

Schabel, Frank

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Frank Schabel*

Managers' Career Expectations Are an Individual Matter

1. Introduction

The image of the manager who systematically plans and pursues his career is, without a doubt, an enduring cliché. But then, clichés usually do contain a certain degree of truth. In this case, however, the cliché fails to take into account that managers' careers are directly related to the individual's current employer, the general job market, the given economic climate, society's perception of the individual's profession and the individual's personal environment as well as his own professional background. When we speak of how managers' careers change, we must always bear these points in mind, because careers do not exist in a vacuum. On the contrary: By means of the above interactions, they can be explained, to a great degree, on an individual basis and not just through the use of broad generalisations.

With this in mind, I would like to further differentiate, due to my continuing communication with managers, the image presented by Kattenbach, Lücke, Schlese, & Schramm (2011¹) of largely stable career expectations by managers over the years. For this purpose the above points of reference will play a central role. Through changes in the market, career prospects or personal circumstances, one's career expectations will also correspondingly change. Therefore, these are only ever snapshots and have no claim to being a stable pattern.

2. Career expectations and their benchmarks

A fundamental factor is the individual's current work environment. Whether managers are prepared to change employers or not depends mostly on whether they believe their current employers offer them sufficient opportunities. If this is the case and if they find their overall work environment to be agreeable, managers are less motivated to pursue a career path outside their current companies. This means that the more businesses make the effort to look after and involve their management talent and offer them interesting assignments, the more willing these managers are, at least in the mid term, to develop their careers internally. Of course, the converse is equally valid: If career expectations are not in accord with their current duties, managers will begin considering their external options. Managers' career expectations and the associated question of how willing they are to change employers, depends in large part on how managers view their current employers and the options these employers can offer them.

How current professional satisfaction affects the long-term career expectations of managers is, by contrast, more difficult to judge. In my experience only a small pro-

* Frank Schabel, HAYS AG, Head of Marketing/Corporate Communications, Willy-Brandt-Platz 1-3, D - 68161 Mannheim. E-Mail: frank.schabel@hays.de.

¹ In this discourse, a single reference list for all contributions is given at the end.

portion of managers plan their careers over decades, because the overall economic environment has long since become too unstable. Since companies still continue to count on short-term success, long-term career expectations on the part of managers are simply no longer valid.

With regard to how managers' career expectations compare with their current situations, one must, of course, take into account certain important "objective" elements: Is the company a mid-sized firm that offers a greater degree of operational freedom, but fewer formal job titles or is it a corporation that, as part of its structure, offers managers promotions at regular intervals? These sorts of considerations colour managers' career expectations.

The situation is similar for the various business sectors: Managers who work in IT or commerce more often pursue jobs outside their firms, because this corresponds to the dynamic perception of their industries. This applies less for managers in chemical firms, for example, because this field is characterised more by an image of constancy and internal further development. In general, the following can be observed: The more sales-related a business or business sector is, the more willing managers are to change employers.

A further benchmark for gauging managers' career expectations are the macro-economic conditions that influence an individual's career planning - over both the short and mid term. Here we see some diametrically opposed trends. The global economy's growing vulnerability to crisis, which we have experienced in recent years, has changed managers' career planning and aspirations. It is scarcely still possible to systematically plan careers because companies swiftly change and, for example, sell business sectors, fuse with other companies or change owners. In such an environment persistent career development is becoming increasingly more rare. Managers must, on the contrary, expect disruptions and swift rises and falls in their careers. Against this background the traditionally-held concept of what a manager's career actually is means less and less.

However difficult the economic climate may actually be, the demographic trend puts the risks for managers into perspective. Highly-qualified professionals - and this includes managers - hold the best cards, because in future they will be a rare breed. And this will have a positive effect on their career expectations: The individual's job and chances of promotion with his current employer could be put at risk, however, due both to their qualifications and to demographic trends, there are enough other attractive career opportunities open to managers.

Manager's career expectations are not just influenced by hard factors, but also by the image that society has of their careers. This has changed in recent years and is the reason why the subject of work-life balance is at the top of the career wish list for university graduates. The classical notion of having a high salary and continuous career progression went out with the baby boomer generation. Purely focusing on a career is now no longer fashionable and this trend does not seem to be just a fad. However, exactly what effect this will have on managers' career expectations cannot yet be foreseen. Do young people change their expectations over the course of their careers or do they remain true to their needs?

If they remain constant, the greater focus for managers will be on life-phase oriented career planning. This includes raising children and taking care of parents, pursuing a second degree or taking an extended break from work so that individuals can re-orientate themselves. Thus in future, careers will no longer be linear, but rather serpentine, and the number of managers who fluctuate back and forth between permanent and interim management positions is already increasing. Career expectations, therefore, are part of a larger societal context than they were previously.

Managers with families are presented with another set of challenges when it comes to reconciling their professional and private lives. Their geographical flexibility is limited, which affects their career demands. For these managers, job security is of greater importance than further career progression. Moreover, they must consult more and more with their partners about what they want out of their careers and about how these choices affect the entire family. By contrast, the younger and less tied down the manager is, the more prepared he or she is to make greater efforts to advance his or her career, i.e. these sorts of factors also shape and influence managers' career expectations: Are they deeply involved in stable, long-term personal relationships and networks or is this less the case?

The individual's personal background, likewise, plays an important role in deciding what managers expect from their careers. By this I mean not just whether one's parents were themselves managers, but also the individual's own experience of dealing with disruption and change. If managers have been confronted with similar difficulties previously in their lives, their willingness to embark on new challenges grows and, in terms of their careers, so does their willingness to change employers. And of course age plays a significant role when managers are planning their careers. Changing employers is viewed more critically and arguments for and against such a move are given greater consideration the older a manager is. There are risks associated with moving to a new company and for older managers, job security is most often more important than the prospect of a possible further promotion, be it internally or externally.

In addition to age and personal background, one's chosen profession has an impact on career expectations. Finance managers regard careers differently than marketing managers or a manager who works in research and development. Finance managers are more likely to tend toward stability while, for marketing managers, it is simply understood that they will go through a series of companies during their employment life. Developers, by contrast, are more likely to associate the content of their actual work with their careers.

3. Conclusion

It is our view that the expectations managers have for their careers depend on many factors. Because these factors change continuously, the understanding managers have of their careers also varies. In other words, this understanding is reflected in these changes. When career expectations change, it is due first and foremost to these factors. For example, because of the changing impression society has of careers, it is no longer just about careers themselves, but rather about gaining a balance between the different areas of an individual's life. In other words, a kind of holistic integration as opposed to the previous, more encapsulated or cloistered impression of careers. This

new pattern also includes a stronger life-phase oriented planning of careers closely bound up with discontinuities. How strongly pronounced these are depends, in turn, on many factors such as one's own background, business sector or profession.

Blanket statements about career expectations also do not serve much of a purpose; what is needed is a differentiated view that reflects the interdependence between these various career benchmarks; for example: a comparison of how the career expectations of managers from various business sectors, from large and small businesses or from individual professions differ from one another.

For HR departments it would be important to clarify these points with managers openly and to find a shared way to harmonise career expectations with the company's own corporate interests. This would be an interesting contribution to the topic of talent management and gaining manager commitment. However, we are only just at the very beginning and both sides have yet to fully lay their cards on the negotiation table.

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