



Keumars Afifi-Sabet

Climbing the career ladder successfully

There is no one-size-fits-all approach, but consistency, proactivity and uniqueness are key

Once you've got your foot through the door of the field you want to work in, it may be tempting to rest on your laurels. However, rather than just sitting back, you should cast your mind to the future in a way that complements your own ambitions.

Making that first step onto the career ladder may be tough, but where to go from there arguably represents a greater challenge, whether your priorities lie in developing yourself as a person and a professional, or making that crucial step up now or in the future.

While employers may seek certain qualities in those they promote, it's not enough to 'fit the mould.' Workers must stand out in a way that really accentuates their own strengths, and

ensure managers know what they bring to the table. Some barriers will inevitably arise, especially when it comes to the looming spectre of workplace discrimination. So, overcoming these challenges, and knowing when to speak up and when to walk away from an organisation if you realise your opportunities there are limited, are critical in navigating your fledgling career.

Building blocks

For Tiger Recruitment CEO David Morel, the first step is to establish whether your current place of work is compatible with your aspirations. It's about choosing the right kind of professional experience to take on board; broad is better, and too narrow can be detrimental, he suggests.

"Consider whether a prospective employer supports your career ambitions," Morel tells *The Business Briefing*.

"Is it a large business with sufficient room for growth, where you can move up through the ranks? Smaller businesses can also be good for your career – they're often easier to break into and allow you to quickly build up experience in a specific area which you can then take to a larger company."

Once you've established yourself, it's then about determining how your personal qualities 'add value' to an organisation, according to Justine Lago, director and executive coach at Onion HR.

Each worker will bring different attributes to the table, it's therefore important to accentuate your own strengths and demonstrate how these benefit the wider organisation.

"Then," Lago continues, "seek feedback – check your assumptions,

be curious (and not defensive) as to the perceptions of others about your work quality, your capabilities, your team orientation and anything else that is important in your role and for the organisation.”

However, this may be out of your hands, with many employers looking out for specific signs in potential promotion candidates. Catherine Flynn, student service manager at the Berlin School of Business and Innovation (BSBI), explains that while this varies between organisations, maintaining consistency in the quality of your work, ensuring that you’re dependable, and being able to see the bigger picture when it comes to the business and its future plans, are boxes you should definitely tick.

Sam Hyans, founder of digital careers platform Springpod, agrees that there’s no one-size-fits-all approach, but admits there are certainly common denominators that most employers value. “Proactivity is the first, ambition is the second and the third is uniqueness,” Hyans says.

“We find that most organisations don’t want a team who are all identical - they want a diverse workforce where team members can bring their own experiences, passions, and skills to the role.

“With that in mind, we’d encourage young people to try and gain as much work-experience as possible so that their CV is rich and diverse.”

Facing barriers

Although many workers pour their heart and soul into being noticed by their superiors, the sad reality is that many will face barriers to promotion due to intrinsic biases.

McKinsey’s 2019 Women in the Workplace report found that for every 100 men promoted to manager level, only 85 women were. This gap is even wider for women who identify as being part of an ethnic minority.

Such barriers - should they exist in a particular business - aren’t easily overcome and, sometimes, there’s no shame in contemplating whether or not the healthiest move is to simply walk away, Flynn advises.

“If you feel you are being held back or overlooked for promotion in favour of other candidates, ask for feedback



about the decision-making process and your candidacy,” she explains.

“You don’t need to do this aggressively to inform them why you think they were wrong, but [instead] to educate yourself as to how their process works and what they were looking for.

“If, however, you feel like you are continually passed over for promotion for reasons beyond your control, then don’t be afraid to pack your bags and walk away from the company. Knowing your own worth is invaluable, and if your current company does not see it then go somewhere that does.”

Seize the day

Beyond discrimination, another huge barrier to promotion - and one that is universally applicable - is having to wait for opportunities to actually arise.

Rob Grant, a business coach and founder of Manchester-based Business Bread, stresses that a vacancy must first exist for you to fill it, therefore remaining patient is vital. Dedicated employees must bear in mind that recognition will come with time and that they can use that time to build strong foundations in their

current role, according to Grant.

That said, he also believes that there is never a wrong time to simply ask for promotion.

“I personally have made it part of my plan not just to ask for a promotion, but to actively influence the network around me to create those next opportunities,” he continues.

“Sometimes it is easier to move around larger organisations than straight up. Indeed, in some cases, the direct route means you can get promoted to a role managing people doing the thing you excel at, rather than being good at the new role.”

Having a plan, Grant adds, is essential when climbing the ladder. So, too, is being realistic about your prospects, Flynn insists. “Ask yourself whether your skills, qualifications and character suit the promotion you are applying for,” she says. “Are there potential areas of weakness? If so, how can you address them to meet the demands of the role?”

When push comes to shove, though, you - as an employee seeking to develop yourself and climb the career ladder - must be as proactive as you can in driving your career, Springpod’s Hyans says, adding: “[After all], no one else is going to do it for you!”