

Reexamining the Definition of Career Success: Not Everyone Wants to Be a Manager

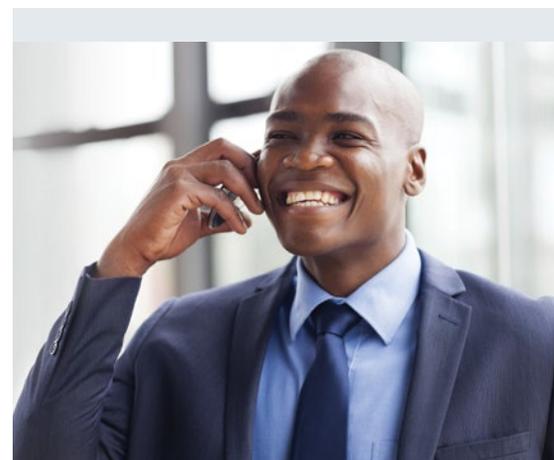
The flattening of today's organizations has made vertical mobility difficult—if not impossible—for many employees. The traditional path to professional success involved climbing a career ladder of roles of increasing responsibility with a senior management position beckoning at the top. Today's path to career advancement may look more like a lattice comprised of a series of vertical and lateral moves—possibly within multiple organizations. And it just so happens to be the best option for millions of employees who are turning away from management roles, preferring careers as individual contributors.

While there is always a great deal of emphasis placed on developing future leaders and high potentials, the employee who enjoys his or her job, performs well and wants to remain in a non-management position is also someone who needs to be developed, engaged and retained. These employees often demonstrate a very strong work ethic, considerable company knowledge and the desire to grow their talents and share their expertise. Still, many are denied development opportunities because they don't seek management positions.

According to a recent CareerBuilder survey,¹⁹ about one third (34 percent) of workers aspire to leadership positions, with only seven percent aiming for senior or C-level management. The nationwide survey, conducted by Harris Poll on behalf of CareerBuilder, included a representative sample of 3,625 full-time workers across salary levels, industries and company sizes in both government and the private sector. Why are workers eschewing the corporate ladder? A majority (52 percent) reported satisfaction in their current roles, and a third (34 percent) said they want to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Seventeen percent felt that they were lacking the education necessary for management positions.²⁰



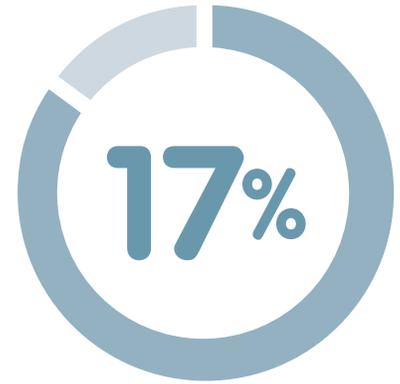
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Some managers are uncertain how to retain these high-performing individual contributors. Individual contributors deserve—and respond well to—recognition and mentoring tailored to today’s flatter organizations. As they make lateral moves along the career lattice, these employees are less concerned with climbing the ladder than in securing challenge, respect and fulfillment in non-management positions. To show high-producing individual contributors that they’re appreciated and valued without focusing on promotions and added responsibilities, propose an opportunity to travel for a training and development conference in their field, or solicit their opinions on possible process improvements or solutions to other challenges they deal with every day. Provide development opportunities that include leading projects (vs. managing people), inquire whether they would be interested in an off-site assignment, or offer the opportunity for them to represent the department in a company volunteer project or community activity.

Career success takes on many forms. For some, it’s landing a management position. For others, it’s finding work-life balance or developing a very specialized expertise in one area. Still others like the variety lateral moves provide. Respect and acknowledge each employee’s definition of success, and keep individual contributors engaged. Whether they’re backroom, frontline, low or high profile, individual contributors are the backbone of an organization and, as such, should not be relegated to stagnation but valued and nurtured through customized development and growth opportunities.



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