



CAREER DEVELOPMENT

12 Keys to Career Success

by **John Oltesvig**

The number of manufacturing jobs in the United States has declined significantly in the past few years. Most *Quality Progress* readers already know this fact, and Figure 1 quantifies the decline since 1996.

Because many jobs in the quality profession are derived from manufacturing, interest in attaining career success and job security has increased.

Careers are seldom predictable. Two well-known examples are Joseph Juran and W. Edwards Deming.

Juran could have earned a comfortable living and retired from Western Electric. Instead Juran managed his career first through his formal education and then by using the practical base of knowledge gained at Western Electric's Hawthorne Works in Chicago to formulate his *Quality Control Handbook*,¹ launching

his career toward fame as a quality consultant.

W. Edwards Deming, after an impoverished boyhood, earned a doctorate in mathematics at Yale University and subsequently served as a teacher for a time. He made a career transition by taking a position with the Department of Agriculture. Had he not made this move, he might not have met his mentor, Walter Shewhart of Bell Labs, who later became known as the father of statistical quality control.

Deming's career shifted again during World War II. His experience enabled him to help American technicians and engineers improve the quality of war materials. After the war, the Japanese sought Deming out to teach their managers how to improve manufacturing. Had Deming not continuously managed his career, he would not have been in a position to transform the face of global quality.

In 50 Words Or Less

- **The loss of U.S. manufacturing jobs means it's more important than ever for quality professionals to ensure their own success and job security.**
- **Every quality professional possesses the seeds of career greatness.**
- **One or all of these 12 keys to success could open the door to a successful career.**

You Can Do It, Too

Like Juran and Deming, each one of you has the seed of career greatness. You can achieve success and job security in these turbulent times. These 12 ideas have served many quality professionals well:

1. Manage your career.
2. Take responsibility.
3. Start today.
4. Define success for yourself.
5. Establish a basic foundation.
6. Create value.
7. Be hard on yourself.
8. Get focused.
9. Become a writer.
10. Use setbacks as a springboard.



11. Train for success.
12. Consider past employers.

Just one of these keys might open the door to success in your career, and, who knows, you could even become the next famous quality guru.

1. Manage Your Career

Nowhere is career management more important today than in the quality profession. And no one is responsible for managing your career but you.

While this statement is true for all professions, dynamic changes in the world economy have transformed and will continue to change quality theory and application dramatically. Quality professionals must continuously manage their career to keep pace with these changes.

Successfully managing your career life is similar to navigating a ship: Modern navigation has to do with the whole of a preconceived passage, from start to finish. It is concerned with four basic objectives:

1. Selecting the course (and staying on it).
2. Avoiding collision with other moving ships and crashing into fixed obstacles.
3. Minimizing fuel consumption and conforming to an established timetable.²

Managing your career is your passage to success from start to finish because it:

- Ensures you have a plan for your career, causes you to keep focused
- Avoids disasters on your passage through contingency planning
- Increases the efficiency of your journey and prevents career burn-out
- Ensures timely goal attainment by timing and pacing your career progress

As a personal example, my daughter's initial career experience after graduating from college began with a large company in the retail industry. She started out well, full of ambition and enthusiasm. But she had no long-term plan, no short-term plan—no plan whatsoever. As a result, she became disenchanted with her lack of advancement. By the end of her first year of employment, she had burned-out and decided to change companies.

The new company was also a large retail com-

pany, not much different from the first company. The difference at the second company is that she took the time to create a five-year career plan shortly after starting with this company. She set realistic targets for her career advancement, educational goals and a plan for career development on the job.

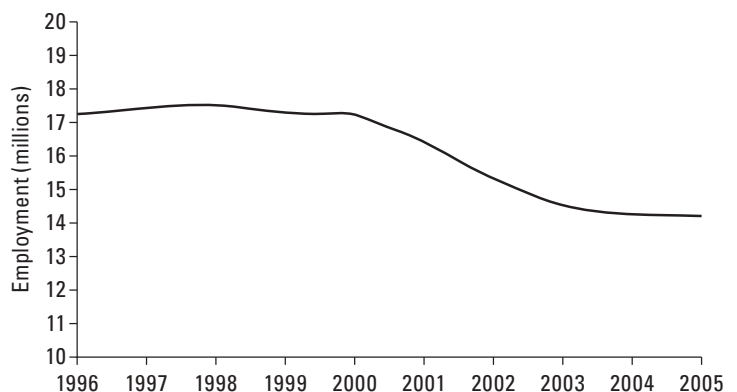
She immediately began executing it. She was able to convince her employer to rotate her laterally through a number of job roles and responsibilities. Another part of her plan was to take entrance exams and begin work on a master's degree. Additionally in her plan was to gain exposure within her company by networking nationally with company peers. Her collaborative approach allowed her to implement some innovative ideas above her normal job accountabilities.

As a result of managing her career, in less than four years she became the youngest store general manager in the \$16 billion company that operated about 3,000 stores worldwide. Subsequently she has extended the five-year plan to a ten-year horizon. Her plan now includes international experience and regional and corporate level work.

Planning, avoiding disasters, preventing burn-out and setting goals are critical success factors in managing your career. The lesson is for you, as a quality professional, to start drafting your career plan today.

Many of you are involved in the waning manufacturing sector of the economy. In that case, your

FIGURE 1 Employment in Manufacturing, 1996 to 2005



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: www.bls.gov/iag/manufacturing.htm.



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planning should consider inclusion of sectors of the economy, such as the health care industry where your quality tool skill set is desperately needed.

2. Take Responsibility

Do not depend on your current employer to ensure your career success. While business organizations sometime offer quality and other training and a certain amount of succession planning and career mapping, do not depend solely on this. You must take personal responsibility both on the job and on your own time to manage your career.

Taking responsibility for your career means holding yourself accountable rather than playing the “blame game.” It is natural and easy to hold others accountable for your career setbacks or lack of progress. Do not take this approach.

Instead your mindset must be, “I should have seen that coming and included it in my contingency planning.” Or say to yourself something like this when there is a setback: “That was my fault, I did not take the responsibility to continue my education and therefore the promotion went to the better prepared guy even though I work harder and longer.”

When you take personal responsibility for every bad thing that happens, you will not become disenchanted, cynical and bitter or develop a poor attitude. Instead you will become positively energized and excited. As a responsible person, you can and will take positive action to get more education, do contingency planning, write that career plan, become an innovator or whatever you tell yourself was your personal shortfall.

Personal responsibility and accountability not only applies in white collar office careers but in all aspects of your life. Case in point: Lance Armstrong’s attitude of personal responsibility driving him to a miracle in the world of cycling.

After his defeat over cancer he was quoted as saying, “If you ever get a second chance in life, you’ve got to go all the way.” The take-away is that we are all made from the same flesh and blood but only a few have mastered the skill of taking full ownership and responsibility for whatever life has to throw your way. Put yourself in the winner’s circle by starting from this moment to take responsibility for all of your career disappointments.

3. Start Today

What can you do today? Now is the time to start managing a successful career. Don’t be overcome

by a bad experience or the status quo. The choice to begin is yours.

In her hallmark book *The Change Masters*, Elizabeth Moss Kanter emphasized that we must learn to master change or we will be mastered by change.³ The choices you make today to change and continuously improve will lead you eventually to the results you seek.

For a number of quality professionals, the good news is that past performance is not necessarily a good indicator of the future. No matter how bad your past career has been, there is hope for the future if you’re willing to make the right choices about your career and begin making changes today.

4. Define Success For Yourself

In his noteworthy publication *Lead the Field*, Earl Nightingale said, “Success is the progressive achievement of a worthy goal.”⁴ It is incumbent on quality professionals to determine goals worthy of a major commitment of time and effort.

For example, helping your organization achieve improved financial performance by minimizing the cost of poor quality (COPQ) has been a goal of many quality professionals. Major reductions in COPQ can be a significant source of personal satisfaction and professional success. COPQ reduction becomes increasingly important in the new world economy because it can easily make the difference between profit and loss.

For some professionals, success is measured in terms of personal financial net worth. This can mean achieving double-digit increases in total compensation by moving up the organization’s hierarchy or by achieving upward mobility along a career path within the quality profession.

Quality consultants can measure success in terms of the stature of their organizations that call on them for expertise. Or, it can be measured in terms of continual improvement of revenue and profit.

There is so much change and turmoil in business today that, for many quality professionals, just keeping their job can be an indicator of success. These 12 keys, although no guarantee, will help you keep your current job alive in turbulent times.

The good news is that the things you can do for security on your current job are the very same things that will be of great value if your company is bought out, downsized or goes bankrupt.

Success requires quality professionals to define goals they consider worthy. It is difficult for most people to sort out goals in an increasingly complex



and stressed society. A disharmony of demands for time constantly pushes goal setting far down a long list of other competing, urgent and important tasks.

Reading *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen R. Covey⁵ will help you recognize tasks requiring your immediate attention as those that are both urgent and important. Defining success and tailoring worthy goals for yourself is urgent and important and requires action now. Take the time to decide what success means for you personally, and you will be on the road to achieving it.

5. Establish a Basic Foundation

There are many ways to establish a basic career foundation, but you must pick one and stick to it.

You should consider working for one company long enough to demonstrate you can fit in and are valued. While job hopping may be OK early in your career, you must eventually establish credibility through longevity with one company.

But you say, "I'm frustrated with this organization!" While you believe you have been pushed to the breaking point many times, stay the course in one organization. This will become a foundation on which you can build your career.

Consider moving into a major name organization—perhaps one of the *Fortune* 500 companies—after you have gained some experience in a smaller company. Beginning your career at a small, unknown company is a great way to gain some experience in the real world and get some initial blunders out of the way. People who don't make some mistakes are most likely not very productive, so don't be afraid of judiciously trying new things.

6. Create Value

To move up inside your current organization, creating value is the key. One major source of career success for many quality professionals is helping a financially beleaguered company slash costs.

These efforts to create value for the company, done in an environment of teamwork, will be recognized and rewarded handsomely. In a troubled company, you might be rewarded through the experience gained and by building job security as a valued employee. You will be playing an important role in helping get the company's balance sheet in order, creating a lean and mean organization and brightening the company's future.

The point is, if you can make a significant differ-

ence that will create value for an organization, you will create a solid reputation, potentially move up inside that organization and build job security.

7. Be Hard on Yourself

Anyone who says life is easy has not hit the first inevitable low in his or her life. Everyone will eventually come to a place where it seems there is no way out.

Be hard on yourself to prevent as many of these low points as possible. Be disciplined and make difficult choices for success:

- Do I go home when everyone else does or do I stick around at the plant a little longer to achieve 5% more than my peers?
- Do I take that professional training course from ASQ to gain additional knowledge, skill and certification, or do I continue take the easy road?
- Do I make it a point to really help my company achieve its goals by adding value through innovative uses of my quality skill set, or do I just work at pleasing myself, narrowly addressing only my own department's functional goals?
- Do I consistently spend some evenings and weekends working on my associate's or bachelor degree, or do I just spend the time watching more professional and college sports on TV?

Yes, these are often very hard choices. Follow through on your decisions. You will find that when you are hard on yourself by making the right choices, life will be vastly easier on you in the long run.

8. Get Focused

In his book *Over the Top*, Zig Ziglar repeatedly made the point, "In order to get what you want, you must help others get what they want."⁶ This applies to your current employer.

Determine what you can do to help your boss and your organization achieve what they want. By so doing you will be rewarded by getting what you want in terms of recognition, financial remuneration and career advancement.

How can you more effectively help your boss and company get what they want? Focus is the key. I've heard it said that genius is the ability to be able to focus on the task at hand.

Let's take an example from your personal life and then apply it to your situation at work. Most of us are at work from 50 to 60 hours per week. We sleep about six to eight hours per night. Other routine personal activities take another three hours per day.

This leaves little time for personal discretionary activities. Sometimes things around the house pile up. Recognizing your responsibility to get all these items done, and in desperation to catch up, you write down all the things you would like to accomplish on your next day off work.

First thing in the morning on your day off work you get the list and begin working on it. Notice that you don't wake up and then start thinking, "What would I like to do today?" Because you already have a work list, you are focused. When you complete the first item on the list, you begin on the second item. After you have checked a few items off the list, you become enthusiastic about how much you have done already. So you go to the next and the next until all the items are completed.

Why not do the same thing at work? Take responsibility everything that should and must be done for your boss and your organization to be successful and you will be successful. Don't pass the buck by saying, "This should be done but it is not my responsibility."

Take the ball and run with it. Get focused by making a priority work list. Plan your work and work your plan. Do this over and over and watch the enthusiasm build in your team at work. Your boss will notice after you repeat this performance day after day on the job.

Now you won't allow yourself to go back to the old way because your reputation is at stake. You will be seen as a leader, as a winner and as a valued member of your organization. You are focused and on a roll.

Sometimes you put off doing the more difficult things on your list, but, as your momentum builds, you will rise to the challenge of completing the hard things, too.

I could go on and on about how and why to get focused, but the point is to help your boss get what he or she wants by something as simple as effectively getting things done without being asked. By making yourself more valuable to your boss, you are creating job security.

If the business fails and everyone is out of work, you will have built a good reputation for being effective. This will put you first in line for a position at another company. The same is true if your organization is downsized or bought out by another company. You will be in a secure position since you have built a reputation as an effective, valued employee.

9. Become a Writer

Another key to career success and job security is to become known in your industry. Try writing an

article and getting it published in a professional journal or magazine such as *Quality Progress*.

Submit a paper to be presented at a regional, national or international quality conference. Not only will you become known in the industry, but you will also gain confidence in yourself as a professional. Being self-confident is critical to job security. If you don't believe in yourself, no one else will.

If you cannot write a book, you can write an article. If you can't write an article, you can write a paragraph. If you can't write a paragraph, you can at least write a sentence. Then write another sentence and another and another. Before long you will have that article written.

Ernest Hemmingway once said he couldn't sit down and write a book but he could sit down and write a sentence. Start small and keep at it. You will soon have a paper, a periodical article or even a book to publish. This will boost your career immeasurably.

10. Use Setbacks As a Springboard

It is not likely you will stay at one company for your entire career. In fact, it is likely you will change companies three or more times during the course in your career.

Chances are one of these changes will not be voluntary. You may be fired, laid off or downsized, or your company may even go bankrupt. People frequently are fired through no fault of their own.

Sometimes being fired even can result from not being a good personality match for your boss. This happens frequently at higher levels of any organization—Henry Ford II is said to have fired Lee Iacocca with, "Lee, I just don't like you."

Setbacks can become a springboard to the future if you have been hard on yourself by making the right choices, preparing yourself through taking advantage of training opportunities and building a good reputation by being effective on your old job.

If you have done all these things you will vault into the future. Having gained experience you will be in position to change industries, secure a higher level position in a better company and even get a nice increase in pay.

Cream, as they say, does always rise to the top.

11. Train for Success

Always remember you don't earn a living, you learn a living. Basic education is the primary foundation of a quality career.

If you lack an associate's degree, you must



become committed to begin work on it. Community colleges exist in almost every area, so go there.

If you don't have a bachelor's degree, by all means, take the next steps to get one immediately. If you have a bachelor's degree, find a way to start work on your master's degree. Even if you don't finish your master's, you will gain confidence in yourself by beginning a course of study.

If you seek a scholarly, professional career track and wish to expand the quality body of knowledge, why not make the commitment to complete a doctorate as Deming and Juran did?

Many universities offer distance learning. You can get a degree online, and this gives you the added benefit of transportability should your career move you to a different city, state or country while you are pursuing a degree.

By all means begin professional certification through ASQ. Become a certified Black Belt (BB) or Master Black Belt, or attain one of ASQ's numerous other certifications.

12. Consider Past Employers

If you are well along in your career and have worked for more than one employer, don't leave those former employers in the past. There is a lot to be gained by going "back to the future."

For example, you may come across an opportunity at another company, say Acme Manufacturing. You may not even be looking for a new position, but the opportunity finds you through an acquaintance, professional associate or headhunter. You take it because it is a 20% increase in salary and a better position.

Three, five or 10 years later you learn of an opportunity back at your old company. The great thing is that you left the old company with a reputation for being effective, positive, innovative and a leader. You are a known quantity at the old company.

In the three, five or ten years since you left the old company, you have continued to build yourself professionally. You finally completed your MBA and you became an ASQ certified quality engineer or BB in addition to building a fine reputation at Acme.

What are the chances of getting back into the old company with a handsome pay increase and a promotion? Since you have built your reputation as an effective employee, it is quite possible your old employer will rehire you. This has happened time and again—you will notice stories like this in the press regularly.

By taking charge of your career, you very well might make it possible to go back to your future.

Improve Your Chances

Unfortunately there is no silver bullet ensuring career success for the quality professional as U.S. manufacturing jobs decline. These 12 keys are not meant to be an exhaustive discussion of the subject.

Nonetheless, your chances of attaining greater career success and job security in the quality profession will be enhanced to the extent you are able to employ these keys to career success for the quality professional.

Get on the right course by deciding now what success means to you and then taking steps to reach your goals.

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