DISASTER PROOF YOUR CAREER
TACTICS TO SURVIVE, THRIVE AND KEEP AHEAD IN THE WORKPLACE
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Preface

*Success doesn’t come to you, you go to it.*
— Marva Calins

Whatever job you may do the maxim quoted above is not a bad one to adopt. The world does not owe you a living. Nor these days can you realistically assume that regular, automatic assistance will be forthcoming from an organization (if one such employs you) intent on doing everything possible to further your career, or even to assist you satisfactorily perform the job you do for them currently. You need to take the initiative and adopt an active approach to developing your competence to do what you need to be able to do now, and what you want to be able to do in the future. This book, or rather the approaches it advocates, is designed to help you:

- become secure in your existing job and role;
- be ready and able to take on new challenges;
- appear an asset to your organization (and your boss) making you worth developing and promoting on up and through the organization structure;
- be desirable in the job market if you choose to move on to another employer;
obtain fair and satisfactory rewards for what you do (and improve this too, if that is an aim).

To a degree, the need for this is true of every job; everyone needs to be what we might call ‘career fit’. Certainly this book addresses anyone working in an organizational environment regardless of age, seniority, gender or experience and whatever type of industry or kind of organization they work in. The situations it addresses are widely true across the globe also.

Its message is addressed to the individual rather than the organization or employer. It makes reference to the organization, of course, but the focus is on the individual and on individual action: on you and what you can do. It looks at how to make what you do and how you do it successful; and at how to make it go on being successful over time.

**Change is the norm**

Why is this so important? It is not just because of the competitive nature of the modern work environment, but also because every aspect of the workplace can get more volatile following any particular economic upheaval. Let us be clear about this right at the start: change is the norm. We can expect change to continue and for the pace of change to continue to increase. As Steve Case, Chairman, AOL Time Warner once said, ‘There will be more confusion in the business world in the next decade than in any decade in history. And the current pace of change will only accelerate.’ This comment will remain relevant for a good while and such a situation affects everything that follows here.

Change may seem a fairly benign word, but it can be almost normal for disaster to stalk the land. Certain industries, such as banking, once seemed stable, but they are as subject to difficulties and staff lay-offs as any other sector. Whenever jobs are in jeopardy and when any kind of cull happens a choice is usually made. Management does not usually decide to lose the best people, and those who are performing poorly, thought less of or are simply more of an unknown quantity may quickly find themselves in the firing line.
This book is not designed to help if disaster strikes, but to make the chances of that happening to you less and, possible disaster apart, to help you excel in a secure, satisfying and rewarding career. It is certainly true also that being career fit will help you recover if disaster should strike.

The very nature of the modern organizational environment means that success is always to be laid primarily at your door; so too is failure. You have to get things right, and you may get no second chances. And this is as true of your career as it is of your job.

Whatever your expertise at present, it is a fact that its nature and level will need to change. This may mean major extension if you are a newcomer to your chosen field, or it may mean what is better described as fine-tuning – though this may still be of considerable significance and influence ultimate success very much. Whatever it may necessitate, you must ensure that you are always ‘career-fit’ now and at any time in the future.

So, you must ensure this change takes place. You must ensure that your knowledge is kept up to date, your expertise and skill continue to be finely tuned and that you are able to do an equally outstanding job tomorrow, next week or next year whatever new circumstances you face.

The book reviews how you can achieve just that. It looks at an aspect of what might be called active career management, at what makes the process manageable, and what makes it effective. For the employee wanting to become – or remain – successful, inaction is simply not an option. Perhaps we might wish otherwise, but as Beverly Sills said: \textit{There are no shortcuts to any place worth going.}

\textbf{ACTION:} To get the best from reading this book it is worth keeping pen and paper close at hand, noting when anything mentioned seems to have direct application for you and specifying specific action you will take (even if this is simply to consider something further).
Hitch your wagon to a star; keep your nose to the grindstone; put your shoulder to the wheel; keep an ear to the ground; and watch the writing on the wall.

— Herbert Prochnow
The 21st-century workplace

The business world is an extension of the kindergarten sand box – but with quick sand.
— Richard F Stiegele

Unless you have the luxury of not having to work, your work is likely to be a major part of your life. Most people want two things from this: rewards (essentially financial reward) and job satisfaction. If you are going to spend a major part of your life working, then it is surely best to do something you like. Remember what the journalist Katherine Whitehorn said: ‘The best career advice to give the young is: find out what you like doing and get someone to pay you for doing it’ – perhaps good advice at any age. This is important in terms of the work you choose or, realistically, as sometimes happens, that you fall into, and also in working to ensure that you maximize the job satisfaction and rewards you get from whatever you do.

We do not choose or undertake our work in a vacuum, of course. Decisions need to be made in context of the broader world. And this broader world of work has changed radically in the last decade. As the 21st century moves on any individual is right to wonder how their career will progress and whether it will give them what they want.
Yet uncertainty is the order of the day.

Many, certainly those with some years’ experience, may feel they remember ‘better times’, that is times when there was more certainty about how a career would progress. Many organizations once had defined career paths for people and, although progress varied somewhat, once on a specific path the direction in which you would be able to go was reasonably clear. In some industries this was particularly so. Banks make a good example, yet banks have changed too, more than many kinds of organization and, many would say, not for the better. Now, though this kind of prescribed career path does still exist, it is less common.

Some people may hanker for a return to these ‘better days’, but waiting for things to return to ‘normal’ is simply not one of the options. There are currently few, if any, safe havens, and few, if any, organizations that seem likely to be so again in a situation where change is the norm. Organizations are always likely to be under pressure and the well-being of their employees is often a lesser goal than sheer survival. All sorts of factors contribute to there being a different workplace and work culture than that of the past, and include:

- organizations being under greater market and financial pressure;
- changes in the way business and organizations operate (think of the IT revolution or international pressures, for instance);
- lower staff numbers and more pressure on individuals;
- reduced budgets and thus a reduced ability to fund personal development;
- changed terms of employment (think of how the pension schemes offered have changed in the last few years);
- more competition between employees to succeed;
higher unemployment;

a general increase in both the amount and speed of change;

the greater likelihood of employers having to take sudden and negative action to protect themselves (such as making people redundant – in case of real disaster you may need *The Redundancy Survival Guide* by Barry Cushway and Rebecca Corfield, 2010, Kogan Page).

Despite all this you no doubt want to thrive, prosper and get on; and you probably want to enjoy your job while you do so. And remember it is said that if success were easy, there would be no such thing as failure. So what is the moral? How can you ensure that you do well? The simple answer is that there is nothing you can do that will guarantee success (if there ever was). But there is a great deal you can do to make success more likely. And this is what this book is about.

**The way ahead**

Let us be clear: this is not a guide to how to apply for a new job successfully, though it touches on some of the issues. Nor is it a guide to *career planning and development* in the corporate sense; that is it is not about how a company may organize career paths for people, or at least for some people, though again this is mentioned.

Rather it is about *the career enhancement made possible by career management* in the sense of the analysis, planning and action that can be taken by an individual at any stage of their career – and ideally throughout it – to *actively* increase the chances of their doing well, by ensuring that they are in a state that actively makes success more likely. The concept of it being an *active* process is key. For the most part, success comes not to those who sit and wait, nor even to those who take advantages of opportunities as they may occur, though this should be part of it. Success has to be *actively* sought. In today’s volatile and competitive world of work perhaps *very* actively
sought puts it better. What is more, you have to have a clear idea of what you mean by ‘success’ to have any chance of moving purposely towards it. So, defining goals, financial and of every other sort, is inherent to the process.

For the successful careerist this means a number of things. You must adopt the right attitudes, study and analyse the area and circumstances in which you work, plan and implement action to assist in boosting your competence and thus your progress. You need to be quick on your feet, ready for anything so that you can adjust longer term plans tactically and fine-tune your actions as necessary.

**Basic preparations and precautions**

To be ready and able to progress in your career you need to have certain thinking done and certain actions taken. Some examples follow:

**CVs:** The curriculum vitae (CV) is a document everyone should have on file. Not only should you have one, you should keep it up to date. Make a note on your file copy about any events (particularly successes) that need adding and about anything that needs deleting or replacing with something more appropriate; then on a regular basis, perhaps a couple of times each year, rework it. Remember too that a CV is not a standard document. If you need to use it, to apply for a new job say, then you need to review it and tailor it appropriately, emphasizing those things that might appeal especially to a particular potential employer. The same applies to covering letters designed to accompany CVs.

**Watch the job market:** If you are at a stage where you have decided that moving on is the right way forward, then do so well informed. Of course, you want to watch for particular opportunities, an advertisement for the perfect job, say, but you want to do this as part of a wider scan, one that informs you about the state of the market, salary levels, where demand seems to exist and so on. There can be a danger of jumping at one good thing seen, only to find later that in broader terms it was not as good as it seemed. If you are more urgently seeking a new opportunity then you need to become active:
you may need to register with recruitment consultants and websites or get in touch with headhunters.

**Watch and liaise internally, too:** Promotion is often as much of an opportunity as a move and you need to take notice of your surroundings; network and generally be aware of changes, developments and possible opportunities – more on this as the book continues.

**Personal rules:** It is a good idea to make some *rules* for yourself in terms of the way you will conduct yourself. At a point where you are satisfied with your job, and trust the people with whom you work, this may seem unnecessary. However, you may come to bless the day you abide by such self-imposed rules. Include things such as:

- always get things in writing (this includes job offers, changes to job descriptions, promises about remuneration etc);
- never cut off your options until you have to do so;
- always question the reason even for good things (you need to understand what is going on and why);
- check regularly to ensure that you know how your situation compares (for example with your salary and remuneration package) – this may or may not prompt action, that is a matter of choice and circumstances;
- record and update your career management records on a regular basis.

Rules devised – stick to them.

**The power of communications**

Without communications there would be no work, no achievement and no organization. You probably spend much of your time
communicating, and every time you do so you not only pass on a message, an instruction – whatever – you also say something about yourself. Together with the achievement of your work objectives this is perhaps the most important factor to influence your career. You might be surprised how much a short, powerful, well-described description can achieve. Avoid statements that begin with ‘it’s sort of ...’ and aim to be memorable where it matters.

So, there are three overall areas to be approached carefully here:

1. **Communication skills:** few people are going to progress successfully in their career unless effective communication is one of their strengths. It is necessary to the job you do and to the process of career management. You need to define those skills that matter to you. These might include: listening, persuading, being assertive, negotiating, questioning and more. You may have to be as good at communicating in writing (from a long report to a succinct e-mail), in a formal presentation, or in – or chairing – a meeting, as well as simply face to face. Once you know what is important, you need to find out what makes the techniques work and learn, and practice, so that you excel at them. Communication can be fraught with difficulty; but, make no mistake, do it well and you achieve more and stand out as someone to be reckoned with.

2. **Communication intentions:** one of the keys to success in communicating is to be sure of your intentions – are you: instructing, explaining, prompting discussion, persuading; or several of these at one time? Adopt and follow clear objectives and things will go better.

3. **Link to your personal goals:** finally, your manner and style of communication must reflect your personal goals and give the impression you want. Do not overlook this (see ‘creating the right personal profile’ over the page).
People power

It is rightly said that who you know is as important as what you know. People are a significant part of your passport to a successful career. There are those who succeed by riding roughshod over others, but such an approach is inherently risky (you may rule it out on other grounds, too). In career terms it can lose you sympathy and make you enemies, and this in time can prevent your further progress.

Leave relationships with people in aid of getting the job done on one side for the moment. In career terms, people come in various categories. There are those who are, potentially or actually:

- **helpful** (actively or just in the sense of being a source of information or advice);
- **able to recommend or pass on information about you**;
- **competitive with you**;
- **against you** (for whatever reason);
- **allies** (in the sense that you work together);
- **mischievous** (perhaps they are rumour spreaders or seen in a light that makes them inappropriate for you to be seen as allied with);
- **irrelevant**: and thus not worth wasting time on (at least from a career point of view).

However you categorize people in this kind of way you need to actively work with or through people, so:

- Keep good people records (the day you want to check who it was you met at a conference in New York two years back, you should be able to turn up the details).
Network and keep in touch (remembering that networking is an active process and a two-way one; it is not just a matter of keeping in touch with those who can help you, it is a matter of being helpful to them). Allocate it some regular time.

Ensure that you have people in place for specific purposes. Who do you turn to when you need advice or assistance on some particular matter? Do you have a mentor(s)? We return to mentors later.

Your relationship with others is likely to be a fundamental factor in your success; never become so busy or self-centred that you lose touch with those you need to work with or keep tabs on.

**Creating the right personal profile**

Whatever your level of self-confidence is, and even if you may feel you are obviously destined for the top, you should work at presenting the right profile to the workplace and to the world. This is not a question of defrauding people and pretending to be something you are not – acting out a persona that is not really you. It is a question of making your strengths clear and perhaps making them more obvious. First you have to decide what sort of person you want to be seen as being. This needs some analysis. It is no good saying *I must be seen as a professional operator*. What does that mean?

You may decide it means you should be seen as: experienced, expert, a good communicator, good (and perhaps patient) with people, an innovator, creative, good with attention to detail, empathic, caring, sincere – and more. You decide; but the list must make sense in terms of what you do, what you want to do and the environment in which you work. Thus, two things are important here:

1. deciding the profile you want;
2. actively working at putting it over.
You need to consider how this occurs. For instance:

- **you and your manner**: everything from the way you make a presentation to how you conduct yourself at a meeting;

- **your appearance**: dress, tidiness and appropriate professionalism;

- **your things**: that is your desk, office, briefcase, even files you carry into a meeting; muddle here can be read as inherent inability in more serious areas;

- **your dealings with others**: from having time for people, to being helpful, supportive or more.

Literally everything contributes. For example, if you write well (or can learn to) and it is important that this skill is in evidence, then you may need to contrive projects that provide an opportunity to use this communication skill. If the impressive reports you create are then seen by those in a position to make decisions about other things that you might do in future, that may help you. It is a sensible question to put to yourself in many situations; not just can I do this? But, if I do it, and do it well, how will I appear? Everyday activities will allow you to consciously and progressively build a positive image.

**Office politics**

The office without office politics does not exist. As this has an effect on you, you need to understand it and get involved, and perhaps control it, in the right sort of way. The situation here is that there are those that see a side of working in an organization that has little to do with getting the work done. Work provides, after all, a social environment and it is unsurprising if people react to that, but sometimes the effects are negative. Rumours are one example. There is apparently nothing that some people like more than feeding the rumour mill. So, with an eye on your profile and career you should:
Understand what goes on. If you remain aloof and detached from it all you may both miss opportunities and, worse, miss problems – or attacks; let us not forget that corporate life is competitive – that may adversely affect you.

Use the situation appropriately. You should probably not join the rumour-mongers, and certainly not be seen as a rumour starter, but you should, for example, be plugged into the grapevine or again you may miss out.

This area can be a minefield. Care is essential in terms of both what you do and what is, or may be, done to you. If you stay ahead of the game you can act accordingly, and in time. Remember the graffiti that said – *It is difficult to see the writing on the wall, when your back’s to it.*

**Achievement and results**

There is only one, but strong, message to bear in mind here. It is a truism that *you should never confuse activity with achievement.* For the most part, the opportunities in corporate life come largely from achieving what is required of you. Looking busy, being busy, having difficulties, succeeding with peripheral matters with which no one else seems to bother, none of these are as important as meeting your main objectives.

So, perhaps the most important rule for the careerist is this: successfully achieving your goals or targets (whatever form they take) is of first importance in building your career, *indeed it is the foundation of everything else you do.* Attention to this is a prerequisite and although many other matters, as we have seen, need attention as part of career management, the effectiveness of all of them is reduced, perhaps drastically reduced, by any failure of achievement. *Note:* beware, it is a dangerous trap to feel that provided you are achieving successfully all is well and no further action is necessary. Even competent people can be overlooked and real shrinking violets are in most danger of this – at worst, look like a doormat and people will tend to walk all over you.
Perhaps this leads to one more useful principle – timing. The best moments to press home and initiate action to further your career may be when things are going well. Going to your manager for a raise just after some project has overrun its deadline and incurred costs double its budget, may not be too clever.

**A management role**

Perhaps you currently manage others, perhaps not. Although it is not suggested that the only way to be successful is to manage other people, there are things about management that are worth noting. In organizations many, perhaps most, of the senior jobs involve management. This fact reflects the way organizations are, and it links to the hierarchical nature of organizations, too. Of course, there are specialist positions that do not involve this whose incumbents are, by any measure, successful. But management is a prime route to success in most organizations. Furthermore, when management is added to someone’s responsibilities it almost always adds to their rewards.

That said, management is not for everyone, nor is it something that everyone can do well. But if you can do it, or become able to do it, (and you might just find it very satisfying) then it is something to consider. If you reject the management route, you reject a good many options and rule out success being achieved in one of the classic ways.

Management is a broad discipline, and it is beyond the brief to review the many techniques that make it successful here (though there are other books that can help you do this). However, it does make a good example of the need to link the realities of organizational life to your own plans. Maybe this is something you have to be able to do to get to where you want. Maybe you can bypass it – or perhaps it is already something you want to do.

*Note:* while on the subject of management, your own manager is key (more of this later), but it should be recognized that some managers are bad, and a few so bad that career progress while reporting to them is unlikely and the immediate aim must be to change that.