

Fostering adaptability in tomorrow's executives

The most adaptable executives are those who have worked in a variety of different jobs and those who had access to senior managers early in their careers.

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Adaptability, defined as the ability to work effectively in a variety of situations and with a variety of individuals, is perhaps the most crucial competency for modern executives.

If businesses are to survive and prosper in an ever-changing marketplace, they must be able to respond effectively to new contexts and challenges.

As leaders in those businesses, executives particularly need to be able to learn new skills and rapidly deploy them to solve novel tasks and unfamiliar problems.

In their paper, "[Too Much or Too Little? A Study of the Impact of Career Complexity on Executive Adaptability](#)," IESE's [Mireia Las Heras](#) — together with Salem State University's Guorong Zhu, GEI Partners' Steve B. Wolff, Boston University's Douglas T. Hall and Kathy Kram, and Hay Group's Betzaluz Gutierrez — examined whether executives with more varied career histories become more adaptable as a result. Their findings were published in the journal *Career Development International*.

A historical approach

The researchers studied a group of high-level general managers in a Fortune 100 company. They looked at the managers' complete career histories and put their previous jobs into categories based on role type (line, matrix or staff) and organizational level (from tactical implementation to enterprise leadership). The specific definitions of each role type and

organizational level for this matrix are based on the Hay Group's "Guide Chart-Profile Method," reported to be the most widely used job-evaluation method in the world.

They also considered the results of recent interviews used to select managers for executive roles. Adaptability was one of the competencies assessed by those interviews, on a scale of 1 (low) to 4 (high). (Executives with "zero" adaptability were not studied because of the likelihood that the interview lacked sufficient information, hence the "0" score.)

The researchers found a relationship between the interview scores and the number of times the individuals had moved between job categories during their careers. However, the relationship was not a straightforward one.

Striking the right balance

Up to a certain point, more flexible career histories led to a higher level of adaptability. Changing roles forced managers to learn whole new skill sets and adapt to radically different environments. In the long run, this helped them develop new competencies and strategies.

However, individuals who changed job type too often, remaining in each role for relatively short periods of time, benefited less from the experience.

If most of their time was spent struggling to keep their heads above water in a new job, these executives didn't necessarily get a feel for the nuances of the role. They were also less likely to experience the long-term consequences of their decisions.

The optimum number of role-type changes (e.g., line, matrix or staff) seems to be three, and the optimum length of time to spend in each role type is around 100 months — just over eight years. This gives executives time to settle into the role and respond to changing circumstances over time, without allowing them to become too settled or complacent.

This suggests that corporate programs that move managers around relatively frequently may be failing to get the most out of them, at least when it comes to their ability to adapt to new circumstances.

The fast track to success

There was a second strong pattern in the data. Some of the managers had been placed in an executive assistant role to a member of senior management early in their careers. These managers scored consistently well on adaptability, with the vast majority scoring 3 or higher

out of 4.

The experience appears to have been extremely useful in preparing young managers to deal with a variety of changing situations. Not only did it give them the opportunity to watch and contribute to complex executive decision-making, but they also received valuable mentoring and the chance to develop their professional networks.

Lessons learned

Although this study was limited to a single company and a particular cohort of managers, these results provide valuable insights into two ways of fostering adaptability in up-and-coming junior managers.

First, working as executive assistants early in their career helps to foster rising talent, allowing them to learn how members of senior management deal with changing circumstances.

Second, the most flexible executives are those who have experienced a number of different roles, but spent long enough in each of them to gain a full understanding of the consequences of their decisions.

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