Bridge to Career Success

A study of career mobility and advancement in the information and communication technologies workforce

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As the U. S. continues to add jobs and recover from the “Great Recession,” there is growing concern about the state of the nation’s talent pipeline and the ability of the workforce to meet the needs of an increasingly global and tech-fueled economy. Between 2010 and 2020, for example, domestic employers will create 1.4 million computer science job openings, but domestic colleges and universities will only graduate 400,000 computer scientists.\(^1\)

Despite the clear need for more skilled information and communication technologies (ICT) workers, there are many barriers to career success for employment in these fields. While there are training agencies offering entry-level ICT skills training, technical skill acquisition alone does not guarantee long-term career success with opportunities for enhanced mobility and economic self-sufficiency. Because the 21st century economy creates fast-changing skill demands, ICT workers must constantly attain new relevant skills and be prepared to frequently change jobs and even careers. In essence, a successful ICT careerist must be skilled and mobile.

Within ICT, there is a stark divide between entry-level workers who staff company help desks and perform computer repairs, and the engineers and designers whose talent and creativity fuel the nation’s innovation engine. Employers often view their lower-skilled workers as expenses without direct connections to revenues, and view higher-skilled ICT workers as foundational to their success. However, the distinction is not made in technical mastery alone, but also in a distinct set of employment-related skills and traits that are vitally important but are rarely formally taught.

Career-navigation skills and characteristics — e.g., networking, teamwork, flexibility, passion for life-long learning — are often the differentiators between career success and failure. This is a challenge for entry-level workers who have some technical skills but may lack access to opportunities for developing career navigation skills. Training organizations that focus only on ICT technical skills and ignore career navigation could place their graduates at risk for long-term employment oblivion.

Located in the heart of California’s Silicon Valley, NOVA Workforce Development has already documented the importance of these navigation skills in promoting career success. This study is designed to articulate career-navigation success factors and to demonstrate how navigators apply their skills and characteristics to thrive in a fast-changing economic environment.

As such, this work is a “how to” guide for students and job seekers seeking to enter – or re-enter – ICT and other technically dynamic occupations. It also provides educators, workforce trainers, employers, and policy makers with clear direction for developing programs that promote career success. The Appendix features the voices of the best possible sources of career navigation advice – the ICT workers themselves.

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To fully meet the talent needs of ICT employers, entry-level ICT workers must have access to all of the tools available to the top-tier software developers. They need both elite technical- and career-navigation skills training. They need a strong career focus, not just a job focus; they need modeling and motivation to propel them through the dynamic ICT landscape.

While the research includes important information for anyone interested in ICT employment success, it is especially critical for lower skilled workers, who have the greatest need for enhanced mobility. This research study is a call to action to education and training providers to focus on these key characteristics and skills to better serve their constituents.

Created by NOVA, based in Sunnyvale, California, and the Economic Advancement Research Institute (EARI), a Massachusetts non-profit research organization, TechLadder is an initiative promoting access, career advancement, and economic self-sufficiency for workers in all occupations requiring ICT skills. It is illuminating practices that enable entry-level and lower-skill workers to advance along career ladders and provide greater value to their communities and employers.
TechLadder operates on the premise that these career navigation skills and characteristics can be learned and must be promoted if ICT workers are to have the greatest opportunities to actualize their passions for technology and address the nation’s growing skills gap. This career pathways research project is foundational to TechLadder’s long-term goals of:

- **Expanding access** to career ladders at all ICT skill levels;
- **Enhancing regional economic competitiveness** by preparing talented professionals to fill critical skill gaps;
- **Promoting a more-inclusive ICT workforce** at all skill levels; and
- **Fostering family economic self-sufficiency** by increasing mobility and access to opportunities.
The purpose of this research is to understand the various pathways for career advancement in ICT fields. As illustrated in the groundbreaking report “Silicon Valley in Transition,” technology firms in Silicon Valley highly value technical skills and are in fierce competition for top talent, often recruiting from elite universities and graduate programs to meet their needs. As noted in that study, however, “when given a hypothetical scenario … employers tended to prefer an applicant who has a demonstrated ability to learn quickly, adapt to new objectives, and take on new tasks and responsibilities over a more experienced candidate who might be less flexible, less adaptable, and less entrepreneurial.”

This research is focused on refining these core success metrics, identifying how these characteristics are acquired, and determining whether replicable and sustainable models can be created to hone and develop these characteristics to enhance the career prospects for entry-level ICT workers.

The research seeks to examine several propositions about supporting career navigation:

1. Career navigation is learned. Navigation appears to be most frequently developed through exposure, experience, and rich informal networks of successful career navigators, such as family, friends, and co-workers, whom are more prevalent in higher socio-economic communities.

2. Career navigation is not formally taught. Public schools, colleges, and other training providers rarely offer formal career-navigation skills training, opting instead for more technical or academic approaches.

3. The lack of emphasis on career navigation in public workforce and education programs contributes to growing inequality and lack of mobility.

4. Creating models for students and job seekers to develop career-navigation skills aligns closely with career success.

Unlike some more traditional industries where each job opportunity represents a specific rung on a ladder of increasing title, pay, and responsibility, ICT mobility is significantly less rigid. Due in part to rapidly changing technologies and an environment of creative destruction, companies, jobs, and

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3 Ibid. at p.21.
skill sets come and go much more quickly than in other sectors. A vertical career-ladder profile for ICT becomes outdated soon after it is produced – especially for higher-skilled workers. As a result, this research was designed to understand mobility, which is perhaps the most important value-added characteristic a worker in this field can possess for career success.

This paradigm requires a different approach than most models for identifying career pathways. In contrast to many career pathway studies, a research team including EARI, NOVA, and San Jose State University collected data from a diverse group of current and former San Francisco Bay Area technology workers from a wide range of ICT careers to explore how ICT workers identify factors that contribute to developing successful career pathways.

The research includes two specific data collection efforts. The first was a survey of 117 workers in ICT careers. While the participants are not a representative sample of all ICT workers in the region, each participant was considered based on his or her specific career profile in order to maximize diversity in responses. The questions included quantitative assessments to identify various career success metrics, as well as more qualitative questions focused on context and examples. The survey of 21 questions was administered online in the fall of 2013 and averaged nine minutes in length. Participants were quite actively engaged in the process, with 115 of the 117 completing all quantitative responses and 104 completing all qualitative responses.

Following the survey, ethnographic researchers from San Jose State University’s Applied Anthropology graduate program conducted 17 deeply qualitative interviews, which averaged one hour in length. The interviews were conducted with 13 participants from the survey respondents as well as with four participants who were contacted through personal networks to broaden the range of perspectives offered. Unlike the other interviewees, these four did not attend college. Their educational experiences ranged from not completing high school to dropping out of college after a couple of years, but all of them had been employed in ICT for at least 15 years and self-identified as being successful.

The initial steps for the ethnographic interviews began with the creation of an ethnographic interview instrument. The first step in this process was to understand and define what is meant by “success” in an ICT career context. As previously discussed, career success is defined for this research context broadly as enhanced mobility. Mobility provides an individual with the freedom and ability to shape his or her career in a way that they choose and it involves both vertical and horizontal dimensions. With the theme of mobility as the focus, the research team constructed an interview instrument with 19 questions that focused on education, skill sets, career history, networks, and mentorship.

The results of the survey and ethnographic interviews are analyzed, synthesized, and summarized into the following research findings.
What does it take to succeed in an ICT career? Technical skills are obviously important, but they cannot be effectively applied without career navigation skills. The research suggests that certain foundational characteristics and attitudes are key to development of effective career navigation strategies. Further, and contrary to some common perceptions, these personal characteristics are not inherited or bestowed, but rather learned through exposure, experience, and social interaction.

### Core Navigator Characteristics

1. **Attitude.** To successfully navigate the rapidly emerging and changing ICT career landscape, it is critical that navigators have the appropriate blend of healthy self-esteem and humility. Employers respond favorably to workers with a positive outlook, who have a desire to be valuable contributors, and are also willing to learn from their mistakes and be open to new ideas.

2. **Personal initiative.** Successful navigators are self-motivated and believe they have the power to make choices and control their career destinies. They take the initiative to make sure they are up to date with the latest technology and trends. They do not necessarily wait for their employers to hand them assignments or move them to the next rung of a career ladder.

3. **Passion and curiosity.** Workers who ask questions and explore new ideas spur innovation, which is a highly valuable commodity to any ICT employer.

4. **Strong work ethic.** Despite an often more-flexible work environment and schedule, ICT work is demanding. Navigators who demonstrate their willingness to go above and beyond to add value to their companies are rewarded in this field with greater opportunities.

5. **Teamwork.** ICT employers usually think about filling holes in their teams of workers, seeking complementary role players who can interact well with others. Workers who help others around them and focus on their teams first tend to be successful navigators.

6. **Flexibility and adaptability.** Successful navigators need to be as nimble as the industry itself. The ability to reinvent oneself, take risks, and accept and embrace change is critical to continued employment in the 21st century ICT economy.
According to one research participant, many of these characteristics were acquired around a kitchen table. This highly successful “techie” reported growing up in a community where his parents, neighbors, and friends’ families regularly discussed work as their contribution, or mark left, on the world. He mentioned how, later in his career, he often nearly gave up but persevered because of a nudge from a friend or colleague who had been there before.

In each case, it was the connection with people that seemed to make the difference in the development of these important characteristics. During the longer interviews, it became very apparent that all of the interviewees were individuals who had the ability to both be effective technical workers and communicate their knowledge in non-technical applications. The expression of this trait was unique to each individual but was easily identified throughout the interviews.

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Examples of this include a programmer who teaches technical skills to underprivileged youth at a non-profit, a manager who counsels her “techies” to be better team members through the development of emotional intelligence, a security expert who has superior networking skills, a product manager who excels at monitoring the tech industry fluctuations, and a systems analyst who wants his work to improve people’s lives.

These workers are “bridges.” They are able to connect to those outside of their technical arena and effectively translate technical information in a non-technical format, to foster a shared understanding between departments, and to establish relationships with a broader, non-technical audience. The goals or purposes of bridge activities are dependent on individual or organizational needs and behaviors, but the transfer of knowledge between seemingly disparate teams, departments, companies, or individuals is always present.

Bridges are strong in four areas — personal/professional networking, organizational reading, self-awareness and relationship management — and they have benefited from formal or informal mentorship. Each of these categories include traits that can directly contribute to career mobility and perceived career success. An individual may possess some or all of these abilities, and it is not necessary to possess all of these traits to be an effective bridge. Depending on the needs and/or goals of the individual, different strategies for bridge activities can be used.

Some bridge strategies were obvious and emerged quickly, like an ability to use professional and personal networks effectively to find appropriate mentors, while others were more hidden. Managing relationships, being self-aware of strengths and weaknesses, and understanding organizational demands and culture were fundamental, but interviewees often struggled to express them explicitly.
The concept of bridging is useful in generating deeper insights into the strategies employed by the successful, mobile career-builders encountered by the report authors. It draws attention to the fact that there need to be reasons to connect two dissimilar groups or networks of people. Some bridge connections were temporary and driven by the demands of a particular task or project, while others were longer-term and even provided support for entire careers. Likewise, sometimes it was necessity that led to the bridge building between groups and other times it was simply opportunity that created the bridge connection. These latter bridge connections might seem to serve no immediate function, but they can be extremely valuable in meeting future personal and organizational needs.

Bridge exploration highlights a fundamental change in the ICT workplace. Workers who keep their heads down and only know their task and their department will likely be vulnerable to long-term dislocation…

Bridging often occurs when technical and non-technical workers have to collaborate or interact in a routine manner. Many things can cross over the bridge, but the interviewees most often spoke about ideas and information. These ideas tend to be complex and embedded into a world that is somewhat foreign to the non-technical group. So the bridge has to be

**What distinguishes successful career navigators?**

1. They use their networks for proprietary access to job openings, hiring managers, and up-to-date labor market and technology trends.

2. They “see around the corner” and anticipate economic and technical changes that would otherwise threaten their careers, thanks to their access to market data.

3. They benefit from de facto mentors including parents, relatives, university alumni, and co-workers. These mentors provide inspiration, positive role modeling, and practical life lessons on how to surmount career and life barriers.

4. They maintain access to the relevant technical training required to stay connected to the ever-changing economic mainstream.

5. They possess an ability to reinvent themselves by continually understanding the value that they can bring to an organization.
able to not just transmit this information, but share the deeper meaning and understanding that is associated with it. In other words, it is not just a matter of transfer, but equally of interpretation or “sense-making.”

Want to be a bridge? Here are some tips:

“Manage your own portfolio of projects by adding things where you're weak. KNOW the metrics that matter in the business. Whatever your job is learn who the top 20 customers are and what they care about. Structure your work output in terms of what drives customers and what drives the business metrics (the income statement). Basic financial literacy is a must. Learn how to tell what the income statement tells us about the business. What does that balance sheet say about the health of the business and how does your specific job relate to that? READ everyday. At least one section of the Wall Street Journal. If you can read 30-45 minutes a day, you'll accumulate a lot of knowledge that will help you synthesize your work product with the outside world and likely help you understand what's happening to your business - which is exactly what the executives want to understand, which is exactly how you get more responsibility and promotions.”

This bridge exploration highlights a fundamental change in the ICT workplace. Workers who keep their heads down and only know their task and their department will likely be vulnerable to long-term dislocation. They will be less likely to hear about changes in technology and markets that could impact their jobs. Once dislocated, they will likely experience greater difficulty finding new opportunities. Through their strong connections, bridges know where the economy and industry are headed and how they fit.

One factor that gives bridges competitive advantages is that they develop a holistic understanding of the business environment and focus their resources on executing and adding value within that context. That’s important to longevity at a particular company but also facilitates moves to other employers in the ecosystem.
As one survey participant reported, these ICT professionals have an “understanding of organizational priorities and customer concerns” and are able to address them “effectively and efficiently.” This leads to a “relentless customer focus” that enhances opportunities for success in the current and future jobs, another said.

In summary, the personal characteristics and bridging activities are mutually reinforcing. Workers need to focus on the characteristics and the activities in which they develop and apply these traits.

The research suggests that bridges engage in five key activities: networking, organizational reading, self awareness, relationship management, and mentorship. Each activity is described in detail in the following pages.

Photo Courtesy Norris Wong
Networking

“Everyone has or should have or needs a network of people and support in most dimensions of their life ... they provide value in a number of ways. When you express your desires and intentions there are channels in which the universe can deliver what you are looking for ... it produces better results often than impersonal techniques.”

In the context of this research, networking is defined as an individual’s ability to both engage his/her existing contacts (organizational teammates, friends, family) and reach beyond that base to increase the number of professional contacts he/she has. The process of networking may take a variety of forms (e.g., inter-departmental communications, formal networking events, the evolution of personal friendships into professional contacts), and its purpose is dependent on the needs of the individual. Consistent networking themes found in the interviews included having the ability to concisely state what you want or need and to communicate with a wide variety of people, and the value of reciprocity.

Survey participants were asked to identify and then rank the value of various activities to their career success. In-person networking ranked third, following only previous work experience and self-guided learning and experimenting. Interestingly, in-person networking was deemed significantly more valuable than virtual networking through social media like LinkedIn. At the same time, respondents were evenly split as to whether they had enough access to networks of people who make hiring decisions.

The ability to “pitch” interests in a quick and effective manner allowed many of the research participants to grow their networks effectively. It helped them to identify relationships that were mutually beneficial and establish deeper connections with those individuals.

In addition, the participants who identified as successful networkers cast a wide net when attempting to grow their contacts. Their suggestions included researching people online prior to reaching out to a professional you want to meet, telling everyone (even friends and family) what you are looking for and asking if they know someone with information on the subject, and being sure to meet a variety of people, including decision makers.

Reciprocity was viewed as the way to maintain a lasting connection once the relationship was established. When meeting new contacts many of the participants offered something in return as a way to enhance the relationship and demonstrate personal value. Examples of this included an offer of introduction to another person of interest or providing a piece of knowledge that was considered important or necessary to the new contact.

“Networking is establishing value-add relationships that are bidirectional. You can’t always be asking. You have to be giving. That’s why, in your network, you always have to be open. You have to say, yeah, I can count on so and so. Every time I spoke to him I learned something. It was a value-add conversation.”
Organizational Reading

“Do not become too focused on the day-to-day grind. Pay attention to your company’s performance to avoid becoming blindsided by changes.”

The ability to analyze organizational and industry behavior was defined in this research as the category of organizational reading. This ability provides an individual with the necessary information to aid in decisions about the strength of the organization, the functionality of their department or the economic conditions of the industry. Consistent monitoring of these behaviors contributes to career mobility by allowing an individual to leave an organization or department that is perceived to be in decline or no longer fits the goals of the individual.

Throughout the interviews the participants discussed situations in which they noticed a change in the organization and made calculated decisions to leave. Examples of this behavior were varied and ranged from industry level to departmental. One participant realized that opportunities for increased responsibility and change in job functions were limited in ICT. She then made a decision to leave the company and find a hybrid position that included business development and technology.

A second participant had a keen ability to read a company’s culture and organizational processes. He made calculated decisions to leave companies due to behaviors that he viewed as red flags. These red-flag behaviors included housing the software programmers and a vocally loud team in the same cubicle farm and noticing that the company was making many successful products but their profits were not increasing. From an industry perspective, he noticed a shift where more opportunities were to be found in San Francisco rather than Silicon Valley.

A third participant was hired into a prominent organization but decided to leave soon after due to the fact that organizational behaviors would not allow him to work effectively. The result of each of these analyses was the individual taking a calculated risk to leave an organization before it was explicitly necessary. All of the participants who took such a risk reported that their next position was better suited for them and that they stayed at the next position for a longer period of time.

“I saw the opportunity for innovation had dried up and it was time to move on.”
Self-Awareness

“People need to start first with who am I? What are my strengths? Then, how do I fit in this organization?”

Understanding where you are on your career path, where you want to go, and what you need to do to get there were very common statements in the interviews. This theme led to the creation of the self-awareness category. This concept was defined in multiple ways by the participants and covered a broad spectrum of interpretations ranging from a structured approach involving emotional intelligence to less-specific statements such as “I know myself so I ....” All of the statements illustrate a reflexive thought process where the participants took a step back to analyze themselves and their place in the professional world and assessed what needed to be done. This process directly correlated with their perceived ability to affect personal growth, develop networks, and generate professional mobility.

Reflexive self-awareness in the context of this research can be thought of as a thread that is woven through each of the categories we have created. From a networking perspective, valuable connections will be made if the individual has developed a goal or plan and is able to identify people they believe they should know. Similarly, if an individual knows what they are lacking or needs support to meet their goal, they can seek that information through informal or formal mentorship.

Self-awareness under the contexts of organizational reading and relationship management both benefits from understanding yourself, how you interact with others, and knowing how to compensate for any shortcomings you may have. A unique perspective provided by some of the participants regarding achieving increased self-awareness was to foster curiosity and empathy in individuals. As one participant stated, “Be curious and connect with others. If you’re not curious about a person, you fall back on your assumptions and stereotypes.” It was this participant’s professional opinion that tech workers may be very curious individuals, but they are not curious about other people.

“I know myself and I know what I’m capable of. I know if I want to embrace a space. I know what I need to do to become conversant in that space…. You have to be able to put on the right hat and see what things are at play.”

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Relationship management was a consistent theme in the interviews and its function was expressed in multiple contexts. The benefits of successful relationship management provided the participants with greater opportunities for mobility when a transition was needed. Relationship-management strategies were explained as effective methods for maintaining a large number of relationships. The relationships discussed by the participants were personal and professional but they managed each type of relationship in the same way. Relationship-management systems varied by participant and each system spoke to the personality of the individual. Some individuals used computer software, others used old-fashioned Rolodexes.

Suggestions for successful relationship management included the following strategies. The first method is to keep detailed notes of each person in a database. It is important to take notes of characteristics or interests that are unique to the individual, notes about their family and what they care about.

The next set of management strategies are suggestions for maintaining connections in personal interactions. The participants suggested demonstrating leadership, connecting with people around what they need, demonstrating value in each conversation, and making sure people feel good around you. As one participant stated, “You have to be a better listener and make people feel better when they’re with you.”

For relationships that connect on an occasional basis, one participant found that an effective management strategy was to send emails every few months updating his contacts about a competitive hobby in which he participated. In this way, he was able to consistently stay on his contacts' radar.

“Practice leadership … everyday.”
Mentorship

“Find people that you have a connection to, people that you can talk to freely and easily and have them help you set a career plan, someone that can help you see the bigger picture, envision a path.”

Survey participants noted the importance of both formal and informal mentors. Formal mentorship was selected as important to career navigation by 15.5% of survey participants, while informal mentorship was reported as important by 47.4% of participants. At the same time, 60% of survey participants agreed with the statement “I have not had enough mentors along the way” (20.2% strongly agreed).

The interviews made it clear that mentorship for bridges takes on two forms. First, the majority of our participants either benefited directly from a mentor or believed having one would positively influence their career success. Second, many of the participants believed that part of their professional responsibility included being a mentor. The participants’ relationships with their mentors took on a variety of forms and usually the mentor/mentee relationship addressed a self-identified need of the mentee. Three of the participants acquired mentors through professional relationships in which the mentor identified a skill set in the mentee and coached him/her in developing that skill.

A unique perspective that came from the interviews was the idea that mentorship does not need to be a formal relationship. If an individual knows that he/she needs guidance, knowledge, or input, he/she can seek out that information from others. In this process, a mentor may not realize he/she is mentoring, but the mentee is gaining the insight he/she was seeking. As mentioned above, the self-awareness thread can be woven into this mentorship process through the individual understanding what he/she needs in his/her professional development. This process provides the individual with the fuel to empower his/her own development and it contributes to increased mobility.

“I have benefited from mentors throughout my career, whether they are called mentors or not, people who have been on the job for a while and have experience and perspective. Seeking out people like that, arranging some type of knowledge transfer. A lot of times it happens informally.”

(See Appendix for detailed “how to” worker advice on career navigation.)
Conclusions

The research findings in this report demonstrate a clear set of mutually reinforcing characteristics and activities that are key success indicators for ICT career mobility. Technical skills are obviously important, but attitudes and characteristics, such as flexibility, curiosity, and initiative, foster important bridging activities. These activities include networking, self-awareness, organizational reading, relationship management, and mentorship, and demonstrate to employers that they have a team member who will continue to seek to add value to the firm.

Despite the demonstrated importance of these characteristics and activities, few in the education and training community are purposefully working towards developing them with their students and clients. Existing systems are not built to provide this type of innovative development. More could and should be done to develop programs that offer exposure, experience, and interaction that lead to bridging activities. Failure to do so will only accelerate inequality and leave ICT employers in a constant struggle to find more talent.

NOVA has recognized this in its work with Silicon Valley dislocated workers, many of them from ICT. To be effective, workforce and training agencies must keep an ear to the ground and be able to change programs to reflect external realities.

NOVA and EARI strongly believe the existing education and training system should provide workers with all the skills they need for continued career success and mobility. Career-navigation skills have been clearly demonstrated to be differentiators for highly successful employees, and as part of our shared commitment to providing job-seekers with the best possible training, we will continue to explore how to develop more successful career navigators in our communities and beyond.

Specifically, NOVA and EARI intend to take the following steps:

1. Research existing efforts across the country that teach or promote activities that develop career-navigation skills.
2. Evaluate existing public programs for their development of career-navigation skills.
3. Assess the current policy framework to determine what barriers exist to developing successful career-navigation programs.
4. Develop a structure for assessing, developing, and evaluating career navigation skills.
5. Implement pilot programs to test new models.
Existing systems are not built to face these challenges. With this in mind, NOVA applied for and received a federal grant to promote ICT career advancement for low- and moderate-income students at The Stride Center in Oakland, California. This innovative grant program will allow for more research and development focused on the interplay between technical skills, core characteristics, and career navigation.

With more research, deeper understanding of how these characteristics are acquired, and innovative pilot programs such as The Stride Center collaboration, workforce investment boards, community colleges, and others in the education and training community can support mobility in a way that has never been done before, while expanding opportunity for thousands of workers who are just waiting to impact the economy.
Applied Career Navigation: Tips from the front lines

*How does career navigation work? This appendix includes practical advice for students, job seekers, mentors, parents, educators, and workforce training providers.*

Career-navigation skills and characteristics are of little value if not constantly practiced and developed. Successful ICT careerists must be able to network, continually advance their own careers, work effectively in teams, and build strong personal brands. They must constantly learn new technology and know how to get back into the game after a dislocation.

Can these success factors be replicated? In this “how to” discussion, ICT veterans share their own practical and proven tips for promoting and sustaining career success. Examples of personal characteristics that define successful career navigators include:

- Positive attitudes, determination, persistence, and a strong sense of accountability
  - “A good attitude, a willingness to go the extra mile when needed, a desire to be excellent in everything I do.”
  - “Taking responsibility for all things good and bad, including learning from mistakes.”
  - “Leaving (a traditional industry) and stepping into a pure technology company was daunting. I needed to work hard to familiarize myself with the most relevant technology and stay open to asking others for help. It was like starting over, but I got over my own ego and approached it with enthusiasm and an open mind.”
• Personal initiative
  o “I needed to learn a particular skill for a job. I purchased a book and taught myself.”
  o “Once, when work was distributed among writers, I was left with no new project to work on and a lot of time on my hands. So I took it upon myself to develop ways in which the entire set of documents could be improved and made recommendations to the Tech Pubs group, including an entire reorganization. This was later implemented, and the online help is much improved.”

• Passion and curiosity
  o “Don’t do anything for money. Find interesting projects, contribute, build a good personal brand, and build credibility with the capable people around you.”
  o “Be curious. The rate at which technology transforms itself will outpace you if you stand still even for a moment.”

• Strong work ethic
  o “It’s called work because sometimes it’s hard, effort is always required, and often outside one’s comfort zone — but we learn from those experiences more than any other.”

• Openness and humility
  o “Willingness to be open to new ideas and learn new skills.”
  o “I’m an entrepreneur; all we run into is obstacles. Often times, though, the biggest obstacle is ourselves.”

• Teamwork and a willingness to help others
  o “Focus on how you can help those around you, rather than how to advance your career.”

• Flexibility and adaptability
  o “Flexibility and the ability to reinvent (oneself) in new directions.”
How Navigators Apply Their Skills

Getting a foot in — or back in — the door

• “I was able to gain job-enhancing skills by volunteering with non-profit and community organizations. Working with these organizations gave me exposure to individuals who would support my efforts to gain employment. Spend time with people who do the kind of work that you think you want to do, ask them questions, listen to their stories, do not assume that there is a ‘formula’ for finding your way to those goals.”

• “I was laid off from my job and was having difficulties getting interviews. I decided to list my resume with temp agencies and this got me in the door to my current position and the company offered me a full time position after three months because they were so pleased with my performance.”

• “During 2010, I was laid off and out of a job for almost a year and a half. It was difficult to find just any job during that time, and I was willing to take whatever jobs, from part time to a position that is lower in pay or in title than my prior position. I posted on job boards on the Internet and networked with everyone possible. I ended up getting a job offer for a three-month contract and doing project coordination work that is very different from my technical experiences. I ended up contracting at this job for one year and got hired on as a regular full-time employee with the company and went into a manager-level position, a growth I could never imagine. Hence, never underestimate the potential of small opportunities that can open up another door with bigger opportunities.”

Building a strong personal brand

• “Don’t expect your work or value to ‘speak for itself.’ Thoughtful and assertive self-promotion is absolutely required to get ahead.”

• “Develop a reputation as a ‘can do’ person. Become an SME (subject matter expert) on the processes and procedures of your job. Build relationships with your management, your peers, and your subordinates, by demonstrating a willingness to learn, to help, and to meet commitments.”

• “Always do a good job for whomever you work for in Silicon Valley. It’s a little community in the end and most always someone will know your work at another company. This is an excellent networking possibility and one that’s not to be underestimated.”
• “Develop your skills, capabilities, and experiences so that you become a scarce and highly valued resource.”

• “Get to work early. Leave late. Focus on accomplishing as much as possible. Treat everyone well.”

• “Keep your head down and do what you are supposed to do. At the same time make sure your efforts are getting noticed. Do not get involved in office politics. Be positive and greet everybody with a smile.”

• “Be nice to people, they may not remember your name, but they’ll remember how you made them feel.”

• “In career, it’s all about positionality. If you want to be promoting your career, take a step back, think deep and think about what you want to be known as. What is your personal brand? It’s extremely critical. That personal brand has to come across loud and clear in all of your activities. Whether it is the work you’re doing, your social media presence, your profile, all of your communications. It’s very important for you to understand that and how to position yourself.”

Networking

• “Spend at least one night out of every month at a networking event and rotate events.”

• “Get involved in technical conferences, meet-ups, and social settings with others in your area of career choice. Introduce yourself and meet people. One of the people you meet will likely help to get you considered for a job someday (or at least get you an interview).”

• “Learn how to position your skills (elevator and cocktail pitches) and PRACTICE THEM to observe how people react to them.”

• “Use the outside networking events as venues for practice and for learning what’s valuable to the market and interesting to you.”

• “The goal of networking events is not to meet everybody, but to meet one or two and make deep connections.”

• “Keep track of your contacts and networks that you grow over the course of your career.”

• “It takes skill to build a network properly. I don’t ask people to connect to me (on LinkedIn) until, I’ve read something they wrote, talked to somebody I know. I want to be referred to them.”
• “I really think, again, that the resume is really just for information, for someone who doesn’t know you or who wants to know more about your history. If you’ve got a good network, people know you over the years, they’ve either worked with you or know you through other activities, so it’s usually through those relationships that you’re able to often get something whether you’ve got the experience or not.”

• (Referring to internal company networking) “It’s knowing who to talk to, who has the authority on some things and a lot of times it’s not even the authority, it’s who has the ability.”

• “Who are you going to meet? What are you going to be exposed to? How is that going to give you that lift in your career?”

Keeping up with the latest technology

• “Learn something new every day.”

• “Don’t allow yourself to get tied down to a particular skill set. It will be obsolete before you know it.”

• “I am always reading up on what is going on with the latest technology. I like to test different tech products whether it is soft or hardware products.”

• “1. Learn to use Google to find free tutorials online. 2. Take MOOCs (massive open online courses), which offer free tutorials which can be repeated and no one needs to know where you learned the material. 3. Don’t believe the co-worker who says they are not studying the material after work — including on weekends — because they are.”

• “Be open to learning new things, especially on your own time and with your own money.”

• “Listen to the technology expert to learn (such as the CTO, director of technology, at your company). Read up on the technology by doing research on other companies in the industry — blogs, articles, and white papers. Join industry organizations, attend as many conferences as possible, and get involved by becoming a volunteer to the organizations, networking and connecting with all involved.”

Advancing your career

• “Job security within a company is often a myth. Be your own job security. Know where you need to be and find a way to get there. If you can get your company to pay for your development, do that, but if not, be proactive and create your own future. It belongs to you.”
• “MAKE A PLAN to have a new job of your choice (i.e., give yourself a promotion) every two years, then work towards the assignments that get you the needed experience and skills. DO THE JOB YOU REALLY WANT before you interview for it — having the experience gives great credibility, whether you’re interviewing ‘outside’ or you’re seeking an internal ‘promotion.’ If you are not advancing every two years, you are STAGNATING and will soon be left behind.”

• “The best way to get the next gig is do your current gig really well. If that is entry level then start there and do that really well. You must ALWAYS choose interesting work, in a growth area, with a good team, and a good company culture ahead of an incremental pay increase. The long-term benefits of challenging projects — with people who will remember your contribution — will always outweigh the short-term benefits of a little-higher salary or maybe a better title if the company is not a good company.”

• “Accept more responsibility without the immediate linkage to more compensation.”

• “Do good work. So when you do want to make a switch, there are people out there who know you and know what you can do and know what you stand for.”

• “Work for organizations where your contribution goes to the heart of what makes that company successful.”

• “I started my semiconductor electronics career in product engineering but wanted to move to design. I volunteered to do design work additionally while working in product engineering to facilitate a transfer to design.”

• “I had to keep reevaluating, to see if I was in a good place.”