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Is corporate downsizing returning us to a medieval way of working—a world of craftsmen-consultants, cottage industries, and contingent workers? Not really. Other powerful forces are making future careers different from anything we have known in the past.

Back to Square Zero

BACK TO SQUARE ZERO: The Post-Corporate Career

MAURY PEIPERL

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The Wellcome Foundation, until 1995 one of the major independent pharmaceutical firms, was known for its positive management of employees' careers. Long-term employment, although not guaranteed, was the norm in this organization. People who performed well were usually given more responsibility as well as opportunities to move within the company, either horizontally or vertically.

Then, to everyone's surprise, the firm was bought by its rival Glaxo, creating the world's largest pharmaceutical company. Although Wellcome had previously begun its own series of limited cutbacks, the consolidation that followed brought a marked acceleration in job losses, even for those who had been performing well. For those who survived the cuts, careers looked very different.

The company's director of research and development, David Barry, was a case in point. Barry had risen through the ranks and, after a high-profile competition for the director's position, had finally been named to his post. Trevor Jones, the man he had beaten out for the job less than a year before, had left to become head of the industry's trade association. After the merger, Dr. Barry, looking at playing second fiddle in the merged R&D or-

ganization, must have wondered whether his rival hadn't wound up better off. Before very long, Barry himself left to form his own medical research company.

THE PROBLEM WITH ORGANIZATIONAL CAREERS

Of course, organizations have always been subject to change and cutbacks, and individuals within them subject to competition and, occasionally, layoffs. But in recent years the number of organizations whose career systems have been thrown into disarray, and the number of people affected, seems to have reached a critical mass: It is now the norm for organizations to have *no* fixed career paths, and for individuals in them to see no further than one or two years ahead, if that, in their own careers. Competence and hard work no longer guarantee continued employment. The psychological employment contract is changing. Many people who came into their organizations with an expectation of long-term career progress are finding this unmatched by reality.

Reflecting on this new situation, we pose two fundamental questions about careers in-

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