Planning a career has always required some fundamental skills coupled with the willingness to devote time and energy to defining a personal view of success. All of that remains the same for today’s careerists. However, navigating a career in today’s workplaces also requires a different way of thinking.

The turbulent workplace of the past decade has transformed traditional career paths from orderly routes with predetermined destinations into flexible collections of experiences designed to acquire skills that build resilience and offer continuous growth.
Savvy careerists know to prepare for twists and turns and to expect the unexpected. The nonsavvy risk becoming frustrated when the unexpected occurs and too often fail to see the opportunities that can emerge from change.

A History of Career Paths

Career paths emerged in response to employees’ need for assistance in navigating through increasingly complex workplaces. New functions appeared, existing units merged and strategic focus shifted. Employees were finding it more difficult to identify viable routes to success.

Moreover, organizations invested time, energy and funds in formalizing logical paths based on a combination of organizational history and anticipated business direction. Paths were often prescriptive and came with an implied promise.

Employees translated that to mean successful completion of a series of steps, positions and coursework would result in arriving at the last stop on the path — a job. After all, that’s what a path does: It leads you to a predetermined destination.

Paths were intended to be guidelines for career management, but they came with some unintended side effects. Paths led some employees to adopt a “check the box” approach to career planning. The upward progression that defined most paths endorsed vertical, promotional moves as the career option of choice. The careerist who aspired to a nontraditional career experience could feel uninspired and disengaged with the development process.

Career paths have not disappeared. In fact, they’re everywhere. A simple search of “career paths” will produce hundreds of links offering everything from a series of highly specialized roles to a sequence of gradually expanding leadership jobs.

So are paths still useful? Yes, but a career path alone may not get individuals where they want and need to go.

Today’s workplace is more complicated. Employees sit time zones away from managers. Matrixed reporting relationships increase the size and variety of career audiences.

Project-based assignments offer unique and stand-alone experiences. Rotational programs and temporary assignments are plentiful and offer a wide range of growth opportunities. Organizational redesigns demand flexible career planning and pliable options.

Careers are still a series of experiences, roles, assignments and jobs. However, it is impossible to anticipate all the twists and turns that a modern career will take. A career that extends into 2025 and beyond will most likely be a combination of segments extracted from traditional paths, planned and unplanned stops, meaningful side trips and perhaps a few leaps of faith.

The savvy careerist examines the ever-changing landscape and builds a pattern. A career pattern, not completely unplanned but certainly flexible, prepares the careerist to not just weather the occasional roadblock or detour but also to thrive on the changing landscapes and unexpected challenges.

Paths are fixed. Patterns are fluid. Paths were based on what was done before by others. Patterns are for employees to design. Patterns leave something to the imagination. Just as two career journeys will not be identical, neither will two patterns be a replica of one another.

To understand the career pattern approach, envision a kaleidoscope. When you look through the lens of a kaleidoscope, you see a pattern of shapes and colors. If you twist the outer cylinder even slightly, the pattern changes. A new combination of shapes and colors appears. Today’s careers are similar. Organizations evolve, industries shift and professions change focus. The careers that emerge either flex or become obsolete.

Flexible Career Patterns

Imagine driving along a curving country road, and around a bend, the road is blocked with a barricade and sign reading, “Road Closed.” A natural reaction is probably to search the side of the road for a detour sign and arrow. Or perhaps grab the phone to search for options from a GPS app.

A career pattern can offer options — detour signs — when a career experience is blocked or has disappeared. If the international assignment was awarded to someone else, then what equally enticing experiences are included in the career pattern that could be pursued instead for now? What learning was expected from the experience that could be obtained doing something else?

Employees may choose to change direction, or a change may choose them. When changes occur, a career pattern offers alternatives. Change may be an opportunity to redirect or rearrange the order of the planned experiences. Career patterns can be as detailed or as general as their owners — the employees — desire them to be.

The Pattern Partnership

Managers have always had a key role in career development. That role is as important today as it ever was, but the manner in which this role plays out in a career pattern is different. Managers will need to accelerate the new shift in the following ways:

Let go of control. The message that employees own their careers has been repeated often. Ownership comes with a responsibility to put forth the effort and energy to
continue to grow. But ownership also builds an expectation that the individual will have some control.

Allow for flexible timelines. In today’s organization, it is folly to ask employees: “Where do you want to be in five years?” The rate of change in some industries makes predicting what roles will be available or appealing even next year an impossible task.

**Patterns are for employees to design.** Just as two career journeys will not be identical, neither will two patterns be a replica of one another.

It’s up to employees to decide whether they want to plan for the next year or the next month. The savvy careerist examines options and sets expectations based on “What's now?” as well as “What’s next?” Managers and organizations need to allow that latitude.

**Think experiences, not positions.** If careers are made up of experiences, then planning for a career is not a matter of drafting a list of potential future positions. When employees focus on the kinds of experiences they want from a career vs. the job, title or position, they open up a wide variety of possibilities.

Replace the question, “What role do you want to pursue?” with “What experiences will result in a career that you would find rewarding and meaningful?” Do employees want to lead people, start up a new unit, manage a group project or take on an assignment outside the current country of residence? Here’s where those traditional career paths can help.

Think of them as a travelogue. Look for what fits. Study them and search for ideas and options. There may be experiences described in a path that an employee will want to incorporate into the new career pattern.

**Move from promises to purpose.** The implied promise of a path — complete these steps and you will get that position — sets in motion some unrealistic expectations and can initiate or feed an entitlement culture. When employees identify the experiences they hope to include in their careers, the next important step is to put the experiences to the test.

Ask them to write the experiences they hope to have on flash cards, and identify a purpose for each one. Ask questions like, “What will you learn or gain from the experience?” or “How will each experience prepare you for the future or for the next experience?” Patterns with purpose are enticing and will include experiences they can’t avoid.

**Focus on possibilities, not predictions.** Paths provided predictability even though they were never meant to. Patterns provide possibilities and options. Paths are fixed. Patterns are fluid. Careerists who create patterns have options when change occurs.

Encourage employees to keep career patterns fresh and relevant. If an experience in the pattern is no longer enticing or important, it may be time to replace that experience with another that will provide a greater opportunity to learn. Help them consider which experiences come before others and which ones provide skill-building that can be used as they move through the pattern.

**Share stories.** Experience is said to be the best teacher, but even the most comprehensive career pattern can’t offer every experience. Employees learn from the career experiences of others, and a great place to start is with a story.

Share stories from successes and mistakes and ones that reveal major turning points, lessons and inspirations. Managers should share stories that talk about a job that forced new thinking. Encourage employees to ask leaders about their career journeys. The stories they hear will reveal a wide variety of routes. Rarely is a career a straight, uninterrupted series of ladderlike steps.

**Owner’s Role: the Employee**

Like a kaleidoscope, the beauty of a career pattern is in the eye of the beholder. Career patterns are owned, managed and nurtured by the employee. Only the owner knows what personal and professional success will look like for them. Only the owner knows how much or how little they plan to commit to achieving their success. And only the owner can make a pattern come to life.

Creating a career pattern starts with coming up with answers in three areas:

1. **Experiences:** What experiences do I want to have during my career? Who can I watch? Who can I talk to? Who has had a career I want? How can I do that?

2. **Purpose:** What will I learn or gain through each experience? How will what I learn serve me in the future?

3. **Plan:** How will I move between the experiences? How can my experiences build? What should come first?

Paths needed managing. Patterns need to be managed, too. As Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu’s said, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

Employees must decide where to begin, and then look for routes to take to bridge from experience to experience.

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and effective in the workplace, said Deniz Ones, a professor of industrial psychology at the University of Minnesota.

"Using personality assessments, organizations can glean information on individuals’ work-related tendencies, attitudes and work-styles," Ones said. “Results from these tools can be tremendously helpful in identifying high-performers, and can also benefit employees when used in career counseling or development and coaching."

Furthermore, Ones said behavioral assessments can help employers avoid "deviant" behaviors, such as theft, harassment or violence on the job.

Of course, these benefits cannot be conferred by any old BuzzFeed-like quiz. Ones recommends employers verify that assessments they use are in alignment with the professional guidelines for psychological assessments, such as those set by the American Psychological Association, the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology and the International Test Commission.

Organizations without in-house expertise to evaluate these tools can turn to professional consultants who can ensure assessments were developed in accordance with, and continue to abide by, industry standards.

Another means of measuring the potential effectiveness of an assessment is simply to test it, said Linnea Meyer Gandhi, a consultant at TGG Group, a consulting firm that specializes in behavioral insights.

"The only way to really know is to test, because every context is different," Gandhi said. "All of these really cool behavioral science ideas come from lab studies, things that academics did in a very controlled environment. So we have to be very careful as practitioners that we test in the context that we’re applying in before rolling something out more broadly. Because you might find something that worked in the lab doesn’t actually work in the messier context of real life.”

But when organizations are able to find assessments that do work in the context of their business, experts say they’re likely to reap rewards.

"The goal of work psychology is to optimize human potential in the workplace," Ones said. “Personality assessments can help identify and manage an organization’s greatest assets from turning into one of its greatest liabilities.” 

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Here are six tips for managing a career pattern:

1. Redirect: If the hoped-for experience is not available right now or the timing is just not right, redirect to an alternative experience immediately. Don’t waste time stewing over it — find experiences that have a similar purpose.

2. Refine: Often something is learned from an experience that was not expected. Examine how accidental learning might refine or reshape one or more future opportunities. Patterns can be refined to fit and tailored to leverage new knowledge.

3. Recycle or Replace: Sometimes an experience that seemed meaningful and full of opportunities yesterday becomes less important. Recycle it. Toss it out. Replace it with an experience that is more relevant or inviting.

4. Refresh: Pursuing experiences that are no longer enticing results in an unproductive pattern. Patterns should be refreshed regularly to see if they still inspire commitment. Tying a pattern refresh to something easily remembered — maybe when clocks are reset for daylight savings or even a birthday — can ensure a refresh occurs.

5. Rearrange: Several factors influence the sequence in which experiences are pursued. The first is drive, commitment and choices. The order in which pattern experiences happen need to make sense for the owner. Second, careers will not happen in a vacuum. Outside forces often determine what opportunities are available and when. The savvy careerist stays in tune with what's happening in the organization and industry. If a change or shift occurs that places an experience front and center, it's important to not allow the opportunity to pass. Rearranging the pattern to take advantage of the timing can make all the difference.

6. Rejoice: Celebrating the successes — the experiences that turn out to be awesome, and even the occasional stumble, the experience that teaches so much — makes the pattern a rich resource of energy and accomplishment.

The workplace landscape is changing so quickly that no sooner do we map it than our map is out of date. Savvy careerists — individuals who commit to designing, pursuing and living career patterns that are their own — and managers who encourage and guide them are leading the way in this new approach to careers. 

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