



# **Are Nonlinear Career Paths the New Normal? 5 Ways You Can Support Employees While Benefiting Your Company**

Insights

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Workers are choosing career paths that don't resemble the clear trajectory from graduation to retirement that their parents might have mapped out. These paths bypass proverbial career ladders and instead wind through varying roles, industries, and even professions. Rather than tossing out "job hopper" resumes, employers should find ways to adapt – because nonlinear career paths are here to stay. How can you align your hiring and retention strategies with this new workplace reality? We'll give you five ways you can support this new cohort of employees while benefiting your organization.

## **What's a Nonlinear Career Path?**

A nonlinear career path is a career trajectory that is not limited to vertical growth or any singular company, industry, or profession. While it was once common (and perhaps even expected) for young adults to start their career at one company and stay tied to that company until they retired 40 years later, today's employees have long abandoned that notion. More than ever, the current workplace is exploring diverse opportunities to find personal fulfillment and evolve with rapidly changing technologies and business models – sometimes at a breakneck pace.

## **How Did We Get Here?**

The modern workforce has been shaped by a wide range of factors. The pandemic forced people to throw out their playbooks in many areas of life and turn inward to reevaluate what they value most. Remote work has enabled people to work for companies located anywhere in the world and seek diverse opportunities that previously would not have been accessible. And as many workers new to or just entering the workforce have never experienced a traditional, in-person workplace, they might feel less bound to their employers.

Even before the pandemic, we saw a mindset shift with Millennial and Gen Z workers entering the workforce. We have seen them prioritize work they find meaningful and environments that align with a set of values that might not have previously been prized. Moreover, the rise of the gig economy over the past decade was monumental in dismantling traditional career paths and empowering individuals to work independently and untethered from any one company or industry. And from a broader standpoint, as our lifespans increase, our working years do, too – making sticking to one job or profession less realistic.

Finally, nonlinear career paths are not always a luxury. Many workers don't have any choice but to pivot or pause their careers due to economic downturns, caregiving responsibilities, or other circumstances outside of their control.

## **5 Ways You Can Support – and Attract – a Nonlinear Workforce**

You are more than welcome to continue to toss out any resume that comes across your desk where a candidate has had multiple jobs in the past few years or experienced twists and turns in their career. But by doing so, you may be missing out on qualified candidates and putting your organization at a strategic disadvantage given the new normal we are now living in. If you want to keep up with the times, it's time to shift your thinking when it comes to nonlinear workers.

### **1. Keep an Open Mind and Open Door**

While high turnover rates can be disruptive and costly, and frequent job changes might raise a red flag, employers who keep an open mind can benefit by attracting and retaining more and potentially better talent. If this is the new reality, you should try to destigmatize and plan for it.

For example, you could train your managers not to reject resumes based solely on atypical job histories. Instead, encourage them to have open conversations with candidates about their history and what motivates them. And the same is true for your existing workers. In positive work environments, employees may be more likely to express their evolving career goals and areas of interest, offering you ways to retain valuable workers in different roles.

### **2. Offer Flexibility and Work-Life Balance**

A paycheck – even when competitive and paired with an excellent benefits package – no longer cuts it. Today's employees prioritize flexibility and overall work-life balance. This might include remote work options, reduced hours, or even job sharing.

Even senior executives are taking their roles part-time. "Fractional executives" are a growing trend and allow companies to utilize experienced C-suite professionals in a strategically limited capacity. This saves the company money while offering the executive greater career flexibility and agency.

### **3. Raise "Emotional Salaries"**

Nonmonetary compensation includes providing employees with meaningful feedback, checking in on their wellbeing and overall job satisfaction, and other work culture components that help employees feel valued. When different companies are offering similar pay rates, employee recognition and manager support could make the difference for an employee trying to decide whether to leave or stay.

### **4. Encourage Growth and Development**

The antidote to employees who are inclined to bolt when things feel stagnant is to keep things fresh. You can show employees that you are investing in them by offering training programs, coaching, mentorships, and other professional development opportunities. And it doesn't always have to be big, comprehensive programs – “micro upskilling” (bite-sized but frequent learning opportunities) can be effective, too.

## 5. Capitalize On Desires for Exploration

If today's employees are thinking outside of the box regarding their career paths, then employers should, too.

- **Job descriptions** can and should evolve over time.
- **Job shadowing and cross-training** can spark interest, build deeper understanding of the organization, and prepare you for gaps when employees take vacation or temporary leave.
- **Retired employees** wishing for fulfilling and creative projects can be utilized as consultants or mentors.

When you support employees who want to try new things or even shift roles entirely, you can satisfy employees' desire to explore their careers without losing them to external opportunities. In short, turn the career ladder on its side and use it as a bridge.

## Conclusion

We will monitor these developments and provide updates as warranted, so make sure that you are subscribed to Fisher Phillips' Insights to get the most up-to-date information direct to your inbox. If you have further questions, contact your Fisher Phillips attorney or the authors of this Insight.

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**Lauren Laing**  
Legal Content Counsel

Legal Content Counsel  
412.822.6623  
[Email](#)



**George A. Reeves, III**  
Partner  
803.255.0000  
[Email](#)

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