



## STEP 1

# Get Ready to Show Up

Know you can build an  
extraordinary career

**W**hat makes for an extraordinary career in today's world? And how can you continue to build yours? Consider Gerri Elliott, who has had a distinguished forty-four-year career as a senior executive at some of the world's foremost technology companies and has sat on several major boards. Her description of that career vividly illustrates the value of thoughtful progression: "The first third was I did what the hell I was supposed to do. The second third, I broadened my skill set purposefully

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so I wasn't so pigeonholed. And then the final third of my career, I did what the hell I wanted to do!"

Don't stay, either out of loyalty or lack of confidence, in a role you've outgrown or that's no longer fit for purpose. Take steps that will help you reach your "do what you want" era by showing up at your best.

## Open Your Mind to the Possibility of Change

These days, it's common for top leaders like Gerri to seek new horizons as part of their career journey. If you're an accomplished executive, you will already have had many opportunities to learn about, and possibly follow, rewarding new job paths.

Yet, even at the highest levels, confidence can be a barrier. Perhaps you're asking yourself, "How do I quietly and confidentially get my name out there, after years out of the job-hunting game?" Donna Morris, executive vice president and chief people officer for Walmart, notes: "Make sure that you're as confident as you are competent. Not overconfident—but your career, your assets that you've spent so much time on, are worthy of you at least being open to hearing what else is out there." She adds that "people are prudent at least to give themselves the opportunity to explore, so they have the incremental feedback."

Sometimes that takes a hard push. WPP CEO Cindy Rose says, "It's amazing to me how many people stay in their comfort zones and are just unwilling to push themselves into the unknown, into a space that feels scary. I hope that they read this book and think: Okay. I need to raise my level of ambition. Maybe I'm not learning as much as I could be. And maybe I

could push myself harder to do something that’s less comfortable than what I’m doing now.”

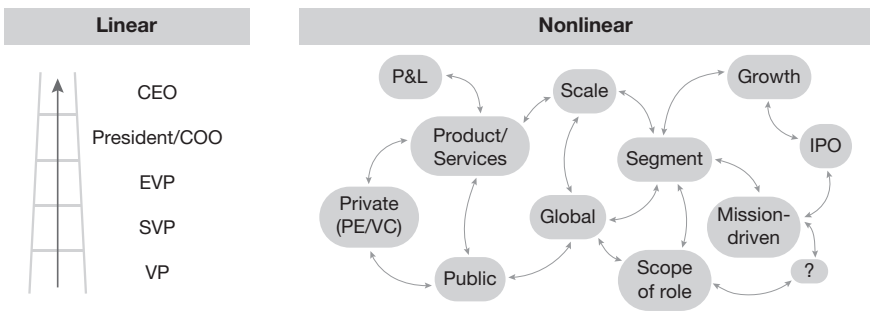
## There’s Not a Single Path Anymore

In the past, the path to career success seemed straightforward: a talented and ambitious future leader got on the bottom rung of the career ladder and worked their way to the top in a one-way, linear progression of more or less predictable promotions—concluding perhaps with a seat on the board. If all went smoothly, your career path might look a lot like the ladder in figure 1-1.

Moving up a traditional career track, with a more senior title and a larger budget and remit at each step, is still common. But it’s not the only way; there is no one definition of career success anymore. These days, the path can be a lot more complex—more like the vertical and horizontal movement across different types of experiences, sectors, and ownership models to build a stronger foundation of capabilities, as depicted in the “nonlinear” section of figure 1-1. As ServiceNow chairman and CEO Bill McDermott

FIGURE 1-1

### Career path evolution



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says, “When you dream big, your career won’t follow a straight line; it will move in quantum leaps. Sometimes that means saying no to a promotion or stepping into the unknown.”

Cindy Rose explains:

People are pretty linear when they think about their career paths. You know—“I’m in sales. I’m always going to be in sales. I’m just going to get more senior in sales”—and some people are perfectly comfortable with that. But there’s lots of directions you can take things; you can become a much more multifaceted executive. I think it’s a wasted opportunity not to build your network and explore things outside of your swim lane. You can reinvent yourself, and it’s all good. It’s all additive and enriching. It all adds to the tapestry of your experiences.

We completely agree. Mindfully building a portfolio of new experiences and capabilities can be a lot more important, valuable, and interesting than doggedly pursuing a vertical ascent in the wrong company. For example, you might choose to pursue a lateral move that will help you build up your capabilities in areas you lack experience in, explicitly to create a foundation for a later move to a position of greater responsibility, as Gerri did in the middle third of her career.

We can’t stress enough, however, that performing well in your current role is the foundation of any extraordinary career. Executives who are always seeking a new role, even before they’ve had time to generate results in their current one, will find that they have little to make a compelling case for themselves. (In step 3 we’ll talk about the importance of being able to communicate what matters about your performance with

clarity and context.) In the long run, doing the work, showing results at the best companies and with the best people, builds your brand and makes you desirable to other companies. We have seen that leaders who focus on ambition rather than performance often are less successful than those who find a balance between performing today and keeping an open mind about tomorrow.

## **The Hiring Landscape Is Volatile and Demanding**

Understanding how varied career paths can be today is important, but we think it's equally important to understand how different the hiring landscape is than it ever has been. It demands a lot from today's executives, in terms of planning, versatility, and energy. This pressure is intensified by ongoing volatile economic conditions, with uncertainty swirling through every sector.

In 2024, according to data that Heidrick & Struggles maintains of two thousand leading companies in markets around the world, 41 percent of new senior executives were external hires, with almost two-thirds of them hailing from a different industry. For many, it's their debut in the C-suite—four in ten external hires in 2024 were first-timers—and they may not stay for long: leaders' tenures, perhaps due to volatility, appear to be getting shorter.

Promotions have also accelerated, and many leaders have come to expect a rapid ascent to the top. A survey we conducted in 2023 of executives in markets around the world, across sectors, found that people had been at their company for seven years on average, with two-thirds promoted at least twice.

## Reasons to Make a Move

The reasons for taking a leap to a new position are unique to every candidate. Depending on your priorities and career stage, you may want to gather experience in businesses with a greater global footprint, or move from private ownership to public; maybe you have a desire for faster growth, or passion for a particular industry or product. You may be looking to expand your breadth of experience, challenge yourself on a bigger stage, or leave a legacy.

### Common reasons to pursue a new leadership opportunity include:

- *You need new challenges.* This could mean taking on a new area of responsibility in the same, or a similar, company. It could mean taking on a role with greater scope, or in a new geography or sector. It could mean moving from a regional office to your company's global headquarters.
- *You've achieved the mandate you agreed to deliver.* It's time for someone else to lead the next phase of work.
- *You sense it's time.* An unfavorable or unwelcome change of leadership, ownership, or strategic direction at your current company can spur you to look elsewhere.
- *You see financial incentives.* The potential for a significant increase in compensation package or vesting

schedule, or an opportunity to get equity in a company with brighter prospects, can all make a change appealing.

- *You see an opportunity in a new area of interest.* This could be an emerging sector or technology, or a lifelong passion.
- *Your life changes.* A growing family, aging parents, or health considerations encourage a career shift.
- *You see ancillary benefits.* There's a chance to join a board or executive leadership team or take up an advisory position if you make a change.
- *You have allies.* Someone close to you, or a longtime supporter, persuades you that change would be beneficial (but we offer some additional considerations on whether to make this kind of move in step 5).
- *You're at a stage where you can take more financial risk.* This can open up possibilities to take on roles you might have been interested in but unable to consider earlier.
- *Your boss and/or the overall company culture is toxic.* A bad personal relationship or a bad culture can create too much stress—or actively obstruct your path.
- *You've plateaued.* There's not a viable path for you beyond your present role.
- *You're out of ideas.* You're no longer able to see the company with fresh eyes—even if it's one you founded.

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Fidji Simo, CEO of OpenAI Applications, notes that “the most effective leaders going forward will be the ones who stay flexible. With AI moving so fast, you can’t just stick to one strategy or one way of doing things. Leaders need to shift gears quickly, try new approaches, and stay calm during constant change. It’s also becoming more important for leaders to understand deeply how new technology works.” Philipp Schindler, a senior vice president at Google and the chief business officer, adds that “the only chance you have is to become an AI native faster than the rest. Anyone who can use it to innovate, build, create will have an edge.”

All in all, businesses are asking more than ever from their leaders: they expect them to be, in the words of Starbucks CEO Brian Niccol, “people you can trust to stay focused and not to get rattled during difficult times.”

Leadership is more demanding than ever, and companies more discerning. There is intense competition for great leaders, and intense competition for great roles. In this complex context, we also see that the best candidates have higher expectations for their roles and the resources they will need to make an impact in them.

## Keep Actively Shaping Your Career

The sooner you start thinking actively about your career, the more space for choice you’ll have later. As Walmart’s Donna Morris says, “Jobs will change, but if you seek out experiences in different roles early on, your ability to adapt will be solidly grounded. It’s very hard to have that optionality as a leader if you haven’t had those foundational experiences.”

But making a move—to another company or even internally—is tricky and stressful. Even the most highly accomplished

## Staying Put Is an Option

You don't have to change companies to build an extraordinary career, if you believe in the future of your current company. Bain & Co.'s Manny Maceda has spent his career at that one firm (we'll explore his reasons in step 3). Gerri Elliott is passionate about the value of starting any exploration right where you are:

If you're seeking a new role, the number one place to look would be in the company that you're in right now! Because it's all about reducing risk—and in your current position, you already know the company and the space and the culture. You might have to go create it, go sell yourself, go solve whatever problem is standing in your way—but looking within your current company should be your number one option. If you have to go looking, it's a stressful situation. And stress clouds your judgment. Remember, if you ever do want to move on, it's a hell of a lot easier when you're secure and fulfilled in the role you have today. So why not look for your next big gig in the company you're in right now?

Throughout the rest of this book, our advice is equally meant for people seeking new roles in their current company and at other organizations. We'll raise specific considerations for each situation when they differ.

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executives can stumble over these decisions. Sometimes they don't lift their heads to see what's possible; they don't take the call or meeting that could change the trajectory of their lives. Other times, they act quickly, without enough reflection or due diligence, and make reckless missteps. As Ryan Roslansky, CEO of LinkedIn, observes: "It's phenomenal how intelligent people can make the oddest career decisions!"

But with forethought, you can keep shaping a dynamic career over decades. Look at Bill McDermott, who started his entrepreneurial journey at age sixteen when he bought his hometown delicatessen. He went on to greater things: over his career he's held top positions at five major companies, including two CEO roles, has served on multiple boards, and has no plans to stop soon. "I'm just getting started," Bill says. "Never felt more fired up about what's ahead!"

Perhaps right now you're happy where you are. But even if you have no immediate plans to move, it's important to keep actively shaping your future. The best first step, as we've noted, isn't looking for your next role; it's performing well in the job you have. At the same time, however well you're doing, you can't delegate your next career move to the company you're with. "Nobody is doing this for you," stresses Ryan Roslansky. "A lot of people think there's some preordained career path you get on—but that couldn't be more wrong. You have to take control over your own career."

You've led organizations to success. Now, you need to bring the same rigor, imagination, persistence, and vision to your own career journey. The first steps are making the right choices about which of the opportunities that come your way are actually worth exploring, and reaching out to your network to understand how others see you as a leader, and your value in the market. We dig into these topics in the following step.