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Generalists vs. Specialists – The Benefits of Adopting a Horizontal Career Path for Gen Z and Early Graduates

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Abstract

Career development has significantly changed in recent years. Traditional career paths with vertical advancement leading to specialist positions become restricted for young individuals due to organisations' structural changes, forcing them to build their career horizontally as a generalist. Given contemporary careers have become more turbulent and complex, the significance of horizontal transitions between jobs allow individuals to gain a wide set of skills and experiences, aiding them to understand the complexities of the ever-evolving workforce. Previous studies demonstrated that generalists with horizontal career paths were more adaptable and likely to transfer their skills between jobs. As Gen Z is approaching 30 years old, their vertical career advancement could be affected by the structural changes in organisations, horizontal career paths may become their alternative approach. Since there is very limited research that focuses on horizontal career paths, future research on this topic would be very meaningful by adding insights into career development as generalists vs. specialists. Recommendations are offered for further research on horizontal career paths and training for early graduates, which could optimise better to provide broader opportunities and enhance career development outcomes.

Keywords/key phrases: Gen Z, careers, career paths, career development, career changes

1. Horizontal and Vertical Career Paths

Career advancement plays an important role in personal career success and social mobility. Traditional careers highlight the importance of vertical paths along the job ladder in one's respective field and eventually becoming a specialist. This type of career path provides job security in exchange for loyalty. However, career trajectories are restricted by formal job ladders that are hierarchical, controlled, and linear (Chudzikowski, 2012). The implied career trajectories from the organisations may not match the actual trajectories of individuals

(Chudzikowski, 2012; DiPrete, 1987). Contrarily, horizontal transitions are flexible and becoming increasingly prevalent due to reduced vertical advancement opportunities as a result of structural changes within organisations (Steindórsdóttir et al., 2023). As such, individuals are looking for alternatives to build their career horizontally to achieve their career goal. Horizontal career trajectories involve moving across different roles and functions, facilitating personal growth and development as well as improving person-environment fit, and are important to both objective and subjective career success (Steindórsdóttir et al., 2023). Given contemporary careers have become more turbulent and complex, the significance of horizontal transitions between jobs allow individuals to gain a wide set of skills and experiences, aiding them to understand the complexities of the ever-evolving workforce, making them more attractive candidates (Chudzikowski, 2012). Generalists usually thrive on adopting horizontal career paths with their diverse skill set, and the horizontal career paths provide broader opportunities for recent graduates, reducing entry barriers and enhancing career prospects. Since there are very limited studies on horizontal career paths, future research on this topic would be very meaningful, adding insights into career development as generalists vs. specialists both academically and in real-life.

2. Generalists vs. Specialists on a specific field: Generalists are easily adaptable and capable of moving horizon

Generalists possess broad skill sets and knowledge across multiple areas; specialists, on the other hand, focus on understanding specific tasks and fields with organisation-specific knowledge, their range of tasks is considered narrower than that of the generalists (Fahrenkopf et al., 2020). Studies have shown the advantage of being a generalist. Agcayazi et al. (2024) demonstrated that a generalist CEO has been shown to be an effective strategist leading to financial gain only because they were able to utilise their wider knowledge across multiple areas of the corporation. Contrastingly, specialists possess deep knowledge and expertise in their singular field, which is significant for careers that require in-depth knowledge. Specialists, however, depend heavily on collaborating with other area specialists. They may need extra training on the social aspect of their role to coordinate with others to complete a task (Fahrenkopf et al., 2020). They may find difficulties within the job market in our increasingly horizontal world where versatility and cross-functional capabilities are crucial. The findings of Fahrenkopf et al. (2020) revealed that generalists were observed to be more adaptable in different work contexts since they are more likely to transfer their skills from previous jobs to a new work environment, whereas specialists may take longer to adapt because their skills may not be transferable between jobs. Horizontal and lateral transitions of generalists and specialists are equally important for career success across the lifespan and in the workforce (Steindórsdóttir et al., 2023).

3. Embracing Horizontal Career Paths: Gen Z and Graduates

Data from Parker and Igielnik (2020) of Pew Research Centre indicated that Gen Z is projected to become a very well-educated and technologically adept generation because they are likely to be enrolled in college with college-educated parents, as well as growing up with technologies. They were observed to be highly ambitious and self-confident, motivated by finding opportunities to expand their skills (Dolores et al., 2022; Mahayosnand & Sabra, 2024; Parker & Igielnik, 2020). The oldest members of Gen Z are approaching 30 years old, and their career

opportunities would be caught up in the organisations' structural changes that restricted their vertical career advancement, forcing them to develop a horizontal career path, making this a meaningful research topic. Furthermore, Gen Z's career aspirations align with those of horizontal career paths with skills diversification and an ability to shift across different roles and departments as an entrepreneurial generation (Dolores et al., 2022; Estaiteyeh et al., 2023).

4. Conclusion

Horizontal career paths offer significant benefits in today's dynamic workforce, particularly for Gen Z and graduates. We recommend that skill diversification should be taught during internships and cross-functional training (Estaiteyeh et al., 2023). Understanding and embracing horizontal career paths can provide broader opportunities and enhance career development, positioning young individuals for success in a rapidly evolving job market. As the workforce continues to change, adopting a horizontal career path mindset would be crucial for future career development. Companies could help to increase students' awareness in acquiring and developing soft skills in adapting to the changing labour market, improving their employability (Succi & Canovi, 2019). Existing research has demonstrated the benefits of horizontal career paths, with diverse and broad skill sets in furthering career development and opportunities. Further research on horizontal career paths could focus on the development of systems and strategies that schools or institutes may implement to enhance skill diversity and development in the workforce, alongside long-term impact studies.

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