

Leaving the Ladder: Rethinking the Traditional Healthcare Career Path

Rachel Polhemus and Jason P. Petros, WittKieffer

Between a global pandemic, social change, and the proliferation of mergers and acquisitions, executives are rethinking the traditional path of career advancement. Moving slowly but steadily up the ladder has gone out of fashion. The Bureau of Labor Statistics [estimates](#) that people today change jobs more than a dozen times in their careers, and that figure is climbing.

This can be viewed with optimism, given the right perspective. Rather than one linear route, the new healthcare landscape offers multiple pathways in which executives can “advance”.

“The ladder’s one-size-fits-all approach assumes employees are more alike than different, and want and need similar things to deliver results,” write [career experts](#) from Deloitte. They encourage organizations, and their career-minded employees, to think more in terms of a lattice model. The lattice metaphor “represents the multidirectional, flexible and expansive nature of how successful organizations work today.”

It’s time for healthcare leaders to rethink career development to adapt to a lattice or matrix structure. Prepare yourself to change positions more often than you might have once thought, sometimes switching to different departments or areas of focus to broaden your skills and perspectives. Consider the possibility of moving

laterally – or even taking a step down – if it prepares you for a more meaningful career and builds your skills for new roles down the road.

Planning Your Path

Leaving behind the career ladder — and its clearly-defined hierarchy of advancement — may leave executives feeling unnerved. The key is to remain open and curious, both about your own unique career path and about the skills and competencies that best suit your organization and other employers in the marketplace.

“Individuals who believe their talents can be developed (through hard work, good strategies, and input from others) have a growth mindset,” [says](#) Carol Dweck, author of *The Growth Mindset*. “They tend to achieve more than those with a more fixed mindset (those who believe their talents are innate gifts). This is because they worry less about looking smart and they put more energy into learning.”

For many healthcare leaders, the pandemic and seismic M&A shifts have resulted in personal reflection and soul-searching. Keeping up with a changing industry requires executives to learn, grow and change the way they lead.

Here below are some additional recommendations:

Think about competencies suited for today. “The Well-Managed Healthcare Organization” is becoming less relevant, while a more facile organizational structure is more common. Essential healthcare leadership competencies for today include abilities in change management, self development, talent development, and team development.

In addition, we believe that executives who thrive in complex, matrix-oriented systems have certain qualities fit for the environment. Among other things, they are:

- Collaborative, team builders
- Good communicators with varied colleagues
- Culturally sensitive and committed to diversity
- Committed to quality and improvement
- Genuine and authentic
- Patient-focused
- Willing to take risks

Think experience, not title. Rather than thinking of your advancement in terms of position title, think in terms of experience. What do you see yourself doing not just one, but two jobs ahead of your current position? What competencies would you need to gain in order to advance to that second job? Your next position should prepare you more fully, serving as the stepping stone to a future rewarding role.

“When it comes to a winding, non-uniform career, what binds it together are skills, mindset, and experience,” another expert notes. “A non-linear career doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re changing jobs all the time, but you think about work dynamically and maintain a growth mindset. How do you learn and develop your skills to ensure you don’t need to be ‘stuck’ in the same role forever?”

Stretch, but not too far. Volunteer for projects that provide stretch opportunities for your professional growth.

This allows you to “test the waters” of a potential branch of your career path without committing to it fully. Be selective in your volunteerism, however; you don’t want to over-commit and under-deliver. One strategy is to create a personal calendar that shows “how to best organize your work, how much time you need to devote to management, and how much time you have for projects. Once you’ve committed to this capacity, you either need to say no to new work or renegotiate previous commitments to free up space.”

Keep a journal of successes and failures. “There’s strong evidence that replaying events in our brain is essential to learning,” writes Dan Ciampa in Harvard Business Review. “While the brain records and holds what takes place in the moment, the learning from what one has gone through — that is, determining what is important and what lessons should be learned — happens after the fact during periods of quiet reflection.”

See journaling as a chance to document what you’ve done and to improve yourself. When the time comes for your next job interview, you’ll have plenty of material to talk about.

Network with your boss’s boss. Once you have mapped out your advancement goals and the competencies you’ll need to reach them, try to build relationships with leaders who are further ahead of you on the path. Share positive feedback on a successful presentation or pass along relevant articles to higher-level executives. When appropriate, ask a question or challenge an assertion to stimulate additional dialogue. Don’t be afraid to sing the praises of your team to higher leadership.

Mine for mentors. No matter how much experience you’ve gained during your career, you can always benefit from mentoring. Whether through a formal program or an informal request to meet monthly over lunch, mentors can provide important insights into your own strengths and weaknesses, as well as the broader needs of the organization and the industry. Pursue a diverse range of perspectives, including leaders from other departments and perhaps a leader from another organization or from a different industry.

As you look to change jobs and employers, one key consideration should be whether the organization has a formal mentoring program.

In this era of change, no one has all the answers. Being open to learning new concepts and mastering different skills garners respect, from both your team and your supervisors. Remain curious and show your genuine desire to grow. Healthcare executives may have lost their footing on the career ladder of old, but it is possible to discover unique and enriching paths that lead you to career success.

About the Authors

Rachel Polhemus, senior partner, has vast experience as an executive recruiter, including more than 15 years of experience at WittKieffer, combined with management consulting experience for leading healthcare and Fortune 500 firms. Based in Bethesda, Maryland, Rachel recruits for key senior leadership roles in healthcare and the not-for-profit sector, with particular expertise in identifying CEOs and C-suite executives in the areas of strategy, operations, nursing, and marketing, as well as for chair positions.

Rachel Polhemus, Senior Partner
240-401-2019 | rachelp@wittkieffer.com

As a senior partner for WittKieffer, Jason Petros has supported the successful placement of over 350 key leaders in integrated health systems, academic medical centers, community hospitals, physician groups and other healthcare services organizations. He works closely with boards, search committees and hiring executives in the recruitment of CEOs, COOs, and other senior leaders. He also has extensive experience in recruiting leadership to support clinical integration, service line development and service excellence.

Jason Petros, Senior Partner
630-575-6156 | jasonp@wittkieffer.com

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WittKieffer is a global executive search firm dedicated exclusively to organizations that improve quality of life in healthcare, education, the life sciences and the not-for-profit sector. Its industry-specialized consultants deliver solutions across the leadership continuum – experienced, emerging and interim – that build long-term partnerships and successful outcomes. The firm understands leadership, people who lead and the impact they have on organizations and society. Visit WittKieffer.com to learn more.

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