Career Rock Climbing

How the Career Ladder Became a Rock Wall, and What You Can Do About It

*Seemingly overnight, the traditional career ladder has been transformed into a far more precarious rock climbing wall. Success, no matter how you define it, now requires you to develop a more creative and nimble career strategy—one that embraces continuous learning and professional growth. Are you ready?*

By Jason Aldrich

Have you ever been rock climbing, and perhaps reached a little beyond your comfort zone? If you have, you’re familiar with that “uh-oh” feeling that makes you question your decision or even your confidence. Perhaps your hands or feet have even slipped a bit and your belay had to guide you back to safety. The lack of clarity and security often felt while rock climbing is in many ways the experience of today’s employees.

The great recession has created seismic shifts in how organizations operate and evolve—shifts that have fundamentally changed how individuals have to conceptualize their careers. The traditional “corporate ladder” with predictable, vertical rungs of progression has been replaced by a rock wall rife with tenuous footholds, unexpected twists and disappointing lateral moves.

**HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

To provide some context and illustrate the forces at play, I have summarized the major economic trends and the keys to successful career advancement used during these periods.

1940’s-60’s: Major economic trends included the post WWII boom, GI Bill, and American firms becoming dominant global players. The job market was robust and lifetime employment with one firm became the norm.

- **Keys to Career Advancement** – An undergraduate degree was your ticket to career advancement with one company and a pension that provided a comfortable retirement. The corporate ladder is in full force.

1970’s-80’s: Global competition starts to affect U.S. industry. Lifetime employment is no longer a guarantee, as massive layoffs, downsizing and flattening of organizations became realities.

- **Keys to Career Advancement** – A graduate degree, particularly an MBA, along with willingness to relocate becomes your ticket to advancement. Multiple jobs and maybe a move to a competitor were needed to keep climbing.

The career rock climbing wall is forming.

1990’s-2008: Companies added significant staff and embraced the idea of talent management to recruit, retain and develop staff.

**Keys to Career Advancement** – For those with advanced degrees and a willingness to be mobile, the global economy and economic bubbles create an upside for the career capitalist.

The career rock climbing wall is in place, but it is masked by a robust job market.
2008-2009: Massive layoffs begin across all sectors of the economy. Hiring comes to a virtual stop. Several key sectors including real estate, banking and transportation are particularly hard hit.

- **Keys to Career Advancement** – Advanced degrees are the norm. Only those with a proven track record of delivering results, a broad network, and portable skills are able to navigate the downturn as a “free agent.” Career transitions take an average of 6-12 months. Many people leave the workforce completely or can’t enter coming out of college.

  The career rock climbing wall is finally revealed by the great recession.

**WELCOME TO THE CAREER ROCK CLIMBING WALL**

Back in the mid-1990’s, just before the Internet boom, I heard a futurist talk about the job market of the 21st century. He described it as the ‘Charles Ingalls’ economy. Charles Ingalls, played by Michael Landon, was the main character in the popular TV series *Little House on the Prairie*, set in the late 1800’s. In the series, Charles Ingalls did whatever it took to take care of his family. He worked his farm, cut lumber at the local sawmill, and even left his family to build the transcontinental railroad.

The speaker indicated that based on the mega-trends of globalization, corporate downsizing, reorganizations, outsourcing, contracting, and the rise of portable benefits, we were quickly becoming “free agents.” Those who embraced this reality and acted accordingly, he suggested, would be successful in their careers. Unfortunately, after nearly 20 years of unprecedented job growth, the loss of 400,000 jobs per month in 2008-09 and the addition of only 119,000 jobs per month since 2010; this “free agent” world has become a reality. While some have been able to adjust and move into new jobs and careers, many have been caught off guard by the severity and duration of the Great Recession. Today, individuals face the career rock climbing wall, full of uncertain footholds without a clear path for career advancement.

The underlying economic trends of previous decades slowly created this environment, and will continue to affect the job market for years. And although there continues to be a lot of talk about a labor shortage resulting from an increase in baby boomer retirements, there is solid research that indicates employers are adapting by replacing them with fewer super-achievers who embrace challenge and continuous learning. In addition, this research indicates organizations will continue to use outsourcing, contracting, flattening and “matrixing” to maximize efficiency. As a result, individuals are challenged to become more resourceful and adaptive than ever.

**SEVEN CAREER ROCK CLIMBING PRINCIPLES: A NEW STRATEGY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY**

Although glacially slow job growth is the “new normal” and “free agents” trying to climb the wall have found it to be a significant challenge, there is hope. Individuals who accept this shift and embrace a continuous learning approach to proactively managing their careers will be more successful than those who long for a return to the job growth and relative job security of the past.

**So, how do I manage my career going forward?**

Because a career is seldom built anymore one vertical rung at a time, we must change the way we build careers. The lesson of the great recession is to conceptualize our careers independent of any one organization. We must embrace the “free agent” economy, strap on our gear and chalk our hands if we are going to successfully make the ascent to the top of the rock wall. These seven principles can help guide the way.
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**Principle # 1 – Have the right equipment, consider the elements, and use your resources in concert.**

Advanced education is the norm. If you don’t have the necessary education to continue advancing, get it; whether you need a certificate in a hot topic or a new degree. After you clear all the education hurdles, focus on developing your leadership skills, build a strong network and identify mentors in and out of your organization who are at two levels above you.

**Career Strategy** – Develop the competencies necessary to rise in the firm. Being an expert in a functional area will only take you so far.

**Actions**
- If formal education is complete, focus on leadership and innovation. Consider additional education or certification opportunities.
- Learning how to recruit, develop and lead teams is critical to advancement and leads to a much broader range of career options.
- Communication and interpersonal skills are critical to success. Learn how to leverage technology to effectively communicate with a diverse set of clients and colleagues.

**Principle # 2 – Reach out of your comfort zone, and achieve balance and stability with every move.**

The organization will not tell you when you’re ready for the next challenge. You will have to be assertive to advance, but be sure you’ve developed the competencies needed for success at the next level.

**Career Strategy** – Focus on high-quality experiences and opportunities that allow you to develop the competencies, network and mentors necessary for continued success.

**Actions**
- Avoid taking a job just for the money or title.
- Do your homework; make sure the organization is going to provide you with the resources necessary to learn and grow.

**Career Strategy** – If you’re not stretching, you’re not growing. It is vital to work on projects that expose you to new challenges and with people who expand your knowledge. Don’t be afraid of taking a risk, particularly early in your career.

**Actions**
- Volunteering to take on challenging projects is a golden opportunity to stretch yourself.

**Principle # 3 – Stay open to creative solutions.**

Career advancement is all about being nimble, engaging in continuous learning and leading change.

**Career Strategy** – Minor adjustments to your career strategy is all it takes to find the combination of challenge, growth and support you’re seeking.

**Actions**
- Volunteering in the community can broaden your network and open new career opportunities.
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**Principle # 4 – Listen to your belay.**

In rock climbing, your belay is the person who is your counterbalance if you fall. In your career, your belay is a mentor.

**Career Strategy** – It is critical to develop a career strategy that extends beyond your current role, or even the next role. Your organization is not going to do this for you. This approach requires the input of mentors inside and outside your organization to help you avoid mistakes and make smart strategic moves.

**Actions**
- Thinking about making an internal move or leaving the firm? Now is the time to get input from mentors you can trust.

**Principle # 5 – Strategic sideways moves are smart...Keep moving!**

The quickest path to the top may no longer be straight up. Just as true rock climbing often requires lateral moves, so does career rock climbing. The worst thing you can do is freeze up because it drains energy and wastes time.

**Career Strategy** – A strategic sideways move may actually accelerate your growth in the long run.

**Actions**
- Your firm is launching a new product, has a major problem, or wants to expand a department. This is your chance to make a strategic lateral move if it helps you move in a new direction, build competencies for the future, expands your network and raises your profile in the organization or community.
- Even if you have to take a lateral move or a step back, the key is to keep moving. For example, a friend of mine lost his job in 2005, took a job at Starbucks to get out of the house, and less than a year later he was a regional manager with 12 stores and he’s been there ever since.
- Don’t allow organizational restructurings or interpersonal conflicts derail you.

**Principle # 6 – It is OK to fail, rock climbing is learned, no one is a “natural.”**

The workplace is full of unknowns and ambiguity. There is never enough time or information to make perfect decisions, and the right move can sometimes be counter-intuitive and full of trial and error. Be prepared for career detours and don’t spend too much time analyzing what went wrong. Identify the lesson and keep moving!

**Career Strategy** – We all need to accept the fact that the vast majority of us are going to fail at some point in our career. We will be let go, or chose to move on, for any number of reasons. Failing is an important part of learning—the key is not to get mired in self-pity or make excuses. Identify the lesson and keep moving.

**Actions**
- Have a strong sense of integrity and ethics. A strong network, outstanding work ethic, and integrity will allow you to outlast most and bounce back quickly if you fall.
- A setback is often a good time to reflect on your commitment to continuous improvement. Consider whether this is the time to engage in self-directed learning, formal education, or executive education.
- Pro-actively ask for input from colleagues and mentors.
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**Principle # 7 – Visualize reaching the top.**

Set your own standards for growth and success.

**Career Strategy** – Be in the minority that dares to dream. Think through your plan – how will it feel when you get there? What does success really mean to you?

**Actions**

- Set aside organization and industry for the moment, and think about the types of roles and level of responsibility you seek. Define your career path based on these broader concepts and then find the opportunities that will help you get there.
- Consider conducting your own annual performance review, with the input of mentors, through the lens of your long-term career objectives.

These principles can help you no matter where you are in your career. Rock climbing is all about preparation, so before you make your next move assess where you are, then engage in self-assessment and reflection. Self-assessment is the first step, but before you spring into action...Go deeper! Identify your resources, make a plan that includes short (6 months to 1 year), intermediate (3 to 5 year) and long-term (5-10 year) goals.

So, double-check your equipment, secure your knots, grab your chalk bag, and take the rock!

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The largest business school in the South and part of a major research institution, Georgia State University's J. Mack Robinson College of Business has 220 faculty, 8,000 students and 80,000 alumni. With programs on five continents and students from 88 countries, the College is world-class and worldwide. Its part-time MBA program is ranked among the best by the Aspen Institute, Bloomberg Businessweek and U.S. News and World Report, and its Executive MBA is on the Financial Times list of the world's premiere programs. Located in Atlanta, the Robinson College of Business and Georgia State have produced more of Georgia’s top executives with graduate degrees than any other school in the Southeast.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jason Aldrich serves as Executive Director of the Career Management Center at Georgia State University’s J. Mack Robinson College of Business. Before joining GSU, Jason served in similar roles at Vanderbilt University and The University of Georgia. In addition, he was President of the Georgia Association of Colleges and Employers (GACE) in 2004 and has presented at numerous regional and national professional association conferences throughout his career. Jason is a doctoral student at The University of Georgia pursuing a Doctorate Degree in Education. His research topic is *Facilitating the Career Adaptability of Graduate Business Students*. Jason earned a M.A. in Student Affairs in Higher Education from Indiana University at Pennsylvania.