

BLUFF YOUR WAY INTO A NEW JOB

By the time you reach your third year in the same job, you should be aiming to move on so you can add new tools to your toolkit and broaden your expertise. Not doing so can be dangerous to your future.

As recent financial debacles have illustrated, companies restructure continuously. Restructuring is driven by many things: market competition, changes in product lines, innovation, the need for flattened, knowledge-driven hierarchies, as well as mergers and acquisitions. With restructuring, work gets eliminated, outsourced and revised—resulting in changed employee requirements and objectives. Inevitably, if you fail to take the initiative to learn and grow, you will find yourself with obsolete skills and no job.

So how do you get new work when you lack the competencies or experience to advance to a job with expanded responsibilities and cutting-edge skills? Siobhan O'Mahoney of Harvard and Beth Bechky of UC Davis set out to answer that question with their research.¹

What is stretchwork?

The research focused on how self-employed contractors in two industries progressed in their careers without the benefit of organizational guidance. Their data is from interviews and observations of 61 high-tech contractors and 85 film-production contractors. Faced with nearly volatile technology changes, learning new skills is a necessity for contractors to successfully navigate the marketplace.

O'Mahoney and Bechky's unusually sophisticated, in-depth interviewing methods permitted them to find out the contractors' perceptions of their world and detail the steps they took to achieve their objectives. With both groups, *stretchwork* was the most common and useful approach for career advancement.

Stretchwork is a strategy for bridging the gap between experience and aspiration. Basically, it builds on a contractor's current skill set but provides opportunities for adding new skills. One database contractor explained,

You get contracts that keep stretching you. I know C programming, but I don't know the web, so I'll get a project that requires C programming on the web. I know C, so I will stretch a little bit, I'll start learning Web stuff.²

A technology architect put it this way:

I pick a project that gives me the best return in terms of skills. If I have already done 15 projects with databases, it's very unlikely that I will do the 16th one with databases. I will try to do the 16th with a twist with e-commerce so I can capitalize on any database background but also get into e-commerce.³

My experience with stretchwork reveals that it can provide workers with the opportunity for developing a passion for a new role or even a new industry. Indeed, stretchwork often facilitates what I think of as *constructive opportunism*—a context where events challenge you to reconfigure the set of career possibilities that make up your personal and professional identity. To borrow from Ibarra, in stretchwork,

you can discover real possibilities trying out new activities, reaching out to new groups, finding new role models, and reworking your story as you tell it to others around you.

We interpret and incorporate the new information, adding colors and contours, tinting and shading and shaping, as our choices help us create the portrait of who we are becoming. To launch ourselves anew, we need to get out of our heads. We need to act.⁴

Stretchwork allows professionals to extend their skill base in the direction of jobs that enhance their visibility and growth prospects. It focuses on ways for managing work success now that organizations no longer offer guidance, much less a career ladder. Far more than mere employability, stretchwork provides fascinating opportunities for reinvention. And as Warren Bennis has emphasized, self-invention is how we get to know ourselves.

The research

Because contractors are representative of the drastic changes in the employment system—temporary staffing, short-term contracts and outsourcing—the study focuses on the challenges of these self-employed workers. They face the paradox of trying to acquire work to develop skills when employers are searching for people with prior experience in those desired positions. The self-employed have every incentive to develop their skills, but employers have little incentive to offer them such opportunities. Caught in this catch-22, entrepreneurially oriented contractors have figured out ways to resolve their dilemma.

In focusing on the perspective of workers in film and technology, O'Mahoney and Bechky were able to develop an insider's perspective on the work and careers of the contractors, then analyze those experiences from the standpoint of career theory. These are highly productive processes that anthropologists use when studying cultural issues from within a culture—processes outside the usual methods of behavioral research—guaranteeing more accurate and qualitatively useful insights that can be generalized to other vocations.

The study revealed four different ways to gain new job opportunities in settings where contractors lacked the desired skills:

--*Performing exceptionally.* Because contract workers hold temporary jobs, their performance is scrutinized more closely and more frequently than that of permanent employees. For exceptional performers, clients, brokers, fellow contractors and employees become a willing source of referrals—a job network.

--*Acquiring referrals.* Contractors could also land stretchwork assignments from their job networks—networks that confirmed their competence and had greater reach and range than the average permanent employee.

--*Bluffing.* Contractors desirous of stretchwork sometimes engaged in outright bluffing—framing their capabilities to convey the needed competence for a new job. Many have become adept at crafting their

expertise in language that allows for easy translation to the desired job.

--*Discounting*. The least remunerative way for obtaining stretchwork was to accept pay below market standards to increase their attractiveness as job candidates.

Contractors often make it a priority to formulate language and stories to expand and transform one set of competencies into another—utilizing their network of colleagues to mentor them. On occasion, they used the four strategies in concert to demonstrate their relevant competencies for a volatile market.

Using the stretchwork model

Stretchwork does not apply solely to contracted workers, but also to employees within an organization. I have also observed these skills used extensively—and constructively--by employees *within* that context. They supported their stretchwork with solid competencies in networking and information gathering. There is one happy caveat: it's exceptionally rare to have to take a pay cut as an employee.

The stretchwork model provides individuals control over their own career paths, along with the self-confidence that what they do will help them determine their own outcomes. Most of us will work in three to five different organizations with twelve to fifteen jobs, and make at least one major career shift in the course of our lives. We won't be able to predict the twists and turns of our career, but stretchwork skills significantly increase our ability to keep from getting stuck. Stretchwork is an important process for crafting a more fulfilling future.

¹O'Mahony, Siobhan and Beth A. Bechky. (2006) Stretchwork: Managing the Career Progression Paradox in External Labor Markets. *Academy of Management Journal*, **49**, 5, 918-940.

² Mahony, p. 924.

³ Mahony, p. 925.

⁴ Ibarra, Herminia (2003) *Working Identity: Unconventional Strategies for Reinventing Your Career*. (Boston: Harvard Business School Press), xii.