



CAREER DEVELOPMENT

# Climbing the Career Ladder: It's Up to You

by **H. Fred Walker and Justin Levesque**

**T**here is no shortage of information on the subject of career planning or development. Many academic disciplines and professional organizations have provided us with books, white papers, articles and websites that describe

the tools and knowledge needed to build a career in a given field or industry.

So much information leading to so many choices can be overwhelming—look at all the choices of reference and instructional material and services in just the field of quality. So the real challenge in building a successful career is not recognizing the need for career development, nor is it recognizing there are so many options for accessing instructional materials.

The real challenges are:

- Embracing the fact that you, not your employer, have the ultimate responsibility for your career development.
- Finding some sort of structure to guide your career development plans.

Grappling with these challenges as early as possible in your career will help you clarify and articulate your goals and objectives for a successful career in quality.

Once you recognize the first point, that you are responsible for your career development, you must

## In 50 Words Or Less

- **The first step in advancing your career is recognizing that you, not your employer, are responsible for your career development.**
- **A successful career in quality will come from a clear vision statement, education and training, a well-defined career ladder and professional certifications.**



then find a structure to guide your plans. This structure comes from a personalized career development vision statement, education and training, a career ladder and a hierarchical certification structure.

### A Vision Statement for Your Career?

There is a reason vision statements have been common in business and industry for many years—they clarify strategic intent and direction. Effective vision statements are concise (not more than one or two sentences) and are stated in measurable terms.

Creating a career vision statement is an important first step in your career advancement. Career development without a vision statement will likely lead to unanticipated and unplanned events that you realize, later in your career, were not beneficial. A vision statement such as “I want to develop a career in quality by gaining the knowledge, skills, abilities and credentials needed to become a quality manager in a mid-sized manufacturing company in the western United States, earning an annual salary of \$85,000 by the year 2010” is an invaluable clarification and starting point.

In business and industry, someone drafts a vision statement and then refines it after talking with internal and external stakeholders. In the case of your career, you need to write the first draft of the vision statement. The value of this effort cannot be overstated.

Once your vision statement is drafted, share it with the key stakeholders in your life, such as current and potential employers and family members. Be open to differing viewpoints and criticisms, and be prepared to revise your vision statement based on the feedback you seek. Once in its final form, share your vision statement with your key stakeholders to help plan specific activities, a schedule and milestones to guide your career.

### Education and Training

The education and training needed to support your career development vision statement depend on the career you desire. It is true you can begin your career in quality with a high school diploma. It is also true that, although not a requirement for every employer, the higher you wish to climb on a career development ladder, the more education and training you will need.

Education and training come in specific levels and types. Levels of education include the various degrees—associate’s, bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral. Specific types of training might include ISO 9000, Six Sigma or Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award criteria at a strategic level. Training also might include topics such as process mapping, visual controls, basic quality tools and statistical quality control at a tactical level.

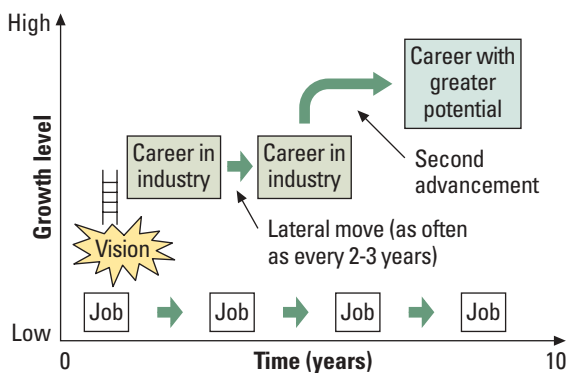
To advance your career in quality, you should practice lifelong learning by continuing your education and participating in relevant training at every opportunity. By practicing lifelong learning, you stay updated on developments and trends in quality, remain technically competent, refine your ability to learn, become a more valuable employee and enhance your career potential.

### Career Ladder

It has been said many times that quality is about the journey, not the final destination. When talking about your career plans, however, quality is about both your journey and your final destination—this is why a career development vision statement is so important.

In Figure 1 we see that without a vision statement, people typically move from job to job—all

**FIGURE 1** Upward and Lateral Career Movement





jobs being at an entry level. We also see that moving from an entry level job into a career position requires upward mobility and that mobility is provided by a career ladder.

A career ladder is the structure defining a career development plan. As the analogy implies, a career ladder is composed of rungs or steps, each representing the levels or combinations of education, training, work related experience and professional certification needed for you to reach your career goals. If your goal is becoming a quality manager, the requirements are quite different than for someone aspiring to be a quality, reliability or software engineer, or a technician or inspector.

Figure 2 is an example of a career ladder as applied to a career in quality. Each ladder rung is associated with selected certifications administered by ASQ, which also offers several certifications not listed. Each certification has clearly defined requirements for education and years of experience that must be met to qualify for the certification exam.

There are many possible career ladders in the

field of quality, including many not presented in Figure 2. As you advance up whatever career ladder you choose, you must define a schedule that is consistent with your personal and professional goals and follows ASQ's requirements.

To be sure, the specific requirements for any career goal in quality will include various levels and combinations of education, training, work related experience and professional certification. The key is realizing all these levels and combinations can be structured in a manner that is unique to you to provide a competitive advantage.

### Professional Certification Levels

Figure 2 shows four levels of certification defining two career paths for a manufacturing professional—one path encompassing Six Sigma and the other auditing.

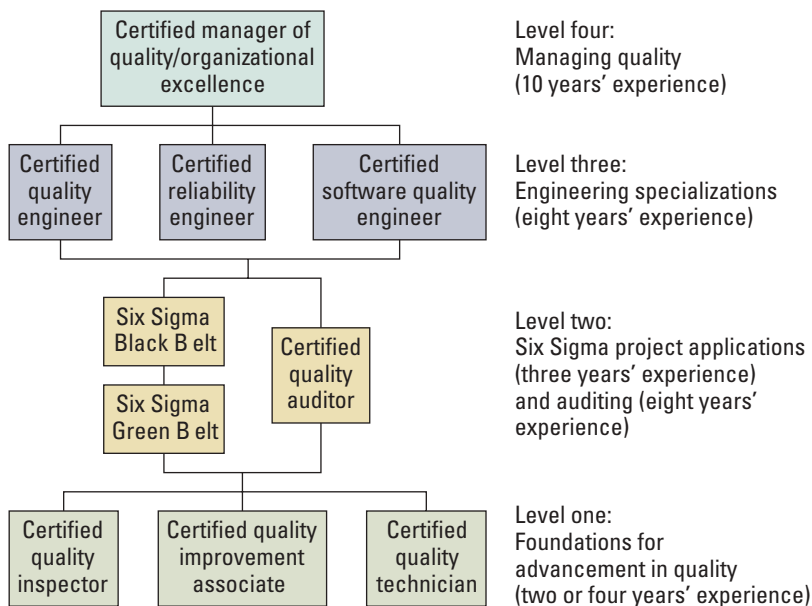
Since professional certifications are the structure of a career ladder in quality, you should take the time to learn more about them. Go to [www.asq.org/certification](http://www.asq.org/certification) for overviews of all of them.

**Level four certification.** At the highest level of ASQ certifications is the certified manager of quality/organizational excellence, formerly certified quality manager. This is a certification for current or aspiring managers engaged in leadership functions. It requires 10 years of relevant professional experience.

**Level three certifications.** The next level comprises the engineering certifications: certified quality engineer, certified reliability engineer and certified software quality engineer. These are certifications for current or aspiring engineers engaged in design or production operations. They require eight years of relevant professional experience.

**Level two certifications.** Level two includes Six Sigma and auditing. The Six Sigma Black Belt (SSBB) and Six Sigma Green Belt are for current or aspiring quality

**FIGURE 2** Sample Quality Career Ladder





professionals engaged in Six Sigma projects solving specifically defined problems via a clearly defined problem solving methodology. Each of these certifications requires three years of relevant professional experience. SSBB certification requires one or two completed Six Sigma projects, depending on the candidate's professional experience. Also in level two is certified quality auditor. This certification is for current or aspiring auditors engaged in verification and validation activities as they relate to quality systems. It requires eight years of relevant professional experience.

**Level one certifications.** Level one consists of foundations certifications. These include certified quality technician (CQT), certified quality inspector (CQI) and certified quality improvement associate (CQIA). These are for individuals beginning careers in quality. CQT requires four years of relevant professional experience, CQI requires two years of relevant professional experience, and CQIA is for those right out of school or with generic work experience

Each ASQ certification is developed in accordance with ISO 17024, an international standard for professional certifications. Certification exams are administered at least twice yearly. Each certification carries with it the expectation of continued professional development and lifelong learning, and each certification is defined by a body of knowledge that is revised every five years by subject matter experts.

### Advantages of a Quality Career Ladder

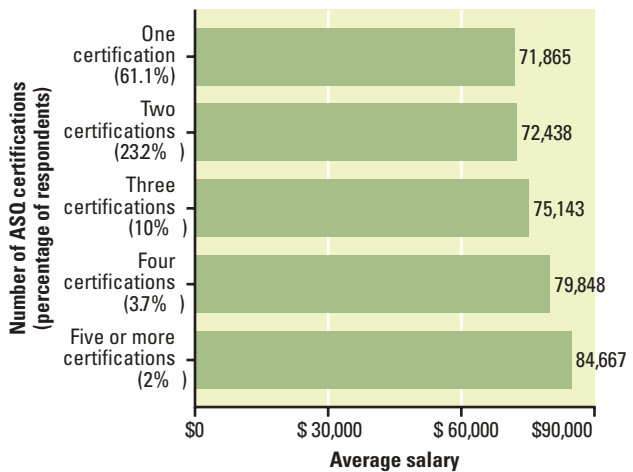
A quick review of career development guidance in professional organizations outside the field of quality will show training materials, references, course offerings and perhaps the occasional conference or professional certification. There are few examples of refined and documented career ladders supported by personalized career development vision statements or hierarchical certification structures.

That's the advantage of a career ladder in quality: You have access to a career development structure people in careers outside of quality generally do not have.

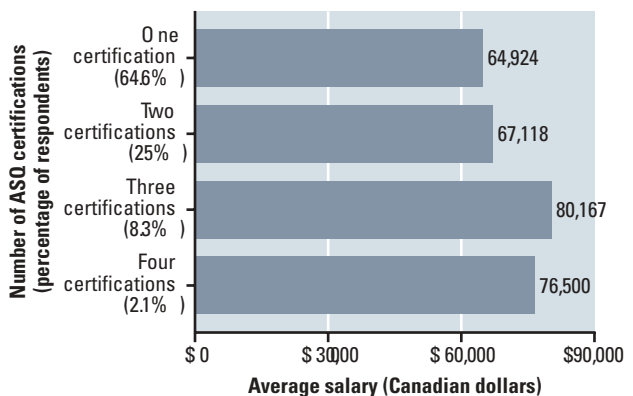
There are also real financial benefits associated

**FIGURE 3** Salary by Number of ASQ Certifications

Salary by number of ASQ certifications for U.S. respondents



Salary by number of ASQ certifications for Canadian respondents



with a career in quality, as shown by *Quality Progress'* annual salary survey in 2005. Figure 3 provides an excerpt from that survey, showing employees who earn multiple quality certifications generally enjoy a higher salary.<sup>1</sup>

The salary survey, while not a guarantee of the money you will earn with certification, provides valuable insights into earning potential and what you can reasonably expect. Of course, there are many factors in addition to ASQ certifications that

influence your salary, but employees who use the quality career ladder and seek ways to expand on it certainly leverage their educational time and money for the greatest lifetime earning potential.

### Keeping Things in Perspective

Success in your career will require more than a clearly defined vision statement, college degree, industrial training courses, ASQ certifications and a career ladder. Factors such as health of the economy, changes in ownership of your company, earning advanced degrees and certifications, and your technical competence in an area needed by your employer are directly related to career success.

Harder to understand and plan for are factors such as plain luck, being in the right place at the right time, knowing the right person, common sense, awareness and maturity—all factors you must realize have something to do with career success. Lastly, even though you might not like it, and even in spite of your efforts to do everything described in this article, factors related to your social skills—likeability and getting along with others—are also directly related to the success of your career.

Many other factors also come into play with respect to one's career moves and promotions—far too many to consider here. One thing is certain: Without a personal career vision and everything that supports it, reaching your career potential will be even more of a challenge than you realized.

### So What's Holding You Back?

You, not your employer, have the ultimate responsibility for your career development. There might have been a time when employers assumed more responsibility for employee career development, but that time has essentially passed due to increasing costs for career development, proliferation of career fields and job titles, and changes in employment duration.

As members of the quality community—and the entire professional business and industrial community—we all need to buy in to the concept of managing our own destinies. We must embrace the concept of lifelong learning as the context and professional certification as the structure for career development.

We also need to realize learning, climbing career

ladders and earning professional certifications take time. What will come from your career vision—along with a willingness to climb your career ladder—is a rewarding career in quality. We hope this article will encourage you to get started.

Now, go reap the benefits that only come through hard work and perseverance in the spirit of fulfilling the vision of quality: continuous self-improvement.

### REFERENCE

1. Phillips-Donaldson, Debbie, "Top Dogs Rule—Plus a Look Back," *Quality Progress*, December 2005.

**H. FRED WALKER** is a professor, department chair and graduate coordinator in the Department of Technology at the University of Southern Maine. He has a doctorate in industrial education and technology from Iowa State University. Walker recently co-authored two books published by ASQ Quality Press, *The Certified Quality Engineer Handbook, second edition*, and *The Certified Quality Technician Handbook*. He is vice chair of print initiatives for ASQ's Quality Management Division and editor of its newsletter, *Quality Management Forum*. Walker is a senior member of ASQ and is a certified manager of quality/organizational excellence, quality engineer, reliability engineer and quality auditor.

**JUSTIN LEVESQUE** is a graduate student in the master's in manufacturing systems and MBA programs at the University of Southern Maine. He is building a career in quality and has established and operated a quality testing laboratory in the brewing industry. Levesque has a bachelor's degree in biology from Bates College in Lewiston, ME.

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