

Mentoring Foundation Research Papers

Moments in Mentoring

Research Paper 3

Tacking: Women's Zig-Zag Careers

At the core of our work at The Mentoring Foundation are conversations, and over the years we have spoken to many senior and mid-career women about their career journeys. We have observed that these come in many shapes and sizes and our Mentees often describe feeling unusual or out of time with their conception of a “typical” career path.

The extensive data collections made by Sylvia Ann Hewlett of The New York Center for Talent Innovation in the last decade suggest that 60% of women graduates from prestigious business school programmes in the US reported what she describes as non-linear careers (Hewlett SA, 2007). Typically this will involve some kind of flexible or part-time arrangement, or a refusal to take a promotion in order to accommodate competing priorities outside the workplace. Hewlett has famously charted the ease with which women can (and do) exit the workplace mid-career (so called “off-ramps”) and the difficulties they face in re-starting their careers subsequently (a paucity of “on-ramps”).

This research paper examines the experience of four of

our Mentees, placing their stories in the context of some recent theories relating to women's career paths. In writing this paper, we are delighted to co-operate with our Alumna Anne Wetherilt, Head of Talent at the Bank of England, who raised this subject as of particular interest in one of our conversations with her. Her observation is that in many organisations, the approach to leadership development remains firmly anchored in a linear model which may not suit many women (and men). Most talent frameworks have not yet incorporated a broad range of career trajectories and as such may overlook women pursuing a “non-linear” career.

Sprinters, marathoners and relay runners: a model for women's career paths

The literature examining women's career paths is well established. In a 2005 study, Maniero and Sullivan described the “have-it-all” generation of women at the turn of this century, who imagined they would “bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan, split childcare with their...husbands and have a relaxing glass of wine at the end of the day”.

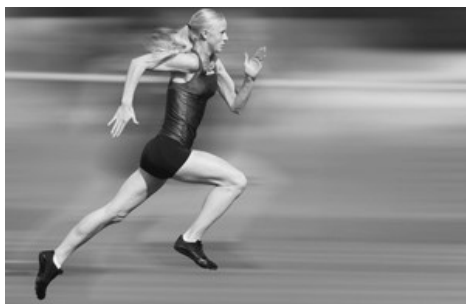


Alumnae Interviewees: from left to right: Marianne Culver, Corin Robertson, Jacqui Sutton, and Helen Wyatt

Maniero and Sullivan go on to say that for many women, this optimistic vision has not been realised. They proposed the notion of “kaleidoscope careers”, in which different priorities take precedent at different times in a woman’s life. Recent literature has built on that idea, demonstrating a wide variety of patterns and paths, reflecting these differing priorities. As one study concluded: “Women’s contexts, connections and priorities ebb and flow over time; affecting all facets of their lives and careers”. O’Neill, Hopkins and Bilimoria (2013). The same study identified an overarching chronology to these patterns and pathways, with three distinct career phases. It is encapsulated in their model, described below:

“Running the career race”

Early career phase: the sprint – all out focus



Seeking challenge: idealistic outlook
Future limitless
Focused on career success and satisfaction
Requires determined focus on self.

Mid phase: the marathon – long duration, challenging terrain, hitting the wall



Endurance phase; managing multiple relationships and responsibilities; seeking balance
Negative/unsupportive work environment
Doubts about meaning or possibility of work in their lives

Focus almost entirely on others to detriment of self.

Later career: the relay - bringing themselves back into the picture. Understanding interdependence. Giving and accepting handoffs



Phase of reinventive contribution
Focus on contribution to family, communities and organisations
Integration of personal and professional lives
Focus on interconnectedness.

Mentee Perspectives

We spoke to four of our Alumnae and Mentees about their experiences: **Marianne Culver**, Managing Director TNT, UK and Ireland, **Corin Robertson**, Director, Estates and Security, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, **Jacqui Sutton**, Senior Vice President, Airbus, Rolls-Royce plc and **Helen Wyatt**, Corporate VP HR & Communication, Firmenich SA.

None of our interviewees addressed the earliest part of their careers and the focus of this paper is therefore on later career phases. Much of their narrative gives weight to the characteristics of the second and third career phases identified in the 2013 “career race” model.

Mid career: the rough terrain

When we spoke to Corin Robertson she began our conversation by stating her **overriding career concerns as being about balance**:

“For me I think it has been about juggling and balancing my career aspirations and ambitions in the workplace with home and family life, particularly with children”.

She spoke about the difficulties she had initially perceived in combining her career with the arrival of her first child:

“I actually thought, well it’s going to be really hard to do this with a new baby and I’m not sure I can come back to my current job. Really, I couldn’t see how that would work.”

Marianne described she felt that pregnancy was somehow incompatible with work; how she was determined not to let it get in the way of her MD duties and how she ended up taking little maternity leave:

“I only took three weeks’ maternity leave both times, which looking back was a near disaster on a personal level. I was exhausted, pushing myself too hard. Not good for me; and with hindsight, not good for the family. I thought I’d take it all in my stride, but if my daughter ever wants to do the same, I will strongly advise her against it. It shouldn’t really be that kind of stressful experience.”

She now wonders if the company would have been able to accommodate her, had she taken more time away from her role.

“There is no sense from the women we speak to that they are not competent to step up to senior roles - they just consider that their experience or their circumstances take them out of the running.”

Helen described the mid-career phase typically as a series of trade-offs which usually work to women's detriment in terms of career progression:

“I think working part-time is the kiss of death to being seen to be on the fast track. Usually I think how women most typically view that is ‘I’m making a trade-off, I’m deciding to do something on balance; I understand it’s going to have implications and I’m fine with that.’”

Jacqui, who did not have to balance her career with competing demands from children, nonetheless found herself “tacking” as she progressed further up the career ladder:

“It was only when I was two levels below the Board that there was definitely then some tacking. The company asked me to take a sideways move in terms of seniority. It was a risk. It was a smallish part of the business”.

Our interviewees also referred to **standardised expectations and processes in organisations** that work against women. Helen talked about women working part-time as being under-valued and sidelined:

“When people go part-time they get put on special projects, or typically what they’re doing is not mainstream any more because they’re not available five days each week. Somehow it gets downgraded, what you’re actually working on.”

She also provides an anecdote which encapsulates the way in which supporting parents of older children, or executives who otherwise do not fit the mould, is often overlooked:

“I remember one of my former colleagues worked part-time. She kept pictures on her desk of her children when they were little. She never updated them – her kids were now ten years older – because, as she said ‘so people never ever question why I continue to work part-time. People will still think ‘she’s not here five days a week because she has young kids’.”

Corin described a culture that did not accommodate flexibility:

“We had no part-time senior management jobs; it wasn’t a done thing and there was the assumption that once you’re in a senior management structure everybody is working all the hours God sends seven days a week.”

For Marianne, some of the problem lies in organisational processes that are geared towards inflexible processes and structures :

“You feel you have to earn your spurs, tick that box, go and live in that country, lead this, fix that; it can be a career ladder process that’s over-formalised around length of service, with a relentless requirement to demonstrate flexibility, preparedness to travel, put the company first, demonstrate active commitment by saying ‘yes’”.

Jacqui attributed her sideways move to the fact that she did not fit the standard model of linear progression towards a general management role:

“In my experience, development frameworks and processes are geared towards people who are going towards general management, to grow their breadth of knowledge. That’s pretty flat-footed.”

These accounts reflect our observation in our recent book, *The Rise of the Female Executive* (October 2015), that women's “sets” and “settings” frequently become incompatible, particularly in mid career. In other words their individual needs, motivations and goals (their “sets”) no longer accord with the corporate cultures and processes in their organisations (their “settings”). As long as this remains the case, lasting change will be difficult to achieve. O’Neil et al (2013) describe this time as a perfect storm, “when the myth of the successful career woman meets the realities of organisational life and societal strictures.”

Our interviewees are from a range of sectors – logistics, engineering, consumer goods and the public sector but their perceptions of obstacles to career advancement at this mid-phase are similar. This, of course, will make familiar reading to many, and stories such as these are often a source of frustration. We hear, with increasing frequency, both women and men question why the conversation on women's careers has not evolved. Their comments remind us, however, that the “marathon runner” career phase for women is alive and well and has not improved for many women in many different industries despite years of debate and activity.

Levelling the terrain

There are threads in our interviewees' narratives that show signs of beneficial change: organisations flexing their “norms” to help sustain the marathoners and signs that women are seizing opportunities to work differently to accommodate their broader needs.

For Corin this began with a senior male civil servant in the Foreign Office acting as her sponsor and encouraging her to apply for a critical role despite having just returned from maternity leave:

“What made a difference was a senior man actually reaching out to me and saying ‘I think you should come back and do this particular job’ which was right at the heart of the presidency and you would never have imagined being able to do this job whilst having a small baby. They said to me ‘We think you can do this part-time’.”

Helen also describes how her previous employer (Unilever plc) had demonstrated flexibility for some of their senior employees:

"We created a global diversity board made up of men and women and we interviewed them. They all talked about the fact that they had lives outside of work and they needed some flexibility from the organisation, even some of the men. We had an incredible reaction within the company to these interviews, for two reasons: that they had been open and shared what was happening and secondly that the organisation had absolutely accommodated them."

Her words also reminded us of observations made by Fiona Cannon of Lloyds Banking Group, when she spoke to us for *The Rise of the Female Executive*. When Lloyds took time to collect data about women's experiences in the company they learned that staff members were themselves crafting flexible arrangements to balance competing pressures informally, without the company knowing about it.

Marianne described the experience of having been singled out and sponsored:

"I was a modern languages teacher who joined electronics and was fortunate to be led by someone who trusted me and stretched me in ways I could not have imagined. When that leader left, the Chairman said "we've decided we're appointing you as MD tomorrow, so it's just as well you said you wanted to be considered for selection!" This [her former role] was a subsidiary of a FTSE 250 company, and not traditionally the most creative or risk-taking culture, rather more a risk-averse and disciplined culture of strict governance and no surprises. But to my surprise (and delight) they chose me!"

Marianne hopes to build a culture in TNT where the needs of talented staff at all layers in the business can be accommodated flexibly to help them remain actively engaged in their jobs and in building their careers. Rather than relying on managing by exception, she wants to build these practices into the company culture.

"I want to know people as individuals, which goes against process-only-led talent management practices. I'm meeting people and listening actively four or five layers down in our organisation, across all functions."

Our bi-annual people days focus on talent development, assignments and succession planning in and across functions, as we build a robust high potential (HIPO) pipeline, while in parallel further developing the High Professional (HIPRO) community. Of course in any business of scale processes around talent development need to exist, but I believe a process-only approach is an excuse; a way of dealing with vast cohorts of people without really knowing talented individuals at all. In cohort X they must have done things 1, 2 and 3 before they progress to the next layer. The kind of culture I want at TNT is around personal career progression, where you have your little rucksack of tools and experiences to carry around with you, building successful career paths."

Jacqui's experience is less explicit. She recognizes that she does not fit the traditional Rolls-Royce engineering profile, but has been approached by the company to take on non-standard senior roles which she believes play to her strengths.

"I find myself again in a confidante role...for the first three or four months I was wondering why I'd taken the job, but then I began to see where I add value."

Corin and Marianne show how the need to accommodate women is not uniquely limited to childbirth – it continues after the traditional maternity phase is over. We know of several of our Mentees who have continued full-time throughout the early years of their children, reducing to part-time as their children grow. Many mothers tell us their children need them more as they get older. Other priorities, such as caring responsibilities or other outside interests may also become more pressured at a later stage. Jacqui's experience highlights how non-linear careers also arise where no childcare constraints exist. Supporting parents of older children, or executives who otherwise do not fit the mould, is not the focus of governmental or most organisational initiatives – another example of how policies can be out-of-step with the shifting lives of women.

Building a culture that encourages and sustains the marathon runner

These narratives and other conversations we have with our Mentees indicate that there remains a deeply entrenched view that women's needs, as their lives evolve and priorities change, are unlikely to be met by large process-driven organisations. The current model relies, it seems, on shoehorning women into a mould that does not fit many women's priorities or aspirations.

There is no sense from the women we speak to that they are not competent to step up to senior roles – they just consider that their experience or their circumstances take them out of the running. Change occurs for our interviewees when their organisations demonstrate willingness to act differently. In summary, women are willing to take the leap but often need to feel supported by their organisation before they feel able to do so. In Corin's words:

"Somehow it just worked. I believed it could work, someone helped me believe it could work and I felt supported".

From that first experience Corin has since, on her own initiative, gone on to put herself forward for promotions even if she has felt unsure of herself. To borrow the language of Sheryl Sandberg, women are willing to 'lean in' but may need some encouragement from their companies 'leaning out' to them first.

Our discussions with our Mentees led them to make quite specific recommendations about what companies might do to lean out to help women thrive through the marathon phase in their careers. These include:

Not allowing the processes to get in the way of talent spotting the right people. All of the interviewees described someone reaching out and suggesting a different way of working or of "taking a punt" on them. They talked about how individuals confounded

expectations in order to allow them more flexibility. Marianne talked about hiring for attitude and learning rather than ticking boxes of required experience. In her words she describes her priority as:

"How do we make sure we have multiple strands of career paths – I know you need grading structures but I don't like boxes; I like windows where you can open the window and demonstrate innate flexibility."

She is also building small teams within a large organisation with managers with whom she engages directly, encouraging them to develop their staff, in order to facilitate a more individualised management approach:

"I consider myself an individual. I believe I am considered as quite individual. For the 10,000 people we have in the UK I am meeting, talking to and hopefully leading them not as a collective, but as individuals within a team."

Job descriptions that allow for a creative hiring approach, that are not framed in the language and style of traditional "alpha male" job specs. Corin described an initiative in her organisation:

"What we've done in the Foreign Office is that for all job adverts we hold a section on 'can this job be done flexibly, and if not then why not?' So, as a hiring manager you're forced to think through lots of different elements, making sure your job advert is as inclusive as possible."

Not only does this allow organisations to think more broadly about the criteria for each role, but it also encourages candidates to apply who might otherwise rule themselves out. In Helen's words:

"There are definitely more tactical things around ways of working for a top team so that you're not just - by the way you set things up - causing people to say 'I don't want to do that job'."

Creating precedents and role-models of working that give confidence to other men and women to propose different ways of working that suit both them and their organisations. In Helen's words:

"I think organisations can publicise and talk a lot more about some of the things they do almost in secret."

Corin was well aware of herself as a role model for other women:

"One of the things that really gave me encouragement was more junior women coming to me and seeing me as a role model. They'd ask 'how have you managed to do that hard-edged job and work part-time?' "

"Women are willing to 'lean in' but may need some encouragement from their companies 'leaning out' to them first."

Treating all employees as individuals and crafting solutions that work for many different circumstances may seem unfeasible. We are certainly not advocating a freelance approach across the board in large organisations. But our Mentees have demonstrated how changing management practices and structures to allow more flexibility within those corporate structures, as well as taking the time to be accessible to workers further down the organisation can deliver benefits to the company in helping talented mid-career women to remain on a career path which is compatible with the rest of their lives.

Meeting the challenge of the marathon phase

Our interviewees' narratives showed that sustaining women through their careers is a shared endeavour between the organisation and the individual. They offered some recommendations for women during the marathon phase of their career.

All our interviewees referred to the importance of **individual connection**. Helen described **the need to stay in touch** during times or absence from work for extended periods:

"There's lots of things you can do in terms of staying in touch, staying abreast of developments, joining strategic meetings to enable you to come back and be fine."

Corin used opportunities where she felt she had done well to **build relationships and her reputation**:

"I did some speculative sending of emails and my CV to various Directors and Directors General saying 'Here I am!' and I could build on the reputation I had built up in Brussels. You've got to make the most of those moments when you do shine and people know who you are!"

Jacqui also highlights the importance of individual relationships and paid attention to reporting lines whilst taking sideways moves. She did not want "sideways" to become "sidelined":

"The other big point is who's asking you to do what and with whom are you going to be working on it. Do I respect them or not? The personal relationship is crucial. I work directly for our Civil President. I still want to be acknowledged for the ziggy-zaggy role."

Marianne told us about younger women who contact her with personal questions about sustaining themselves through difficult career stages:

"...a young woman, a junior Operations Manager, wrote to me after a conference where I delivered the keynote and said 'I need to ask you about whether you ever had a crisis of confidence. This is the question I wanted to ask you in the meeting but I didn't like to.' I said 'that's not the kind of discussion we can do by email, I'll come to your location and let's sit down and have a cup of coffee, which we did.' "

The importance for her and the young women in question is **building a rapport where women have the courage to ask difficult questions** and she is able to engage with them and help keep them on track. In working in this way she is addressing what for her is a key failing in many organisations:

"I think organisations struggle to respond to their people as individuals."

It is frequently said that women feel they are a riskier hire and that in promoting women during the marathon phase in particular, organisations are taking a chance on them. Corin's narrative picks up on this, encouraging women to view themselves with more confidence, pushing the boundaries of what they believe is possible:

"It's the advice I then give on the back of that to people who feel they should curtail their ambitions in the workplace because they don't want to compromise on family, and I say 'No! Just go for it!' because even if it's impossible to imagine balancing various bits of your life, actually you'll find a way to make it work."

Mentoring for the Marathoners

Our observation is that two principles lie at the heart of these changes: **the ability to build trusting conversations** where needs and aims can be heard and a **willingness to put on hold notions of what is possible** so that individual needs might be met. Mentoring is often cited as a forum in which women can be encouraged and motivated to succeed further in their careers. It is our experience that good mentoring relationships offer a safe, trusting environment for mentees and their mentors to hold these kinds of conversations. Our first research paper gave the perspectives of several of our Mentees on how their mentoring work helped them to explore areas of difficulty in their careers or to gain the confidence to go for material promotions. We would encourage organisations to facilitate good mentoring relationships and build on the work that is achieved through mentoring as an essential part of constructing organisational cultures that work for women during their three key career phases.

Women and the "relay" career phase

Three of the interviewees at a later stage in their career had moved beyond the marathon phase and demonstrated different priorities. Marianne's account demonstrates how she has integrated her experience into her professional life. Her contribution is to building a culture that supports and encourages difference and a true meritocracy. Her focus when talking about her career is the change she is making – her turnaround – of the company, rather than her own career progression. Helen also talks about the women's network she has created in her organisation for younger women. Jacqui describes how she is now very aware of her skills and strengths and tailors her career moves to those, rather than to a traditional linear model of success.

Conclusion

For both Marianne and Helen, the focus is on using their authority to further the careers of women in their organisation by building networks and cultures that support them. Our second research paper highlights the contribution that is being made by some of our Mentees as they arrive in positions of top leadership and use the power and agency that comes with their position to achieve broader ambitions. Our findings go against common notions of women as "queen bees" who do not help other women succeed and are part of the problem. If women are encouraged and sustained throughout the difficult marathon phase, with different models for senior roles being accommodated, as these women arrive in positions of power, they are likely to become part of the solution to culture change that so many companies are seeking.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

- P. Cappelli and JR Keller (2014), Talent management: Conceptual approaches and practical challenges, Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behaviour, vol 1.
- Hewlett, S.A. and Buck Luce, C (2010), Off-Ramps and On-Ramps Revisited, Harvard Business Review, June.
- Hewlett, S.A. and Buck Luce, C (2005), Off-Ramps and On-Ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success, Harvard Business Review, March.
- Ibarra, H, Ely, R and Kolb, D (2013), Women Rising: The Unseen Barriers, Harvard Business Review, September, pp. 61-66.
- Maniero L.A and Sullivan S.E. (2005) Kaleidoscope Careers: An Alternate Explanation for the "Opt-Out" Revolution. *Academy of Management Executive* Vol. 19, No. 1, 106-123
- O'Neil, D. A., Hopkins, M. M., Bilimoria, D. (2013). In Wendy Patton (Ed.), *Patterns and Paradoxes in Women's Careers* (pp. 63-80). Rotterdam : Sense Publishers.
- Peninah Thomson, OBE and Clare Laurent with Tom Lloyd (2015). *The Rise of the Female Executive: How Women's Leadership is Accelerating Cultural Change*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Peninah Thomson OBE, and Clare Laurent
The Mentoring Foundation

Anne Wetherilt, Head of Talent, Bank of England
Anne is writing here in a personal capacity.

April 2016



The Mentoring Foundation

Suite 262, Temple Chambers
3-7 Temple Avenue
LONDON EC4Y 0DT

www.mentoringfoundation.co.uk