

ON LEADERSHIP

Gary Burnison

Chief Executive Officer, Korn Ferry



Career Nomads

Job tenure is a whole new ballgame. These are the days of the career nomad traveling from one opportunity to the next, whether inside or outside the company. This is not the career track of lifetime employees who dutifully stuck with one company and slowly moved up the ladder to a retirement party and a gold watch at the end. Now it's all about taking control—and fast.

The numbers tell the story. People spend a little less than four-and-a-half years, on average, in each job. For younger professionals, it's much less—often as little as two years. To put this in context, I will have about four jobs in my career. My five millennial children will each have about 25.

No surprise then that the term “job-hopper” is no longer a pejorative. Being a “free agent” is the new reality, for both employees and the companies that employ them. Two years in a job equates to two old-school annual performance reviews. That's hardly enough to put together and execute a career development plan.

Today, talent is focused on making an impact and proving value as quickly as possible. And employers need the right mix of talent with the right skills—with the caveat that what constitutes a competitive skill set today probably won't suffice tomorrow.

Given all these changes in the world of work, it's no surprise that career paths have jumped the well-established tracks in favor of the unknown. The career development ladder—rising one rung at a time to bigger titles and more money—has been mostly yanked away.

Careers are more like labyrinths. Sometimes moving ahead involves looping around first with lateral assignments to add breadth and depth. Don't fight it—embrace it, because this dynamic is here to stay. To make the most of the career nomad's time in a job, no matter how short that might be, employers need to offer more opportunities to learn.

More than ever, people at all levels, including the most senior, are charting their own course. They're driven by their insatiable curiosity—to grow, learn, and stretch. Their rewards are intrinsic as well as extrinsic as they make an impact. Career nomads are inherently motivated by the desire to develop themselves in their current jobs so they can be prepared for the next one.

To be sure, there is uncertainty. Career nomads aren't following anyone else's footprints or stepping into their shoes. They're largely on their own. While there is no set course for career nomads, there is a general roadmap to follow. To make your way through this new world order, I suggest **PARLAY**.

To parlay is to transform something smaller and finite into something far greater and more valuable. And so it is for career nomads.



Illustration by Peter Horvath

PURPOSE: Know what motivates and drives you and makes you happy.

ATTITUDE: Be mindful of how you interact with others; give, not take. And keep in mind your attitude is your “altitude”—it determines how high you’ll rise.

RELATIONSHIPS: Forge connections with your boss and colleagues; build your network based on what you can do for others.

LEARNING: Expand your skills to prepare yourself for the next move. Seek out mentors to guide you; they’re a critical part of your career development, so choose them wisely.

AWARENESS: Be highly self-aware, particularly of your strengths and weaknesses; target your next opportunity based on where you fit and what you can contribute.

YOU: Take control of your career development.

There will be challenges along the way. For one thing, the career nomad who has 20 or 30 different jobs over the course of a career will have about two or three dozen bosses. Given that people have problems with their bosses about 50 percent of the time, that means potential trouble with about 10 to 15 of those bosses. Add to that hundreds of direct reports and thousands of colleagues, including people on six continents who interact regularly but never see each other in person. And they will be working anywhere and everywhere—at home, in an office, at the coffee shop, or wherever Wi-Fi can be found.

That puts greater emphasis on career nomads’ interpersonal skills, especially for leadership positions in which they must win the hearts and minds of people and align them to an overarching purpose.

The career nomad understands the importance of journeying together, with a band of people that changes every few months—some leaving, others entering. But always the group moves forward toward the next destination. ▀