Career Is S-Curves

Idea In Short

Your career is a series of S-curves, not a straight line. Recognize where you are, launch, ramp up or plateau. Build career capital through rare skills before seeking autonomy. Pivot like Tarzan, grabbing the new vine before releasing the old one. Coasting at a plateau is career death.

Life is a bunch of S-curves. The same applies to career. Career is a bunch of S-curves. Unlike school, the remaining 30 to 40 years of working life are not broken into semesters with conveniently timed breaks. This is what makes life interesting and fun.

> You decide!

Thousands of graduates celebrate their hard work at commencement. Poetically speaking, it is called commencement, the start of something new.

> Commencer means to start; it is time to begin

Career and Life Are Not Linear

The fact is:

> you cannot predict life perfectly!

Life gives nudges.

S-curves come in different shapes and sizes but generally have three parts. The start or launch involves hard, often unglamorous work where gravity is real. The cruising altitude is where you find flow and things go well, with promotions. The leveling off happens when nothing is left to learn, you are bored, or the size of the box limits you.

Starting Out

This is the launch of the career rocket. Enormous energy is required to lift off. Here you do extra work to build a reputation as smart, self-aware, eager and fun. You build relational equity. You say yes a lot because you are the new person. Networking means being a useful human.

Inputs are high and outputs are lower than you would like. This is the time to be patient, show grit and be dependable. The launch phase tests whether you can endure the unglamorous work that builds the foundation for everything else. Many people quit here because the ratio of effort to reward feels unfair.

Ramping Up

This is the fun part. You are crushing it and have found a rhythm. You have a virtuous cycle where activities almost get easier. People seek you out because you get things done. Here you wish there were two or three of you because opportunities abound.

Inputs are high and outputs exceed expectations. Do not complain, keep doing good work and say thank you when you receive compliments. Keep shipping product and harvest the good crops you planted. This is the phase where career capital compounds most rapidly.

Plateauing

This happens to everyone. Things stop being fun. You sit in meetings that go nowhere. You become a mailman delivering messages between departments and people, light on content. You are busy getting alignment and managing change, and you have trouble explaining your job to your kid. Not good.

Inputs fade because you are not putting in your best work, and outputs show it. You need a career Red Bull, an executive coach, a new role or a new job. Do not coast. Coasting equals career death. The plateau is a signal, not a destination1.

Know Where You Are

When at the launch, show grit and do the work. If it is worth doing and you set your mind to it, push through. Do not give up. Think of Vince Lombardi and the power of perseverance. When ramping up, keep going and harvest results. When plateauing, it is time for change.

Unlike school, the working life has no semesters with winter, spring and summer breaks. This lack of structure makes life fun and challenging. You decide when to pivot, push and rest. No academic adviser will nag you to apply for that new opening. It is all on you.

Entry-Level Jobs Are Not So Entry-Level

The Wall Street Journal noted that college graduates have opportunities for more meaningful work right away. Massive technology investment, including enterprise resource planning, fiber optics and Moore's law, automated many low-end manual jobs. New hires will not transcribe or enter data. The World Is Flat described work chopped into pieces and outsourced to those with the least opportunity cost.

Unemployment in the United States reached a 50-year low. One software founder noted that new hires almost skip a step of career evolution because companies automate the least common denominator of lower-level tasks. This is both good and bad for graduates.

It is good because flattening, outsourcing and private equity tightening created lean companies. New graduates work closer to the action, interacting with customers, vendors and competitors more quickly. It is bad because there is less training and less time to study up. Here is your horse, pistol and badge. You are now a deputy sheriff.

Keith Ferrazzi, former chief marketing officer at Deloitte, observed that today's hires need to be independent and savvy at uniting people within their sphere of influence. You have to find new ways to get coached. Learning to lead without authority is now the only way to get anything done 2.

Less Training for New Recruits

Training is lumpy. Senior leaders receive more training dollars while rank-and-file employees get less. New hires must quickly decode their boss's working style and become easy to work with and easy to coach. A 2017 survey of 237 employers by Brandon Hall Group found that the proportion spending more than $1,000 per person annually to train middle managers fell below one-third. Meanwhile, employers spending that much on senior leaders rose to 58 percent from 55 percent in 2015.

This means new professionals must take ownership of their own development. Waiting for formal training programs is a losing strategy. The best early-career professionals seek mentors, read voraciously and learn through deliberate practice.

Sometimes You Go Backwards

Every S-curve does not start where the last one left off. Career is a mountain climb, not a ladder. The assumption of linear progress is a myth that creates unnecessary anxiety.

Going backward can mean stepping into a role with more learning potential, but less pay. It can mean changing industries where your previous experience commands less premium. The trade-off is positioning for a steeper subsequent curve.

Pivot, Plan, Then Jump

A Deloitte partner advised thinking of career shifts like Tarzan. Do not just jump from one project to another. Find commonalities and do not let go of the old vine until you have grabbed the new one. Pivot and plan. In the end, you decide.

No academic adviser will nag you to apply for that new job opening. It is all on you. The people who thrive treat their career as a portfolio of bets, managing risk and sequencing moves deliberately.

Career Advice from Chief Executive Officers

Barbara Corcoran of Corcoran Real Estate advised picking early bosses wisely. The test is whether you even like them. Clara Shih of Hearsay recommended not taking the highestpaying offer for your first job. Go for the best role models. Laura Alber of Williams-Sonoma said to dig in and not treat your first job as a temporary stop.

Mandy Ginsberg of Match said no one likes a phony, so do not be a different person at work. Mark Hoplamazian of Hyatt named empathy as the must-have skill. Rich Barton of Zillow warned against overestimating the risk of failure. Logan Green of Lyft embraced being purposefully direction-less, which does not mean stop working. Gary Erickson and Kit Crawford of Clif Bar emphasized the power of saying no.

S-Curves Vary by Life Stage

Building on Cal Newport's idea of being So Good They Cannot Ignore You, the early career requires hard work to gain rare and valuable skills. You need career capital, what Seth Godin might call becoming a Linchpin, so people want to work with you 3. At this stage, you start using career capital to get better projects, make more money and gain control.

Before you have career capital, you must do the work. Become a mini-expert in something. Once you have capital, think like a strategist and work with people you like and trust. The S-curve framework helps you see where you are and what comes next.

Think of words associated with the modern working environment:

> Agility, flexibility, network, competitive advantage, gig work, shift and remote

The career path is no longer a ladder but a series of curves. Those who manage transitions deliberately will find the journey rewarding.

- 1McKinsey On Shaping Individual Development Along The S-Curve
- 2Cal Newport On Career Capital And So Good They Can't Ignore You
- 3Harvard Business Review On Managing Organizations As Portfolios Of Learning Curves

Summary

Careers unfold as S-curves with launch, ramp and plateau phases. Build rare and valuable skills early to earn career capital. Pivot strategically by grabbing the new vine before releasing the old. Pick bosses wisely, dig in and realize the power of saying no.