backwards along the pathway in certain situations. Professionals who have achieved the top job on one career pathway may be able to leverage transferable skills or networking strength to transition to the middle or top of another career pathway as well.

When properly designed, career pathways are a collaborative undertaking among community leaders, industry, institutions of higher education and training providers. K-12 school systems can also be involved depending on how early a community determines to begin engaging potential workers. For example,

certain cybersecurity roles require Department of Defense clearances which can take a significant amount of time to obtain and only if the applying worker does not have any criminal offenses (such as underage alcohol possession). In this case, it makes sense for a career pathway to be integrated into a K-12 curriculum and begin preparing students with an interest in this field

From a collaborative partnership of community, industry and education leaders, career pathways for key industries are designed showcasing milestone jobs that – with the proper accumulation of credentials, training, and experience – lead to higher paying milestone jobs. It is critical that the pathway is sufficiently developed so as to support individuals along the way, coordinating with employers, and providing crucial guidance. Each step allows the participant to gain a marketable skillset and credential, preparing them for the next job on the career path (Clarkson University, 2020).

3 Why use a career pathway?

Why would any working adult benefit from investing the time to prepare a career pathway? For one, it can support advancement in both one's career and in higher education. There are lots of options for individuals to follow in the modern workplace, so identifying the optimal array of education, training, certification, and employment can take some effort. A career pathway is a blueprint that helps align all the opportunities that are available to support an individual in reaching his or her goals.

The rapid diffusion of disruptive technology during the past ten years has resulted in a professional environment that depends on a skill development system that is poorly aligned to provide adequate training and support for anyone looking to enter a skilled occupation.

The fact is most of the skill development systems that are utilized today were designed for a time before two-thirds of jobs required at least some education and training beyond high school. Combine this with a working population that lack access to career guidance results in significant confusion about how training, employment and the wide array of postsecondary options fit together. It's important to also not forget that working adults who seek professional advancement often have to also maintain their current employment while simultaneously raising a family.

Demystifying how an individual can move from an entry level to more skilled position within an industry is the true benefit of a well-designed career pathway. Simply put, career pathways link your college education to industry needs leading to jobs that are in-demand while offering pathways for advancement. A career pathway does not feature current position openings like a job board. Rather, they showcase a map of options broken down into phases. Each phase showcases education, training and credentials one needs to achieve in order to successfully gain economic mobility and opportunities within an industry. In addition, a career pathway will highlight employment common in each phase as a milestone within one's journey along the pathway.

4 Using career pathways to re-career

A Bureau of Labor Statistics survey of baby boomers found that they had an average of 12.3 jobs from ages 18 to 52.2 Changing jobs is expected, and sometimes those changes will involve different types of positions in various industries. Some career paths have a few ups and downs, and some people even plan a move down the career ladder (2020).

In addition, expectations surrounding work and work-related opportunities continue to change as well. According to Anne Fulton, author of The Career Engagement Game and founder of Fuel 50, there has been a fundamental shift in power between workers and organizations as a result of talent shortage in skilled professions. This power shift means that works have more authority in designing their own professional environments. There has been a significant impact for employers: up to 86% of employees leave a job due to a lack of forward momentum in career development.

As one looks to younger workers the situation only becomes more significant. According to McKinsey research, a full two-thirds of millennials are expecting more career-development opportunities that are more effective and extensive than what previous generations received. In addition, 70 percent of workers are currently working in jobs that have been fundamentally transformed by automation. Up to 375 million workers globally are forecast to be displaced from their present position by 2030 due to automation.

The implications of this are clear. Employers and employees alike need effective collaborative partnerships to be initiated and sustained among institutions of higher education, training providers and industry. The best way to future-proof both sides of the employment equation are for the worker and the employer to tap into talent pipelines established by the utilization of effective career pathways that outline industry specific professional trajectories (Obrien, 2018).

5 All pathways are not created equal…

A well-designed pathway is a true collaboration between a community, industry, and providers of training and education. The tool itself needs to be unique and reflect the specific requirements for the industry that it is supporting, and this can make some career pathways longer than others. They also need to be flexible enough to accommodate the needs of a large population of potential workers seeking to follow the recommended paths. Not all workers move through their career at the same rate or in the same direction. Some people have deliberate, well-planned career paths. Others take things one job at a time, adjusting as their goals and preferences change. Either approach (or a combination of the two) can be successful and a career-pathway has to be malleable enough to accommodate both.

The responsibility for success isn't all on the pathway, though. A worker utilizing a career pathway must maintain some basic paradigms of thinking that exist beyond just the securing of a job. The worker must expand their canvas of professional development to exist across the decades that they will be working. To achieve this, here are a few common mindsets for workers to adopt as they integrate career pathways into their professional development:

- Always be willing to learn: The speed that the modern job market moves at is quick and today's workers have to be willing to learn and add to their skillsets. Workers also need to continually monitor what is trending for desirable skills and credentials.

- Always be willing to network: Connecting with your peers and leaders can help a worker identify new opportunities within the career pathway, even if a worker you're not immediately interested or ready to transition to a new role.

- Always be willing to be flexible: Workers should have a firm vision of their end goal, but the interim steps to achieve it should not be as tightly held. Workers must stay open to opportunities and align professional development with personal interests while still remaining within the scope of the career plan.

- Always keep your own needs front and center: A career path is a general tool designed for everyone but individual strengths and skillsets vary so while one worker may elect to pursue a specific position to gain a specific proficiency, another worker may elect to follow a different path more aligned with her unique skills and talents.

- Always be willing to move laterally: Workers should embrace opportunities for lateral moves if it positions them to be noticed by leaders in the organization or the industry. Sometimes one division is simply more visible or critical from a leadership perspective. A lateral move may also help a worker develop different skills or networking connections from their present position that will be valuable for upward mobility along the career pathway at a later date (Obrien, 2018).

As with any other tool, a career pathway is just a construct that depends on its user for effective deployment. However, it represents a synthesis of leadership from various elements that are responsible for developing the skills, education and experience of a community's workforce so – when developed and executed properly – can really provide structure and insight for individuals seeking opportunities to expand their own professional achievement and credentials. As of late, the inclusion of *rapid change conditions* in the lives of many has become component of the stress arc for navigating socio-environmental challenges.

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