By Lisa A Mainiero

The Typecasting Trap

Many employees get permanently stuck in one career role. A recent survey tells how people fall into the typecasting trap and how they can get out.

Sandra is a chemical engineer in a well-known R&D facility. Considered an expert in her field, she has received many scientific achievement awards for her work; colleagues flock to her desk to ask for guidance on important projects. Sandra's success on the scientific career ladder seems assured.

There's one problem: Sandra is not happy with her career. What she would prefer, she says, is to move into marketing and sales. She has enrolled in a part-time MBA program with a concentration in marketing. But Sandra's attempts to discuss her future with her boss have fallen on deaf ears. When she expressed her desire to move into the marketing area of the company, he told her that she would be committing "career suicide" as a scientist; he saw no reason for her to make that kind of move. He then discussed Sandra's opportunities in a scientific career.

Larry was trained as a computer programmer and has a real talent for computer applications. On several occasions, he has found unique solutions to common problems in data storage and management. In the company lunchroom, Larry is frequently greeted with cries of "There's the computer genius!"

Larry enjoys his work, but he is concerned about career movement in the future. He views his advancement opportunities as a computer programmer as truncated and would prefer to move into accounting or finance. But the company needs his programming talents so badly that Larry has begun to wonder if he'll ever be allowed to make the move.

Virginia bristles at being called "just a secretary." She prefers the title, "administrative assistant," because she feels the corporation is prejudiced against secretaries. Recently divorced, Virginia has decided that she wants more out of life and especially more out of her career. She's not sure what position she wants, but Virginia is desperately trying to get others to perceive her as a good candidate for advancement.

The problem

Just as actors are typecast in certain roles, employees can become typecast in their jobs. Career typecasting occurs when an employee is perceived as able to perform only the job for which he or she was hired. Despite the employee's efforts, the company is unwilling to allow career movement at the present time or in the desired direction.

Long a neglected issue in career development, typecasting can be a significant problem for many employees—and ultimately for their organizations. As people feel blocked from pursuing their own career interests, they can become unmotivated and alienated from their work, causing their companies to lose strong performers.

A recent study sought to determine the reasons why certain employees became typecast and the strategies they used to combat the problem and successfully pursue new careers. More than 50 employees of two R&D organizations—a chemical facility and a manufacturing firm—were interviewed. Their professions varied—participants included chemists; biologists; physicists; chemical, electrical and power engineers; systems analysts; programmers; group leaders; and support-staff professionals. Each was asked to discuss an experience with career blockage and how he or she overcame the problem.

What causes typecasting?

As shown in Figure 1, respondents gave several reasons for being typecast. Many participants identified more than one reason, indicating that typecasting is often the result of multiple factors.

A major cause of typecasting is that an organization becomes overly dependent on the skills of an individual in a particular job. Larry, described above, is a good example; his company really needed him to continue as a computer programmer. No one else could develop programs as imaginatively as Larry.

Some dependency can be helpful, of course, because it can increase the employee's visibility and perceived value to the company. But too much

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need for an employee's specific expertise makes it unlikely that he or she will be allowed to move to a new area.

Another reason for typecasting is that companies fail to recognize employee needs for growth in different fields. In Sandra's case, her boss felt that she would destroy her opportunities as a scientist by moving to a marketing position, although it was directly related to her scientific specialty. To Sandra it was a natural progression and a good way to try out

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Figure 1—Reasons for typecasting

Lack of opportunities in company	41%
Company's overdependence on specialty	38%
Corporate politics	22%
Lack of the right image or background	12%
Too dramatic a change	8%

Fifty-two participants were surveyed; percentages indicate how many participants cited each reason. Percentages do not total 100 because many participants mentioned more than one reason.

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new skills. To her boss, however, a scientist with Sandra's talents had only one career path to consider.

In many cases typecasting has political and cultural implications; a company may decide that someone doesn't have the "right image" for management. With promotion unlikely, the employee stays in his or her current position and is forever typecast in that particular role.

Too much education

Typecasting can be exacerbated by specialization. More employees than ever before are following what they think is a surefire formula: by furthering their education, they increase the likelihood of advancement. Yet many people are becoming educated beyond the opportunities available in their companies.

Typecasting through specialization may be the wave of the future. Peter Drucker, in a recent article in *Harvard Business Review,* discussed the need for more flat, non-hierarchial organizational structures that rely on

subject-matter expertise rather than traditional management layers. He likened this new structure to a symphony. Primarily, employees would be responsible for their own areas of expertise. The manager would serve as the conductor, orchestrating their efforts. In an orchestra, each player needs to be a specialist, and people are promoted on the basis of technical excellence.

Overspecialization seems to be particularly prevalent in R&D organizations, where a premium has always been placed on graduate education and specialty tasks. Many technical professionals—scientists, engineers, and programmers, for example—are pursuing graduate degrees in their areas of specialty or, increasingly, in management. One firm reported that its personnel department has noticed this trend for two years: in preliminary job interviews, more PhD scientists and engineers asked about management opportunities than about technical projects.

Plateauing

That brings up another form of career blockage, plateauing, which can lead to typecasting. After conducting a survey of 72 managers, Janet Near of Indiana University estimated that more than 60 percent had reached career plateaus.

Near suggests that employees become plateaued because of the hierarchical structure of most companies. The organizational pyramid means that not everyone can reach the top levels, or even the middle levels, of the executive hierarchy. The likelihood of being typecast is particularly great in companies that are downsizing.

In the next decade, it seems likely that many more employees will find themselves plateaued and subsequently typecast in their jobs, with little chance for advancement or growth.

Escaping the trap

Regardless of why they are typecast, employees in such situations want to know how to change them. Participants in the study were asked to describe the strategies they used to overcome typecasting.

Respondents identified six techniques that helped them achieve career movement (see Figure 2). From these, three basic themes emerged: communication, enhancement of

skills, and preparation for movement.

Communicating career goals is critical to overcoming typecasting. Many of those interviewed said they made their own career moves possible by talking to others (bosses and colleagues, for example) about their new career goals. Communication may have to extend beyond immediate supervisors. Many respondents described far-reaching networks of contacts, including personnel staff, several layers of managers, and colleagues in other departments (especially the targeted department).

Consider the case of John, a research scientist. John wanted desperately to move into management, but had been typecast by his company as "not having the right personality" for it. John felt he had the skills to be a manager and talked about his aspirations with his boss, his boss's boss, colleagues, friends, neighbors, and members of the company's personnel department.

Through his persistence, John was able to convince his boss that he did indeed have the right personality for management, and his boss became a supporter. His boss then convinced others to give John a chance. John was made a project manager, performed well, and was eventually promoted into management.

The problem with many employees who have become typecast is that they have been trained as specialists rather than generalists. Engineers and scientists, computer programmers, and even secretaries fall into that category. Many of the skills they have learned along the way can be used in other careers. The key is to evaluate one's current set of skills to understand which are transferrable, and then develop general skills that will be perceived as useful in a new profession.

According to interview respondents, that can be accomplished in two ways. One is by enriching the current job to gain new skills, as in the case of Olga, a secretary. Olga really wanted to get into accounting and finance, but didn't know how. Each month her boss had to submit a budget report, but hated compiling all the papers that were required. Realizing that, Olga saw an opportunity for enriching her own job.

One month she compiled the papers for her boss and did some preliminary calculations. She then

asked him for further direction; he was glad to give it. Soon Olga had the responsibility of doing the accounting for the monthly budget. After learning those skills, she began visiting the comptroller's office (with her boss's permission, of course) to ask if there was any extra work she could do. She soon landed the position she wanted and now has a growing career in the financial area of her company.

Another way to broaden skills is by

Figure 2—Strategies to overcome typecasting

Communicating career goals	71%
Pursuing a degree in the chosen field	68%
Enriching the current job to gain new skills	62%
Developing a successor	54%
Making realignment moves	34%
Relocating to another company	48%

Fifty-two participants were surveyed on strategies they used to achieve career movement. Percentages do not total 100 because most participants used more than one strategy.

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the standard route—education. Most companies offer programs that permit employees to pursue their education. By negotiating with the boss, an employee may be able to obtain the degree needed for a career move. Sandra, the chemical engineer described earlier, had decided to pursue an MBA with a concentration in marketing. As her case demonstrates, having the qualifications for a particular area does not guarantee getting a job in it. Not having the right degree, however, can certainly prevent a move.

When networking and increasing job skills proved to be unsuccessful, many respondents prepared themselves to move out of their jobs. They did so in a variety of ways. Identifying a successor seems to be a useful strategy. Many companies become overly dependent on certain employees because no one else can perform the same tasks.

Larry, the computer programmer, hired Maria and trained her to do the kinds of jobs he had been doing. He sent Maria out on assignment to

increase her visibility in the organization. Once Larry's boss realized that he was not indispensable, she was willing to consider his career move. Developing a successor requires time and effort, however, and there's no guarantee that it will work.

Another method is to make a "realignment move." According to Beverly Kaye in her book, *Up is Not the Only Way*, realignment moves are downward moves in the organization's hierarchy. They are used to gain experience in areas that may be dramatically different from an employee's current experience and background.

For example, Martin wanted to move from engineering into a technical sales job. Since he had no sales experience, the sales and marketing division was reluctant to consider him for the job. Martin argued that he deserved a chance; he had a strong technical background that would be useful in sales. The sales group finally agreed to accept Martin. He received the same salary as before, but had to take a lower-level position. Martin accepted the challenge. In doing so, he was able to prove his talents and eventually received three promotions.

Many people surveyed required a far more dramatic move to overcome typecasting: they relocated to other companies. By getting a fresh start with a new group of people, they were able to change their typecast images and pursue their career objectives. Relocation represents a risk; despite signals to the contrary, an employee may find exactly the same situation in the new company, or an even worse one. But for the survey participants who relocated, it was successful.

Involving HRD professionals

Human resource professionals have a responsibility in the years ahead to deal with the issues of typecasting and plateauing. As more and more employees find themselves in these situations, they may assume that advanced degrees will ensure movement to their chosen fields. They will be increasingly dissatisfied when they discover that the opportunities they expected are no longer forthcoming. Human resource managers must develop policies to overcome employee dissatisfaction created by such unmet expectations.

Several solutions are possible. Lotte Bailyn of MIT has suggested that R&D organizations find other rewards than promotion, since advancement opportunities will be reduced so drastically. One avenue for change may involve providing higher visibility for outstanding employees and more recognition for their achievements. It may also be useful to offer such informal perquisites as free research time, flexible hours, interdepartmental consulting time, and opportunities to present research findings at conferences and seminars. Temporary project-management teams, each headed by a different contributor, would allow an organization to test employees for management abilities.

Paul Thompson and Gene Dalton of Brigham Young University have suggested the following alternatives:
- flexible pay systems that reward performance rather than position;
- increased input in decision making;
- increased visibility for top contributors;
- limited tenure in supervisory positions;
- more effective use of lateral transfers.

In other words, companies may need to develop more flexible systems, offering transitory project-management responsibilities that increase the visibility of individual contributors. Matrix organization designs have been misused in the past. Perhaps now is the time to use them as they were intended: to increase the internal flexibility of organizational structures.

Another solution is to recognize that human resource professionals must institute more flexible personnel policies. Job rotations with limited tenure in certain departments can provide employee development. An employee who wants to change careers can learn about a new area on a temporary basis before making a major career change.

Most important, companies need to adopt better career-planning and career-management programs for employees, so they can identify desirable career paths and understand how to overcome the effects of typecasting. By developing systems that reward employees for their contributions and allow employees to grow in their careers, companies can minimize the problems of typecasting.