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Career Self-Assessment

SAILING THE GOOD SHIP CAREER

BY CAELA FARREN

*Who's at the helm of your career?
In a changing workplace, you may think that others are.
Here's a plan that puts control where it belongs.*

As training and development professionals, our daily bread comes from major restructurings, upheavals in customer environments, dislocations, new technology, and shifts in the workplace. In such massive change, it's imperative to understand the value you bring to your organization. However, you may be experiencing nagging doubts about your career. Is it really you at the helm of the Good Ship Career?

You can see, hear, and feel the world around you and use your senses to avoid danger. Yet, jobs and careers are not physical things. They are processes, actions, relationships, and ideas. How can you navigate clear pathways and avoid obstacles that you can't see, hear, or feel?

Working in organization development and career development over the past 25 years, I have seen countless individuals who truly think all aspects of their work life are beyond their control. The villain is categorical, mystical, and overarching change.

Yet, contrary to reports, not everything is changing. Work has stable underpinnings and aspects you can control. Beneath the apparent and seemingly pervasive chaos, there are patterns in work and human life that are stable and enduring. But you must find them beyond the scope of your organization and job, which are only small parts of the whole, believe it or not.

By forming a mental picture—a conceptual map—you can move more easily from one work situation to another, carrying skills with you and applying them where they will do the most good for yourself and others. That examination process serves as an early-warning system. It lends perspective on how you can adapt—to see which industries are most in need of your skills and competencies, and which organizations would pay the most for those services.

A web is a useful metaphor for the system of work because it evokes intricacy, complexity, interconnectivity, and strength. As in a spider web, movement and activity in any part of the web of work will be felt throughout the rest of it. The spider is ever-vigilant to see that its web is strong, well-positioned in the environment, and can be repaired or adapted quickly if conditions change.

12 human needs

A dozen human needs make up the center of the web of work, the part that is the most stable. Those needs, which are basic and unchanging, drive us as people and as a society.

They are

1. Home and shelter
2. Family and kinship
3. Learning
4. Community
5. Spirituality
6. Social relationships
7. Leisure
8. Economic security
9. Transportation and mobility
10. Health, physical and mental
11. Work and career
12. Environment and safety.

The web center is surrounded by sectors that represent the ways in which human societies have learned to address those needs. Professions, industries, organizations, and jobs evolve continually to satisfy one or more of the needs. Once you understand each sector on the web of work, you can see the relationships and interconnections among them.

The first sector around the center of the web represents specialties or professions. Choosing a profession, trade, or craft is the most important career decision you will ever make, given that professions evolve from the 12 basic needs. Once you select a profession, the choices of industry, organization, and job type become clearer.

Historically, as professionals in a given field banded together, their collective work became known as an industry. Industries are the second sector in the web of work. Because that sector is farther from the core—basic human needs—it has less stability.

Industries subdivide into organizations. Because thousands of organizations are born and die each day, they are less stable as a sector than industries but more stable than the outer sector, jobs. A job is a temporary way to package tasks.

As an industry evolves or an organization's mission changes, jobs are the first part of a work system to be reorganized, outsourced, or eliminated. Looking at the entire web of work in the context of one's career, it's clear that there is more

stability in being profession-centered than in being job-centered.

Getting back to needs, the centerpiece of a work system is service—service to our basic needs as human beings. Advancements in society have improved the quality of life. However, they've also distanced us many times from the people and organizations we serve and that serve us.

Employees of large organizations, for example, sometimes forget why they are working. They don't know the real value they bring to an organization because they can't see who benefits directly from their work. That's why understanding the web of work can serve as an early warning system. If you can't see, feel, and assess the results of your work, you are putting yourself at risk. But if you can, you'll feel more stable and secure—and appreciate that your work is not only a job, but also a service.

Evolutionary links

How did the web of work evolve to fulfill the 12 human needs? Consider health needs, for example. No need is more basic and personal than keeping physically and mentally well. Yet, as civilization evolved from families to tribes to villages to cities to nations, taking care of our basic health needs began to involve complex, multilayered systems, moving us further from taking care of such needs personally. Witness the links with health needs between profession, industry, organization, and job.

Profession. Trades, professions, and crafts have evolved to address human needs. In earliest times, shamans and designated tribespeople looked after the health of the tribe. They passed along their rituals only to certain members, hence originating medical practice. Over centuries of accumulated insight into people's physical and mental health needs, more medical specialties—professions—have emerged.

Industry. Medical practitioners banded together in guilds to share their common mission and experience, refine knowledge and technique, and advance technology. Such guilds evolved into present-day industry as-

sociations, such as the American Medical Association.

Organization. Industry professionals form organizations to perform a specific function or achieve a specific purpose related to a human need. A health-related organization typically focuses on one or more specialties. Current health-care professionals can find work in thousands of public or private organizations.

Job. The outer sector of the web of work is the most fragile, transient part. As an organization grows in size and complexity, it creates new jobs. However, the related industry may generate companies that aren't involved directly in people's health, such as insurance firms and surgical-supply distributors. When downsizing occurs, most of the surviving jobs are the ones central to the mission of caring for individuals.

Charting your course

Training and development professionals can appreciate the interconnections among professions, industries, organizations, and jobs. Most workers are also in touch with those interconnections—at least to the extent that they're con-

cerned about job security in uncertain times. They ask such questions as:

- ▶ Does my job have a future?
- ▶ Will my line of work be eliminated or outsourced?
- ▶ Why won't my manager talk about the future of the company?
- ▶ How can I find out what I need to learn in order to stay competitive?

The web of work helps identify indicators you can use to construct a reliable career guidance plan. Countless business journals and books have formulated risk indicators for professions, industries, organizations, and jobs. But they tend to present a partial view, focusing on one or two aspects of work, instead of an assessment of the entire work system, in which jolts to one sector have implications for the others.

Over a three-year period, my colleagues and I found common themes, growth patterns, and declines in each web sector. Our research focused on these questions:

- ▶ What did the most-resilient industries have in common?
- ▶ How were the most-admired organizations described?
- ▶ Did the least-admired companies have anything in common?

- ▶ Which were the fastest growing professions?
- ▶ Which were the fastest growing or riskiest jobs?
- ▶ What were the characteristics of workers who seemed to rebound no matter what happened to their jobs, organizations, or industries?

It's important to understand the factors that shape and influence your career choices, for two reasons. One, having a context lets you see where you fit in the larger scheme of things. Two, and even more important, it helps you develop a better sense of direction and control in planning your life's work and future.

Job requirements change, as the needs of industries and organizations change. You have to watch all of the interconnections in all of sectors to see the changes coming. A small ripple in one sector can reverberate to where you are on the web.

Profession requirements also change. Mastery is a moving target. You have to keep updating your skills and competencies as technologies evolve. For a training and development professional, that can mean mastering such technologies as multimedia, CD-ROM, intranets, distance learning, and CBT. You may even have to move to another position on the web and master new skills to stay there.

Confidence stems from two sources: certainty and mastery. Understanding that the job you hold now is part of a much larger picture will help you stay flexible, marketable, and confident. ■

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THE WEB OF WORK



TEST YOURSELF

Take this test to determine whether your profession, your industry, or your organization is in a low-, potential-, or at-risk situation. Answer *yes* or *no* to these statements about your profession, industry, and organization:

Score one point for each *yes*. If your score is between 9 and 12, you are in a low-risk situation. Look at statements to which you responded *no* to see what actions could make you more resilient.

If your score is between 5 and 8, your situation has potential risk. Scan each *no* statement. Note the ones you want more information about, and begin the quest.

If your score is between 0 and 4, you are in an at-risk situation. Determine whether one sector (such as industry) scored lower than the others. Take action on it.

1. *My profession is essential for this organization to fulfill its primary purpose.*
2. *My profession provides work opportunities that transfer to other types of organizations and industries.*
3. *My profession requires competencies that can be applied to many other professions.*
4. *My profession requires people to communicate with colleagues outside their own organizations.*
5. *My industry serves a basic human need that will exist for many years to come.*
6. *My industry has just begun to expand its growth potential.*
7. *My industry has products or services that are expanding to fill a variety of niches.*
8. *My industry is relatively free of government regulation or interference.*
9. *My organization has a clear sense of purpose.*
10. *My organization is growing in power and influence.*
11. *My organization allows people and resources to move from one area to another easily.*
12. *My organization's management is preparing for the important trends in our industry.*

This self-test is adapted from the Leading Career Indicators (LCI) tool from Career Systems Advantage and *Who's Running Your Career?: Creating Stability in Unstable Times* (Bard Press, 1997).