



If You Are Wedded to the Term “Career” - You Are Heading For a Car Wreck



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“It is into this black swan-inhabited, imagination-needed, pothole-infested business terrain that we are trying to shoehorn the linear, traditional concept of career.”

You Do a Job. We Have a Career.

Language creates imagery and imagery shapes behaviour. Same old language, same old behaviour. And little is more assumption-laden than the term “career.” The dictionary refers to “career” as a profession, occupation or a specific set of skills that underscores success over one’s lifetime at work. Lifetime?

You do a job.¹ We have a career. The first is an activity – a way to earn a living. The second speaks to a “calling.” It also evokes a feeling of being part of something special. The reason your mum wanted you to have a career was: (1) it’s portable; and (2) it has historically offered SECURITY.

To exclude the “unworthy,” professional groups invariably have stringent – at times outdated – professional requirements. Beyond that, some career “clubs” add to the illusion of exclusivity by donning symbolic dress and/or enacting historic induction rituals.² Or as Shakespeare wrote in Hamlet, “The play’s the thing.” Of course, technology cares not a whit for the play; all that matters are speed, effectiveness and cost.

Try as you might, the notion of a career is difficult to get away from. It’s embedded in our culture. Schools have career counsellors and specific career days. Business sectors have career fairs. Meanwhile, leaders are expected to embrace career expectations and career development as part of the performance management process. “What are your career goals?”

¹ Or, as is the case with many workers, multiple jobs.

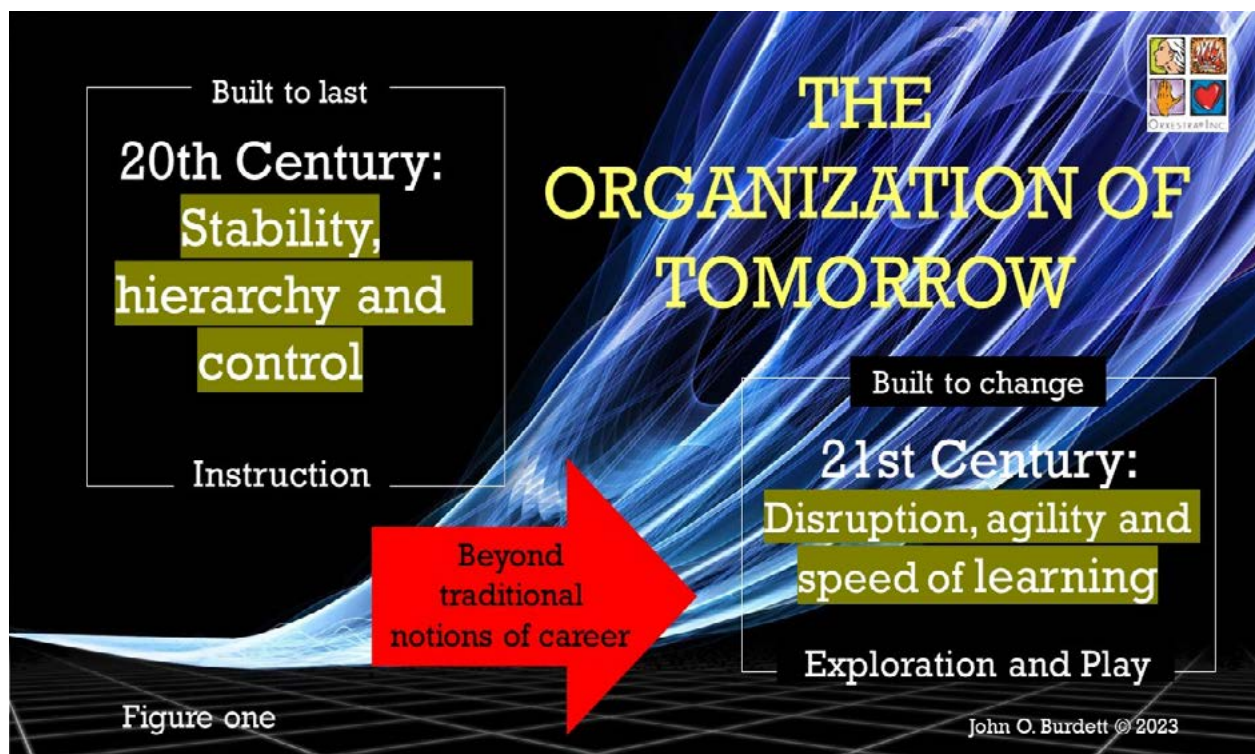
² This is not to decry the value of symbolism and ritual as a critical dimension of culture. Replete in both, the Catholic Church has thrived for two thousand years and the British Royal Family for a thousand. Indeed, were it not for symbolism and ritual, the British Royal Family would be just another dysfunctional family.



Career is where it's at! Or is it? Who, entering the workforce today, can afford to assume that a specific knowledge base and/or skill set will still be relevant even a decade from now? Who, regardless of age, can afford to set aside the emerging (and undeniable) need for agility, resilience and lifelong learning? Who, no matter what profession they are in, can deny that ongoing disruption, AI, ChatGPT, remote employment and the emerging generation of computing is both reinventing the workplace and making the term "career" dangerously misleading?

As for lifelong learning, I am regularly told that people are too busy to read – invariably by those who don't personally invest time in reading. Leaders are readers. Those who don't read are no better off than those who can't read. Know that the first four letters in readiness are READ. Know that in a turbulent and unpredictable business environment, those who don't read will soon find themselves with more than enough time to catch up on their reading.

Reframing Assumptions About Work and Learning



- 3 What is currently referred to as Artificial Intelligence has less actual "intelligence" than a house fly. That does not mean that the quantum dictionaries, giant calculation machines and language-based systems, supported by ever-smarter algorithms, that are referred to as "Generative AI," aren't changing the nature of work. McKinsey forecasts that Generative AI's impact on productivity could add three trillion dollars in value to the global economy.



Same old language, same old assumptions. We clearly need new language – imagery that captures the emerging reality of work and reframes the assumptions about learning. The reinvention of the workplace a century ago – the assembly line – viewed the worker as little more than an extension of the machine.⁴ Simple learning (Instruction) was the order of the day. To enshrine stability, hierarchy and control, the constant theme was: (1) “Keep it simple;” (2) “There is only one way to do it;” and (3) “Don’t colour outside the lines.” See Figure one.

Paradoxically, the introduction of the internet meant, for many, that the more things changed the more they stayed the same. A veritable army of clerical workers were now an extension of the “electronic machine.” Command and control were wrapped in the aura of speed and efficiency, but do as you are told was still the order of the day. Simple learning and instruction ruled. A leadership mindset dominated by *do, don’t think and read the manual*. And, of course, having a career was a great option.

And then things changed – slowly at first and then in dramatic leaps. Software introduced the opportunity for us to engage our unsurpassed capacity to learn. PowerPoint became “power to.” Next came computer games. At first competing against ourselves and then, literally, against anyone who was up for the challenge. Film making, video editing, breakthroughs in graphic design, voice recognition, augmented reality and a whole lot more followed. Even marketing is becoming immersive, interactional and virtual. Welcome to *learning how to learn (Exploration)*.

How Ya Gonna Keep ‘em Down on the Farm (After They’ve Seen Paree)? was a World War I song that became popular in the immediate post-war years. How ya gonna keep ‘em battened down in their cubicle, being told what to do, when learning how to learn has entered their consciousness? Why has retention become such a problematic issue? Why are, literally, the majority of today’s workforce disillusioned, disappointed and disconnected from what is important in their lives? Ineffective leadership, lack of meaning and/or purpose⁵ and little sense of belonging are part of it. Diversity, inclusion, flexibility and the environment have become the heart of it. But awaking a generation to the joy of learning was the start of it.

4 The assembly line created great wealth and took many thousands out of poverty. It also totally destroyed the skill base of those previously involved in hand building carts and wagons, e.g., wheelwrights, carpenters and tanners.

5 Much has been made recently of the need for an organization to have a clear purpose. The sad reality is that, although there may well be a statement of purpose on the website, the vast majority of businesses do not have a compelling purpose and certainly not a quest that gets people out of bed in the morning. We all need a “why”... an intended outcome that gives meaning to work. Where the organization lacks a clear and compelling purpose, the challenge becomes to connect people to their personal purpose.



Beyond Career – Readiness and Agility

We have yet to unlock the code that allows us to truly create the 21st Century organization. Take it as a given, it will be a team of teams. It will also be flat, focused, fast, flexible and fertile to new ideas. The cultural watchword? StrAgility – strong and agile. Beyond that, in a world marked by disruption and primed to expect the unexpected, competing on ideas moves centre stage. Become familiar with *learning how to learn limited only by the imagination of the learner (Play)*.





It is into this black swan-inhabited, imagination-needed, pothole-infested business terrain that we are trying to shoehorn the linear, traditional concept of career. If you listen carefully... you will hear the CRASH! Charting the way forward – personal growth and gaining the skills and experience needed – will be anything but linear. There is no longer a career “path.” Forget about marching in step to traditional music. View tomorrow’s culture as a collective jazz band. Language shapes behaviour. Let’s drop career counselling in favour of exploring *Agile Learning Possibilities*. Let’s overwrite career planning with the *Agile Learning Strategy*. Let’s ensure that the performance conversation focuses on *Agile Learning Opportunities*.

If there is a theme that supports personal growth beyond the traditional notion of a career, it’s “readiness.” Indeed, it can be argued that the value of processes such as career planning have always been an overworked construct. Over the years, I have interviewed a number of top executives – on occasion in front of a large audience – to uncover how they got to where they are. Common wisdom suggests that the career plan beautifully supported and executed is the way to the top. That didn’t prove to be the case. With few exceptions, those I interviewed were, above all else, quick to recognise and respond to opportunity – often unexpected opportunity. Their secret? They had a plan but, far more important, was to hear the call and “be ready.” Curiosity, authenticity, humility, strong reading habits, constantly learning and understanding how to build a great team being central themes in the agency of “readiness.” Don’t worry about reaching for the next step on the ladder. Concern yourself more with *being equipped for the opportunity you are about to unexpectedly bump into (Create)*.⁶ Build the resources and confidence to ride that wave. And while you are at it, get comfortable with being uncomfortable. Very uncomfortable!

As for the professions – emerging technology, sooner rather than later, will reinvent both what they do and what they stand for. Portability and security? The only way to achieve those going forward builds on a success factor that our past kith and kin knew only too well... hard work. That does not mean that professional expertise backed by meaningful standards aren’t invaluable. Tomorrow will not be a replay of today, however. Think ongoing learning, not an established body of knowledge. Think agility, not a fixed path. Think counsel on future opportunity, not a regurgitation of what worked in the past. Think thought leadership, not thought management. Think managing from the outside-in, not from the inside-out. Think partnership, not privilege.

⁶ In the ongoing shift of power away from the enterprise to the workforce expect a greater number of employees – especially those at the top of the organization – to become more aggressive in managing their own learning and growth... and less comfortable in delegating their future to the organization.



Rethinking Talent Management

Important as it is in the middle of the organization, moving beyond traditional notions of a linear career are even more essential at the top. Smart organizations recognise that executive hiring is always strategic – as in always. Merely replacing the incumbent – more of the same – is a mandate for mediocrity. Generic leadership competencies, especially if based on past success, are no less problematic.⁷ Even role-specific competencies (essential) have a limited shelf life, however. Beyond the leadership competencies focusing on strategic fit, the talent acquisition process needs, therefore, to explore three key questions.

1. Are the role-specific competencies aligned with the future culture the organization needs to create? This implies a robust measure of: (i) today's culture; and (ii) the future culture the organization needs to create.



⁷ When Jim Collins, in *Good to Great* (2001), identified the factors that led to “great performance,” there was only passing reference to technology as an economic engine. That would hardly be the case today.



2. Does the candidate exhibit all of the qualities of an agile learner? See the themes in “Beyond Career – Readiness and Agility” outlined earlier.
3. Does the executive in question have the capacity, as needed, to ride the waves of change (learning agility)?

Succession is a critical building block in building tomorrow’s success. Not only is it a fiduciary responsibility at board level but a manager who puts developing a successor on the back burner is putting their future on hold. That said, moving beyond past assumptions about career also reframes the succession planning process in two fundamental ways. One: the development path for a successor has to emphasise learning agility. Two: It’s not unusual for succession to focus exclusively on identifying who is capable of successfully moving, at a designated point in the future, into a mission-critical role. When the strategy becomes, at best, a work in progress, and the future leadership needs are likely to be very different from today, an additional (annual) question enters the picture. “Is the incumbent (and especially the CEO) capable, at a designated point in the future, of moving successfully into the role they currently hold?”⁸

The implications for mentoring are no less profound. In my own work, I refer to mentoring as “A seasoned performer – not by age – who, in sharing their story, accelerates the mentee through the learning curve.” That’s fine as it goes but what about the likely need for the mentee, at a point in the future, to move to a very different learning curve? What about the likelihood of the mentee having to be successful in a quite different culture or, indeed, several different cultures concurrently? What about the need for the mentee to embrace learning agility in their own coaching/mentoring approach? Ideally, the story the mentor shares should embrace: (1) the mentee’s personal growth and development with regards to the immediate challenge; and (2) the need for and the mentee’s capacity for readiness, adaptation and reinvention. It goes without saying, “the story” must be authentic.

Moving forward, three terms describe successful talent management: (1) supportive of (enables) the organizational culture we need to create; (2) an emphasis on learning agility; and (3) to the extent possible, the learning tools are in the hands of the learner.

⁸ How far into the future you need to look is based on the Clock speed of the industry or business sector.



Conclusion

Finally, there may still be value in the term “career” but only if we drop one letter – an “e.” We need to move beyond career and each of us must start to become a **carer**. To care enough to know that what got us here won’t get us to where we need to be. To care enough to know that beginnings start with endings. To care enough to challenge dysfunctional language. To care enough to model readiness. To care enough to encourage curiosity and breakthrough thinking. To care about inclusion. To care about equality of opportunity. To care about fairness. To care about the legacy we will leave. To care, in particular, about the footprint we leave on our planet.





Reflection: Are You an Agile Learner?

1. Are you a prolific reader? What business book(s) or article(s) are you currently reading? Do you regularly share breakthrough articles with the rest of the team? If you are the team leader, do you set time aside to discuss those ideas? Do you take time out to write? Writing organizes your thinking, prompts reflection and allows the writer to connect, what might otherwise be, divergent ideas.
2. As part of your makeup can you be counted on to challenge the status quo? How do you contribute to psychological safety for the team? If a sensitive or controversial topic comes up, when and how do you speak to power?
3. Being ready. Do you put time in your calendar for reflection? Do you keep a leadership diary? Is part of your learning based on the sense (or not) that you are losing currency in the job market (skills, competencies and technology savvy lagging behind the ongoing learning evident in businesses that are market leaders)? Regardless as to whether the organization supports you financially, how do you act on those insights?
4. In terms of personal growth, do you seek out tough choices, i.e., a move to a development role that others avoid? Examples being: Front line sales in a declining market? Industrial relations in a strife-ridden environment? An international move to a difficult country? A business turnaround? Have you been willing to take a salary cut to move into a developmental role?
5. How are you developing the role-specific, leadership competencies demanded in your role three to five years from now? What are you doing to take the skills/competencies demanded in your current role to the next level? When did you, for example, last upgrade your interview skills?
6. Even if you have to make the investment yourself, do you have an outstanding coach? Can you identify, specifically, how that coaching support has changed how you thought and acted as a leader in the past year?
7. We explore the world through metaphors and learn through stories. Do you collect success stories? Do those you work with think of you as a storyteller? What would it take for you to become a masterful storyteller? Being a storyteller prompts us to listen to (and live) our own story.



Next Steps

1. As a business, are you trapped by the linear language of “career?” If so, specifically, what new language are you going to introduce?
2. In building readiness – beyond the skills and core competencies needed – are employees (regardless of level) given the opportunity to shape their own learning? If not, how are you going to make that happen?
3. What are you doing to connect employees to their personal purpose?
4. In that tomorrow’s organization will be a team of teams, how do you measure team effectiveness – beyond results?
5. Does the talent acquisition/succession process address the degree to which the candidate invests in lifelong learning and, as needed, has the capacity to ride the waves of change? What would it take to ensure that key hiring, promotion and succession decisions take into account the candidate’s learning agility?

Engage in the above conversation with your team. Outline the emerging context, explore the what and the why and encourage team members to reflect on their own learning agility. Agree on action steps both individually and for the team. Good luck as you move forward.

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*“What got you
here won’t get
you to where
you need to be.”*

– J. O. Burdett

JOHN O. BURDETT has worked in over 40 countries as an executive and as a consultant for businesses that are household names. He continues to work on leadership development and organization culture for some of the world’s largest corporations.

In 2019, his work with ABB’s top 240 executives received a major international award for the most innovative leadership development initiative of that year. His ongoing partnership with TRANSEARCH International means that his proprietary work on talent acquisition, in any one year, successfully supports many hundreds of top leadership appointments on six continents.

He has written extensively on executive coaching and was awarded international coach of the year by the Finnish Institute of International Trade. Business graduates at the University of Texas indicated that his material on coaching was the single most valuable learning source they took away from their undergraduate degree. He has also coached

numerous executive teams around the world in how to coach. He currently coaches a select group of CEOs.

Apart from a range of corporate leadership workshops, he has taught at business schools on both sides of the Atlantic. His work on the MBA program at the University of Toronto received a teaching excellence award. John holds a doctorate in management development and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

In addition to numerous business articles and twice being awarded article of the year by MCB publications, he has published 16 books on leadership, talent management, coaching and organization culture. A number of them bestsellers. His Leadership Beyond Crisis Series came out in 2021. In 2022, in addition to a number of leading-edge articles, he brought out a fully revised version of his international bestselling book on executive integration: *Without Breaking Stride*.

