The 7 Stages of One's Career

By David D. Dubois

And the new career competencies for the future.

Main Points

● Career work is the process of determining what one's path will be, how the journey will be made, and how to manage the demands of one's life and work along the way.

● What we attend to is driven by our value systems—cultural, work, personal, and interpersonal.

● Successful career work requires certain competencies. A personal characteristic isn't a competency unless it can be shown to contribute to successful performance.

Our "career work" (as I call it) progresses (although not necessarily in an orderly way) through a series of stages in which we take certain actions that we hope will lead us to life and work satisfaction. The term *career work,* as it is used here, is the process of determining what one's path or journey through life will be, how that journey should or will be made, and how to manage the demands of one's life and work along the way. At each stage (detailed later), what we attend to is driven by our value systems—cultural, work, personal, and interpersonal.

In order for people to do their career work (or any other work for that matter) effectively, they must possess and appropriately use a wide variety of competencies. A competency is any personal characteristic that underlies successful performance of any type. A competency can be a skill, body of knowledge, way of thinking, motive, or social role. People perform tasks in order to achieve a result or an output; they use their competencies to perform tasks.

Virtually all of the competencies people use to succeed in their overall career work also can be used to complete their day-to-day work. So, organizations are wise to invest in helping their employees to acquire and use critical career work competencies correctly.

The important questions:

❑ What is the business environment that influences people's career work and organizational success?

❑ What is the meaning of the term *career work?*

❏ What seven-stage process can people use to master their career work?

❏ What are the 20 career work competencies that people need for success?

❏ How can leaders support employees' achievement of career work to their mutual benefit?

The business environment

Organizations throughout the world exist because they produce outputs that their customers or constituents value and want. What they produce is a direct result of work completed by their employees or volunteer workers.

Workers and their organizations share a symbiotic relationship: No organization means no workers; no workers, no organization. In that sense, employees' career work is a joint responsibility of workers and their organizations if both are to succeed. That delicate relationship must reach and maintain a state of harmonious balance if workers and organizations are to prosper. However, the balance is more frequently impaired by internal and external factors as follows.

Multicultural. The workforce is becoming increasingly multinational. People from a variety of cultures working side-by-side have national and culturally specific memories as well as ties with family and friends who are oftentimes thousands of miles away. That puts intense pressure on workers to be tolerant of each other's customs, language difficulties, and concerns about distant family and friends—all of which are compounded by the pressure to perform their jobs well every day. In such an environment, how can one's career work receive adequate attention?

Economic gaps. The economic disparity among workers is widening between the haves and the have-nots. That causes tension among differing people who must work collaboratively for organizational success. Who is looking after the career-work needs of the have-nots and maybe some of the haves?

The age gap. The American work population is aging. The challenges that people confront in their daily lives as they age require accommodation in the workplace if organizations are to benefit from veteran workers' refined competencies. That's a new requirement that many organizations are only beginning to recognize and act on.

Younger workers may have to accommodate older ones (or others) who might have diminished hearing, vision, or physical stamina. Younger workers must also sometimes be helped to recognize and avail themselves of the experience and wisdom of older workers, sometimes as mentors.

A good question: What help do veteran workers receive as they pursue their career work?

New family structures. Some societies, such as in the United States, are experiencing changes in the traditional nuclear family, including the rise of single parents. As a consequence, some workers are having to accommodate less traditional beliefs regarding family structures and relationships in order to have harmonious, productive work relationships. Both groups of workers—traditional and less traditional—require help in achieving their career work. Are organizations providing that help?

> International endeavors require workers to acquire and use new competencies in languages and managing diversity.

It's recognized worldwide that there's a shortage of qualified workers. Organizations will increasingly find it necessary to improve and extend their employee training and performance improvement programs to close the competency gaps.

Broad differences in workers' educational development and achievements have profound effects on workers' effectiveness and their organizations' ability to produce the expected outputs or results, at the required level of quality. Organizations are searching for ways to enhance workers' learning while maintaining adequate productivity. Does career work receive adequate educational attention?

The rapid and never-ending deployment of technology in organizations has occurred faster than workers have been able to master the use of technology for productivity improvements. There are several reasons for that. One is workers' predictable resistance to change, even when they know that the change will ultimately be to their benefit and the organization's.

Two, work units must often maintain dual work systems until automated conversions are installed, tested, and made fully operational. That's labor-intensive and time-consuming, and it places severe demands on workers to do double work. In turn, that affects overall productivity and causes worker overload and frustration.

Three, changes in computer operating systems and production software require workers to upgrade their competencies with each new product release. The training is typically given while employees are on the job and are also still expected to do work and produce results.

Four, information technology has provided new global opportunities in the way business is conducted. Skilled knowledge workers are a must for organization success. International endeavors force organizations to cope with multiple languages and ways of communicating. That requires workers to acquire and use new competencies in languages and managing diversity. The development and use of such new competencies might or might not be consistent with people's career work.

A persistent wave of mergers and acquisitions and the outsourcing of products and services have opened new business markets. The benefits include a wider customer base and improved products and services, research and development capabilities, and financial stability. But product and service branding to enhance customer recognition brings its own set of requirements and challenges.

Workers in such environments must be competent in addressing and managing change, while maintaining their productivity and achieving their organizations' work requirements—despite chaotic change and disruptive work conditions.

Organizations and their workers are facing unprecedented demands to achieve and maintain productivity while pursuing their personal career work. Those complex issues challenge companies as they aim to be profitable and meet

the needs of customers. The demands also create challenges for workers as they try to be successful in their daily work, while pursuing their career work.

The seven stages

The word *career* has broad meaning to people. In its most universal sense, career can be defined as a person's chosen path or journey through life. As one progresses on the journey, he or she fulfills many roles: parent, caregiver, worker, friend, partner.

Career work suggests that people progress, either formally or informally, through these development stages:

1. Exploration
2. Personal assessment
3. Analysis
4. Decision making
5. Planning
6. Implementation or development
7. Life-work management.

A person's progression through the stages is seldom linear because predictable and unpredictable life factors can occur at any time and in many ways. So, it's important the model not be viewed or applied rigidly.

Stage 1: Exploration. This stage includes a person's earliest recollection of "what I want to be when I grow up" and the revisions on that dream as the person commits to his or her career work. This stage is usually heavily affected by spoken and unspoken messages that people receive from family or significant others regarding what their life path or journey should be. The messages are usually from a person's elders about their desire for the type of work the person should do, where he or she should live, and spiritual dimensions and lifestyle such as choice of a partner, number of children, and so forth.

When someone begins career work formally, he or she usually has already had a variety of occupations (such as nurse or chef) and life or work roles (such as student or homemaker). And people have typically already considered a variety of subject matter areas, such as chemistry,

mathematics, or nutrition for their life's journey. Some people, however, might arrive at this stage of career work with no options in mind. They can now take formal actions such as information interviewing, reading, and Internet research or informal actions such as brainstorming or talking with friends to determine their initial options.

Stage 2: Personal assessment. At this stage, people bring with them a list of potential life and work options. The activities of this stage help people assess and understand their competency strengths; personality traits; abilities; interests; learning-style, work-style, and work-environment preferences; and personal, interpersonal, work, and cultural values.

At this stage, people usually receive detailed information from having completed formal or informal appraisal instruments, checklists, simulations, interviews, and so forth. Obtaining that information through online systems is

effective and efficient. The output contains highly specific information about a person, including the effect of his or her value systems on personal preferences. People can use that appraisal information to revise the options they developed in the exploration stage.

Stage 3: Analysis. This stage involves analyzing information from stage 2, the personal assessment stage. It's rare that the life and work options determined in stage 1, exploration, survived stage 2 in their original form.
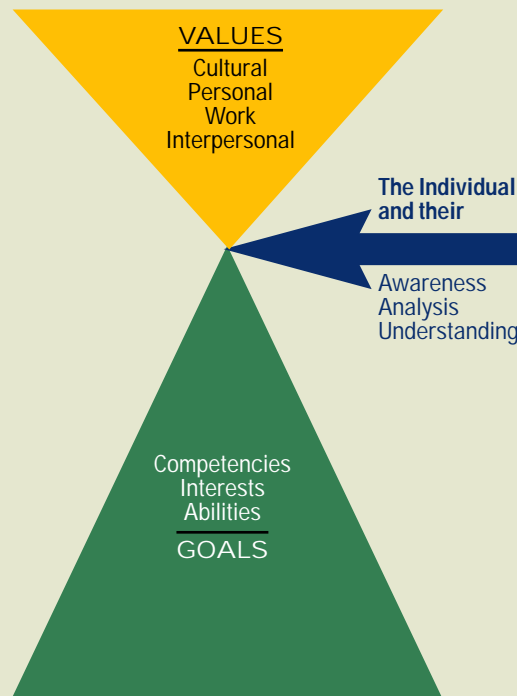
Once someone completes the personal assessment stage, he or she better understands the information from that stage of their career work, which includes assessing the circumstances of their lives or lives of significant others that might affect their future career work. During the analysis stage, people break down that information and trace the smaller parts to past, present, or future cause-and-effect relationships so they can be understood in a more profound and holistic way.

At this and the remaining stages of career work, the importance of a person's personal, interpersonal, work, and cultural values again becomes apparent in setting life and work goals. The values affect what will or will not be included in a person's life journey or career. People's values help them determine what's important in their lives and what's worthy of their attention and energy. One's cultural values are a particularly powerful influence.

The figure, created by my colleague Linda K. Kemp, illustrates a special case in which a person examines his or her cultural, personal, interpersonal, and work values before attending to remaining information that should be included in career work goal setting. The illustration implies that people sort out their values through a process of awareness, analysis, and understanding. The outcomes are the primary drivers of the career work goal setting. For certain people, values are equally or more important to their career work than are their

The First Consideration

When a person's values are what he or she considers first in setting career work goals, the process looks like this:

VALUES
Cultural
Personal
Work
Interpersonal

The Individual and their

Awareness
Analysis
Understanding

Competencies
Interests
Abilities
GOALS

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competencies, interests, abilities, and the like.

The analysis results are expressed as a set of tentative or candidate career work goals. People use those goals during the next stage of career work, decision making.

Stage 4: Decision making. The candidate career work goals defined during the analysis stage are now reviewed and subjected to a decision-making process of the person's choice. He or she must decide which goals to pursue and over what time period. The person evaluates how important the pursuit of each goal is and an approximate time for achieving each goal. Once those decisions are made, he or she can choose all or a few of the possible goals to pursue.

This is a delicate stage of career work because the outputs must be grounded in reality to the greatest degree possible. If they aren't realistic, people are likely to experience frustration or disappointment later on. That could cause them to be discouraged, which could lead to abandoning any further effort. Thus, the decision-making process should result in a set of realistic career work goals, given the information available at the time.

Stage 5: Planning. At this stage, people define how they will achieve each of their goals. They write a plan similar to a detailed project management plan: Each goal becomes a career work project. In the plan for each goal, people identify

❏ tasks they must complete to achieve each goal
❏ approximate time to complete each of the tasks
❏ order in which the tasks will be completed
❏ other people who might have a role in achieving each task
❏ target date for completing each task
❏ expected outcomes once goals are met.

As people formulate their plans, they might discover that their goals aren't compatible or that some goals should be modified to make them more consistent. It's essential to make those adjustments at this stage rather than later and that people know how to obtain the necessary resources.

Stage 6: Implementation and/or development. Here, people execute the project plan. This stage is often referred

to as "working your plan." The order of work depends on the complexity of each goal and whether there are dependent relationships among the goals. You might be able to accomplish some goals simultaneously, others sequentially.

Stage 7: Life-work management. As a person achieves each goal, it becomes part of his or her life-work management stage. It's here that people reap the rewards of achieving their goals. That requires people to maintain successful performance of the work resulting from goal achievement (for example, successful performance as a manager, partner, or laborer). Additionally, they must maintain balance among all of life's elements while they pursue their remaining goals or they cope with unanticipated challenges, such as having to care for an ill family member or becoming a parent. Such events can occur at any stage of career work and can present the greatest challenge of any stage.

A personal characteristic is not a competency unless it can be shown to contribute to successful performance.

People usually find themselves recycling through prior stages of their career work as they achieve, modify, discard, or rework their goals, or as life or work circumstances surface that require changes to their paths.

The key competencies

Completing career work successfully—which means completing the journey through life successfully—requires that people have and use, in appropriate ways, certain competencies. Recall that a competency is any personal characteristic that underlies successful performance. A personal characteristic is not a competency unless it can be shown to contribute to successful performance. Although completing some life tasks requires the use of only one competency, it's more common that people have to use several competencies in conjunction.

Here are some key competencies

people can use for success in their career work:

Achievement orientation. People with this competency tend to be action-oriented in order to continuously enhance their life and work circumstances or work performance and personal satisfaction.

Analysis. An understanding of career-work information or situations by breaking down the factors and tracing pieces to cause-and-effect relationships.

Assessment. People complete assessment or appraisal activities and receive and review information regarding their interests, preferences, capabilities, competencies, prior achievements, values, personality factors, and so forth for completing their career work.

Awareness. Being conscious or informed of key information, circumstances, and other factors that can affect the successful completion of one's career work.

Change management. The ability to manage predictable and unpredictable changes affecting the achievement of one's career work.

Computer literacy and facility. The ability to use a personal computer and hardware or software applications, and to retrieve or send information on the Internet, that will help achieve one's career work.

Decision making. Being able to identify and apply a preferred decision-making model or process to help make career work decisions.

Exploration. Identifying life and work concerns, possibilities, options, values, interests, or achievements as an initial stage of career work.

Goal setting. Defining realistic life or work goals and making a personal commitment to achieve them.

Information identification/collection. Getting key information for achieving career work.

Interpersonal skills. A desire to understand other people whether as individuals or groups and to demonstrate to observers an accurate perception and comprehension of other people's unspoken or partially communicated feelings, concerns, or thoughts.

Networking. The ability to build relationships that promote a flow of information useful to career work.

Oral communication. The clear ex-

pression of ideas or thoughts or the ability to listen effectively and respond so that the speaker feels understood.

Perseverance. Demonstrating in a positive way resolute and persistent thoughts, feelings, and actions relative to the achievement of career work.

Conflict resolution. The ability to use conflict-resolution techniques effectively during the pursuit of career work.

Planning. Identifying the necessary steps or actions for achieving career work and listing the steps in the logical or optimal order for their completion.

Résumé and portfolio development. The identification of critical elements and the ability to organize and format them attractively and easily readable, towards achieving career work.

Self-management. Demonstrating one's comprehension and effective use of such techniques as adopting and maintaining a positive mindset, expressing gratitude, and managing emotions while pursuing achievement of career work.

Strategic thinking. Identifying and understanding work environment trends, changes, opportunities, threats, strengths, and weaknesses that can affect achievement of career work, and identifying appropriate responses.

Written communication. The ability to communicate effectively one's thoughts, feelings, and other information in written form so that other people grasp their meaning.

As you read each competency, did you note its usefulness for completing career work successfully? Career work is about living one's life meaningfully, as you understand and want it to be. The competencies are aligned with the requirements for successful living.

Two questions remain: What can organizations do to help employees achieve their career work? How can people make progress in achieving their career work in their organizations?

Career work in organizations

Work in organizations can be complex and intense, and how work is performed changes as worldwide business, political, or economic conditions change. To meet those challenges, organizations must attract and retain competent workers who invest in their organizations. To do that, workers must see a future in the energy they expend. That's an employee retention issue. But an organization's leaders and employees must do their part for their mutual benefit.

Leaders must

❏ gain an understanding of career work and its mutual importance to employee and organizational success

❏ recognize that career work is a continuous lifelong process that everyone, including leaders, can't escape if they want to have a meaningful and productive life

❏ understand career work as a key element of employee satisfaction and retention, giving those continuous attention through climate surveys and targeted organization-wide actions that support all employees' career work

❏ see that providing opportunities for workers to acquire and use career work competencies enhances the pool of worker competencies available to the organization

Career work is about living one's life meaningfully, as you understand and want it to be.

for achieving business objectives—a win-win situation.

Initiatives that leaders can take:

❏ Create and make competency development and application opportunities available to employees through enhanced job assignments, job rotations, external assignments, and so forth.

❏ Implement the use of succession planning programs open to all employees who aspire to roles or positions in the system.

❏ Offer a formal career work facilitation program as a line function and make its services available to all employees; staff the function with well-trained and experienced career-development facilitators.

❏ Establish innovative and customized job competency development and application opportunities to improve employee competencies needed by the organization and that also support employees' career work.

❏ Provide financial support to employees so that they can take advantage of external competency development opportunities.

❏ Support or sponsor informal competency development activities such as lunchtime seminars, learning circles, and similar activities.

❏ Make it a high priority to keep employees informed of planned change and help them align their career work with new or different opportunities that might become available as a result of the change.

What should employees do to make progress in completing their career work?

Here are several suggestions:

❏ Accept full responsibility for doing one's own career work.

❏ Use the seven-stage model as a roadmap for completing career work.

❏ Use community resources such as libraries, job banks, organizations, career centers, and universities.

Employees must express their interests and intentions to management or to other people in the organization who have a leadership role or informal influence. When a work opportunity becomes available that an employee believes will help achieve his or her career work, the employee must let other people know of his or her interest. Employees should also volunteer for new or different assignments that are consistent with their career work.

Employees should consider taking a lateral assignment as a way to broaden their competency base and functional or technical capabilities. They should even consider taking a demotion if that will place them on a more direct path to completing their career work.

Get on the Internet where there are plenty of free or inexpensive life and work resources. Leave the organization if that will help you pursue your career work in a more productive and meaningful way. Consider, if only temporarily, being self-employed.

There are no easy solutions or gimmicks for completing one's career work. It is the difficult work of living successfully. But take heart and realize that you're not alone in your journey, and there can be many blessings along the way. ❏

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