






# Mapping Your CAREER

**Tips for navigating the (sometimes winding) routes and decisions in advancement careers**

BY DEE BRECKER AND MEREDITH BARNETT

**CAREER DECISIONS—LIKE TAKING ON OR** leaving a job or branching out into a new skill zone—are rarely straightforward. Instead, they are shaped by a variety of professional and personal factors. For many advancement professionals, career pathways are winding, marked with stops, detours, and surprises along the way. Ahead, find tips from veteran U.K. fundraiser and executive coach Dee Brecker on planning and navigating career routes, choices, and skills.





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**Embrace the nonlinear path.** Brecker spent two decades in development at universities and charities in the U.K. Over the years—first as an informal mentor and now, since January 2023, as a certified executive coach—she’s seen how varied the pathways into and through advancement often are.

“When people’s career pathways look a little bit disjointed, what’s behind that is often a human story,” she says.



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## 2. Along the Way

→ **Priorities may shift:** “It’s absolutely OK that there are multiple factors that shape your career. Sometimes you may be focused on a five-year plan or want to reach a certain level [of responsibility]. But other times, you may need to earn more money or live in a different city or accommodate family needs. While I was at one job, which I loved, my husband wasn’t well. So I moved from a director level back down to a head [manager] level—which I hadn’t been at for a long time. I needed that head space.”

## 1. Exploring Routes

→ **Ask questions:** “For a lot of decisions—should I move from a small university to a larger college, or from a bigger advancement department to a small charity?—there will be someone in your network with whom to have a conversation. Lean into people with experience or people at your own career level at a different institution who will know someone. You can’t know what you’re moving into unless you talk.

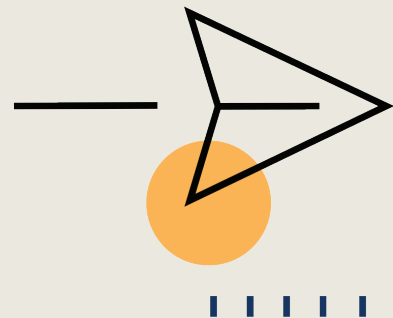
“A lot of people don’t think to talk to their colleagues—so if you say you want to move sideways, get coffee with a person in the advancement communications team or head of alumni engagement to say, ‘I’m thinking in a few years I might want to do this.’”

→ **Build skills:** In performance reviews/appraisals, “set objectives that are meaningful for your next job. Look at job descriptions and map the skills gaps. Work with your manager to say: ‘I want one objective that’s about filling an experience gap.’”



#### 4. Dos and Don'ts

- **Do (or don't!) become a manager:** “Not everyone is interested in management. Some people actually love their craft and don't want to manage. There are very few career options for progression that don't involve managing a team. If you have this conversation early, maybe this generation may be able to change things.”
- **Do keep learning:** If your institution offers a strengths assessment, do it. And “ask what other people are reading—including books that have nothing to do with careers. That's the thing that'll help with career development, not self-help books.”
- **Do give yourself time to pivot:** “You might have taken a turn into alumni engagement and not enjoyed it, and it may take you a little while to come back into fundraising. If it derails you for a year, you'll figure it out.”
- **Not thriving? Don't stay:** “Making the decision to stay in a toxic situation thinking, ‘I need to learn how to handle a bad manager,’ is a mistake, as is staying because you feel you need to prove something. If you don't thrive, you don't do your best work, and you're carrying that baggage. It's not your responsibility to fix an organization.” ●



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#### 3. Making a Change

- **Differentiate between running and moving:** “No job you move into is perfect. You hope to enjoy your work, colleagues, and environment as much as 80% of the time, and there's always 20% that won't be perfect. Try to work out if you're running *from* or moving *toward* something. I left a job once knowing I was moving toward a more meaningful work/life balance. The trouble with running is that you risk making a decision that's not well thought-out.”
- **Own your choices:** “Hiring managers are more reasonable than recruiters would lead you to believe. I had a member of my team who decided to take a year to travel in her late 20s or early 30s. She was anxious [about how that would look]. But if you have a reason for doing it, don't worry. Own your decisions and be up front about them. It only becomes a negative on your curriculum vitae if there's a pattern.”

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