

A man in a dark suit and white shirt is shown in profile, looking out over a city skyline. He has his hand to his chin in a thoughtful pose. The background is a bright, hazy cityscape with several tall buildings, including a prominent cylindrical skyscraper on the right. The lighting suggests it's either early morning or late afternoon.

Should You Be a Career Lifer?

The stories of four executive ‘lifers’ who found stretching and flourishing while working in just one company.


By Antoine Tirard and Claire Harbour

We have now been writing about radical and disruptive career transitions for almost five years. As we continued to explore more stories from extreme career changers, we inescapably stumbled across this question along the way: What about those who do not change? Is this by choice? Is it good luck? Is it a cop-out? Knowing that there are no longer many careers for life, we wanted to seek out some examples of those who did stay for the whole of or almost all of their career in one company. What drew them in? Why did they stay? Was it planned that way? And are there typical personality or

company profiles that make this more likely? Read on to meet four lifers, and see what you think.

When Ricardo’s parents required him to return to his home country to obtain his Spanish degree on top of his European “grande école” qualification in business, they probably did not realize that they were changing his professional path completely. He left Paris with two enviable offers from consumer companies in hand to complete his Spanish diploma. By the time he returned to France, a year later, economic conditions had changed and he was no longer welcome in the

Name	Ricardo Sanchez-Moreno
Nationality	Spain
Company	BNP Paribas
Time in Company	26 years
Functions	Audit, Operations and general management, Human resources
Countries	France, United States, The Bahamas, Singapore



same area. So he returned to Spain, in the hope of being able to play on his multilingual strengths as well as his experience and academics to date.

After six months of struggle, Ricardo had made little progress and started exploring outside the box. He asked himself “what have I not yet tried?” He wrote an audacious letter to several banks, admitting he knew nothing about their business, but describing his abilities confidently. As he entered the interview process with BNP Spain, he also found himself with two other offers, both in the retail space. He was relieved to turn these down when BNP took a punt on him asking him to join their new international graduate programme in Paris.

Ricardo initially chose to work in corporate and investment banking. He had been dazzled by his interviewer, who, feet on desk, had described the world of commodities and interest rates in a manner that captured his attention decisively. He buried himself in the world of corn, oil and foreign exchange for some time, but soon realized that the company’s “management school” was to be found in the internal audit department. So, Ricardo put his mind to it : two years after joining BNP he was recruited by internal audit and two and half years later he was appointed Head of Internal Audit Mission. Internal Audit proved to be an excellent management school,

a source of future network and eventually led to meeting many of the “top brass” of the company, including the head of private banking, who invited him to join the business line in either the Bahamas or Miami.

In 2000, therefore, Ricardo and his family set off to Miami, and he worked as Regional COO of the business line operations on the other side of the Atlantic, while most of the corporate focus was on the intricacies of a merger between BNP and Paribas. Working mainly autonomously, Ricardo acquired a good grasp of what being COO of a private banking unit entailed. A few years later, he was given the opportunity to take direct responsibility of the operations of the bank’s two private banking units in the Bahamas and then merge them. He initially refused, but found it was his only option for advancement. Not being ready to leave the company which he was otherwise finding enjoyable, and providing him with deep learning and progress, he discovered that he loved the new extremely hands on challenge, which kept him out of holidays for a year.

Having learnt such a great deal in the Americas, Ricardo wanted a broader challenge. He held up his hand for a role in Asia, with a larger, more geographically diverse team and greater call for strategic vision. Despite being perceived by the local market as “a little young” for the role, his deep dive in the Bahamas had given him the credibility he needed, and Ricardo thrived. The management of the 2008 crisis, the integration of some external acquisitions and new ventures, and several years of extensions to his stay followed. These were enjoyable, but unpredictable, and by his fifth year in Singapore, he asked his company to provide him a clearer visibility as to the next career move.

Unsure as to the outcome and feeling more anxious about his career progression than before, Ricardo began to look around the market in the APAC region. While he received several offers to take on roles similar to his, he realized COO was no longer what he wanted. In the meantime, his head office asked him to take on a role as head of HR for the Private Banking business line based in Paris. Ricardo’s first reactions? “This is either a casting mistake or

“Is this a casting mistake or some kind of sanction?”

some kind of sanction.” Eventually, it transpired that, at a time of strategic and managerial change within the business line, the bank was looking for someone who knew the business, had people skills and was culturally aligned with the new strategic direction, not an HR expert. Once this was clear, Ricardo agreed, understanding that different doors would open for him, and feeling comforted by the recognition he had received.

Ricardo learnt a great deal, built gravitas, developed new networks, and five years down the road felt he had gone full circle in Private Banking HR and started enquiring again. He was offered a Private Banking general management role back in Asia. But the configuration of this role was of some frustration, and his return to Singapore did not bring the same feeling of accomplishment as the first time. So when the phone rang and he was told that a rarely available role was coming up as global head of HR for a different business line, Ricardo listened carefully. For the first time in his years at the bank, he was put through an official recruitment process, with a “sprint of interviews”, which led to his appointment in summer 2018.


Has Ricardo had a good run? “Absolutely!” Does he think he would have had a better career if he had moved around more outside the bank? “Definitely not! I would not have enjoyed so many diverse roles and opportunities, nor would I have attained the seniority I have”. He alludes to a comfort of knowing the culture and the role implicitly, which makes for fast and smooth transitions. All of this has meant that he only looked around outside that once, back in Singapore. His career has been disrupted multiple times internally, without the pain and risk associated with changing employer. He has also found increasing meaning in what he does, especially in HR. As he says: “Making rich people richer has its limits, as does creating economies in the back office, but developing

people has a fundamental value.” Thus, a quest, however unconscious, for deeper sense, has been met without the need to leave.

Will he definitely stay at BNP Paribas for the rest of his career? Ricardo says that with fifteen years of work left to go, he could be persuaded elsewhere for the right challenge. But it would have to be exceptional to take him away from his “bank family”. He is certainly more attracted by the idea of deepening his knowledge, expertise and influence in the HR field, and is conscious of having learnt about the function by the seat of his pants, so he is currently seeking out some further study or certification to back him up, hoping that his company will support him in taking this step. What emerges beyond this sense of encouragement is that there is a network and teamwork environment which run deep. It will be hard to replace this heritage elsewhere.

While Anna was growing up, her love of horses – and, as she admitted, perhaps her natural authority – led to her dreaming of becoming a mounted policewoman, and the dream persisted in her early years. Coming from a military family and moving around the world prepared her for what she would eventually do. But the way in which she came to it was unusual, to say the least. In her year “off” before university, Anna’s father had been posted to Tokyo, and she woke up every morning to amazing urban landscapes, including the large sign of the Swire Group on a neighboring building, which housed the company’s local headquarters. Not only did she get the visual cue, but she happened to become acquainted with some of the “house staff” or management trainees of the firm. She found a deep attraction to the life they led which included frequent changes of location, company, role and function, all as part of a big plan of lifelong career. However, there was one significant problem: at the time, the group did not admit female candidates to the program.

Name	Anna Thompson
Nationality	United Kingdom
Company	Swire Group
Time in Company	28 years
Functions	General management, Flight operations, Human resources
Countries	Hong Kong, Singapore, Germany, Switzerland



This perhaps added to the attraction, and by the time Anna was in university, and despite internships in investment banks, she only wanted one thing: a place on the house staff program! Luckily for her, one of the authors of this piece had paved the way a couple of years previously, and become the very first woman to join, so Anna’s route was now open.

Sure enough, she signed up as soon as she received her offer, and spread the news enthusiastically around her friends and family. Many expressed doubts about “the takeover” of Hong Kong that was on the horizon for 1997, but her response was “that is in seven years’ time, and who knows if I will still be there by then?”. Little did she know.

Swire Group makes an underlying assumption on mobility and long service that house staff stay “for life” and answer to calls for job transition willingly and swiftly. Anna’s first 14 years in the firm, during which she worked exclusively for the group’s airline, Cathay Pacific, saw her through roles of increasing seniority and stretch as country manager, then general manager of the SE Asia region. During all this time, as she puts it “I did not mind where I went, nor what I did, since I was

learning and exploring, having fun, and had no ties to prevent me from doing so.”

After those initial years, Anna felt a slight sense of frustration that the next role was not coming along quickly enough. She kept her cool, waiting it out, and extending herself in other ways, such as taking on new learning, roles outside the company as a non-executive director or volunteer, and indeed offered her services on strategic projects within the organization. As she put it “I did everything I could to ensure I would continue to succeed in my career here”. With a substantial new role in a joint venture company as COO, Anna began to climb to executive levels, and loved the staff and the environment at Air Hong Kong for a couple of years. So much so that when she was invited into a much tougher environment as Cathay’s General Manager, Air Crew, she took three days of arduous negotiations and hesitations to agree. This, as she explains, was on the understanding that “the company knew best, and if they told me it was to develop my grit, resilience and skills, then it would work out”. Anna has no doubt that it was her time in this role that was designed to allow her to springboard into a Director role shortly afterwards. It had been part of the plan, however painful the plan might have felt at the time.

Less than a year ago, Anna was given a role outside Cathay Pacific, at Swire Properties, which commands a vast empire of real estate mostly in Asia. She now leads the HR activities of that burgeoning business. The jump out of the airline and into a different environment appeals to her desire to learn constantly, and she has delighted in working on new networks, connections and mindsets, as well as a more focused functional job. She is now 9 years away from retirement, and sees a future of another two more “important” roles, before moving away from her career’s first and “only” phase. What makes her so sure? Why has she never been tempted away by the offers of headhunters, or just by pastures

“I did not mind where I went, nor what I did, since I was learning, exploring and having fun”

new? As for enticement to other companies, the offers have sometimes been interesting, and a chance to chat with both the headhunters and the client companies, to explore and discuss the airline market in general. But nothing has ever come up that could exceed what she has. This is not only in terms of the total package, but also in terms of the quality of the company. Anna believes fervently in the value of Cathay Pacific as one of the top, if not the top, airline in the world, and so she has never been sufficiently seduced by other offers to leave. And as for pastures new, well “why would I leave a company in which, unlike most of my peers and friends in other careers, I absolutely adore getting out of bed every morning to go to work?”

And what next? Well, it is, just like her life at Swire, all about learning. That is what kept her in place for the past decades, and it is what will drive the post-work life, in which she has already planned out a further degree in Equine Science (remember the mounted policewoman dream?), courses in Italian language and cuisine, and constantly stretching brain and soul ever further. She is emotionally and practically tied to Hong Kong, and has a permanent home there, regardless of what peregrinations she might undertake in the meantime. Would she do it again, given the chance to start over? Well, obviously yes! And she currently spends time thinking about how to ensure young millennials and dual career couples entering the company now will be able to end up as long serving and enthusiastic as she is. If you need inspiration from someone totally convinced of the value of her company and its endless possibilities, then get in touch with her direct.

By the time he entered his first graduate program, aged 25, after completing two bachelors’ degrees and an MBA, Amadou had also accumulated almost twenty years of work experience, much of it full-time. No wonder he has been snapped up by every single company and boss he has served ever since. How did this happen?

Coming from an “illiterate” family in Senegal, and being the oldest of nine brothers and sisters

Name
Amadou Diallo

Nationality
Senegal

Company
Deutsche Post DHL

Time in Company
23 years

Functions
Finance, Operations and
general management

Countries
Germany, France, United Kingdom,
Singapore, Dubai



put a certain expectation on Amadou from the outset. His family was from a remote village, but his father had moved to Dakar in search of fortune. He ended up managing a Bata shoe store where Amadou came to work every day after school from the age of 6. “That is where I learnt sales!” While building the family’s future, he was still expected to do well in school and get the best grades possible. By the age of 12, Amadou was managing the store single-handedly, as his father had opened a few other outlets and was mostly travelling to these, while confidently leaving his first-born to hold the fort. By the time Amadou was 17, the family business had extended further to a hotel in the family homelands in the south of the country. So, in holiday periods, he worked full time there, too. There was never any questioning of this grueling routine on his part – just a sense that this was what was necessary to make headway in life.

On completion of high school, Amadou was sent to Paris with the plan to enter a French “grande école”. But he struggled with the approach, and instead, took himself off to London, to improve his almost non-existent English language skills. At all times, he was winning scholarships and working full-time night shifts in hotels, to pay his way. As he puts it “a warm place to do my homework, to get a decent hot meal, and to be paid for it, was absolutely ideal!” His pragmatic approach to

“Patience and determination always win out”

learning and life meant that he gained a variety of qualifications, and was even admitted directly to the MBA course from his bachelor’s degree, given his extensive prior work experience.

Soon after, Club Med in Tunisia benefitted from Amadou’s talents and charisma for just over a year, where he was Financial Controller during the day, and Bob Marley cover version singer in the evenings. A brief return to Paris gave him some further qualifications in IT, and then he was hired by his first German company, Deutsche Bank, to work in Frankfurt, on the integration of a planned deal that never actually happened. As he began to look around for an alternative, his colleagues told him it would be impossible without speaking German. So he found a role in a transport company, where he would be forced to speak the local language all day every day. The capacity to beat the odds and to stretch constantly was emerging ever more strongly, and rewarded by a promotion to the role of CFO at age 27.

Three years later, Amadou was headhunted into Nedlloyd, a shipping company, and enjoyed a meteoric rise there too. He was selected for a high potential program and mentored by the CEO. With his mix of skills and savvy, along with being the right person in the right place at the right time, he not only survived a succession of mergers which eventually led to him being part of the DHL empire, but played an instrumental role in managing their successful integration. “This is what I call my major stroke of luck”. As his role in increasingly sizeable and complex integrations grew, so did his reputation, even if it was not without hiccups. A call from DHL head office ensued, and Amadou ended up being nourished once more with ever-more-senior roles, covering larger, more diverse geographies and scope as he went. One attitude which helped him was making quick decisions about the opportunities offered to him. This enhanced his reputation as a company man as well as his

happiness quotient.

Eager to expand his experience beyond integrations, Amadou asked for a “proper business” role. He went into a five-year stint in Singapore, from where he developed DHL’s freight business across the whole region, and began to get involved in boards and NGO’s. After a brief return to head office, his desire to contribute to his own continent came to the fore. On expressing this to his leaders, he was rewarded with his current role of CEO Middle East and Africa of DHL’s forwarding business. He develops the business in a visionary way, not just pushing the current model, but also working at grass roots and governmental levels to ensure the development of fundamentals that allow businesses to grow and thrive, with ventures from South Africa to Saudi Arabia.

So, what has kept Amadou? First and foremost, a sense of gratitude and duty to the company that has given him endless opportunities, as well as having shown faith in him when he was “just an immigrant with poor German” at the beginning. He frequently refers back to “where I came from”, though that tough childhood was certainly a blessing as well as a burden, in developmental terms. Amadou’s natural friendliness and open communication mean that he has “friends” in DHL across the globe, and this increases his sense of being part of a “family business, to which I have a strong loyalty”. He does, and always has, received calls from headhunters, but “no big salary will replace my family”. And although he has had moments of frustration, “patience always wins out”. There is another aspect of this loyalty that may be more personal to Amadou than to our other subjects, and that is around the representation of others. Whenever something happens, his colleagues look to him to speak up for them, and for the good of all, and so he refers often to an “obligation to fix things”.

The next ten years will be crucial for Amadou, and they will certainly be spent inside his DHL family. His purpose and values are aligned with theirs, and those of the NGO’s he serves, mostly

around connecting people and improving life for all. This background as a constant has allowed him to constantly reinvent himself, sometimes at his behest, but often at theirs – an aspect he is at pains to underline. Indeed it raises an important piece of advice for young people considering a “lifer” career today: “Instead of being too demanding of your employers, learn to grab opportunities and craft your own career from those. Be open to learning and living in different countries and cultures, because what you get from that is far more valuable than what you get paid!” While there may not always be the opportunity for a lifelong career in one organization, this seems pretty wise as a governing philosophy, given the chance.

Dek was also “given an opportunity to grab” when she joined Swire and Maclaine, which was the buying agency business of the Swire Group, not long after she graduated with a Bachelor’s degree in business. How she reached the point at which she could seize it is another story.

Having grown up poor, with parents who believed fervently in the power of education to transform, Dek was pushed into a degree in Economics, even though she felt no intrinsic attraction in this direction. Ever since she could remember, she had wanted to work in retail or trading, dealing in the shoes, handbags, jewelry and “pretty, girly stuff” of her dreams. As a child, she used to sneak out of her house in the evenings, to go walking through one of the three malls in Manila, so she could admire and covet these frivolous items again and again. The Philippines of the 1970’s did not offer many opportunities in the retail industry, so Dek struggled to find work in her target area. She was deeply envious of her friend Lulu who had a job as a merchandiser in the Swire agency. Lulu advised her to find a job elsewhere, in a less prestigious trading company, to learn as much as she could, and that she would look out for an opportunity opening up at Swire.

It seemed like an eternity until the first call came from the local Swire manager for an interview. It felt even longer as the process drew out over six months, so that when Dek

Name
Dek Pillejera

Nationality
Philippines

Company
Li & Fung

Time in Company
30 years

Functions
Buying, Account management,
General management

Countries
Philippines, Indonesia, Hong Kong



received a third call while inspecting production in a hot, filthy factory in the hinterland of the capital, asking if she could go in for yet another conversation, she almost lost patience. She dumped her sweaty shorts and shirt, threw on a suit, and walked almost angrily into the boss’s office, saying, “Sir, if you don’t offer me the job this time, then I will not even answer the phone if you call me again”. The normally very polite and retiring young woman thought she had probably blown it. But the impatience, along with the deep desire, had got the better of her. Two days later, she was asked to join, and given a succession of small, frustrating jobs in which she was rather left to learn alone – not really what she had been expecting.

The self-learning paid off, even if it was difficult to persuade vendors to share anything much of their trade secrets. A couple of years later, Dek was offered the opportunity to manage the relationship with a “small” new account called Walmart, and her ship had come in. She built the modest beginnings of a few Christmas decorations and placemats into a multi-million dollar business, and became the queen bee of the office, in more ways than one. Her perfectionism and demanding approach to her own performance tended to overflow to others, and she was not reputed for her “niceness”. It must be mentioned that Claire, your author, was her boss at this time, and did occasionally have to find ways to keep the peace. However, Dek was a brilliant trader, and adored by all clients. So not long

“I will always have loyalty and forever be grateful”

after, as part of an initiative to move Filipino staff around, to build them as future leaders, she was packed off to Indonesia for a couple of years, as a divisional manager, to learn how to manage people, and to smooth off her harder edges.

Sure enough she returned to manage the country office in Manila, though fortunes had changed during her absence, and the operation was making losses, with two huge claims from clients. Her job was to do a turnaround, and obviously a stretch role for her. She received sound and comforting advice from her mentor: “Surround yourself with those who know the business better than you, and find those you can trust”. The advice that Dek received not only helped her to feel that she was genuinely cared about, but also inspired her to treat others kindly and patiently, nurturing the very best.

Once the business was rebuilt, then it was sold to the Hong Kong upstart Li & Fung, who were on a global shopping spree to create their supply chain empire. This was a time of great uncertainty for all in the Swire side of things, but again, the mentoring and caring came in: “Let’s get our act together, sit patiently, and see what happens”. Naturally, most of the Swire staff who had decided to follow that instruction were rewarded with assured seats at the table of the merged company. And this acquisition turned out to be greatly in Dek’s favor. As the new company was more energetic and dynamic, she was given even more chances to grow and actually faster than might have been the case in the previous setup. She soon took on substantial regional responsibilities, running operations for all hardlines (non-apparel) business across Asia, and managing a more diverse range of clients. She has been constantly, promoted, stretched, rewarded and then started again, reaching the ranks of vice president, which she could never have dreamed of when she started out so modestly.

Her hard work has paid off and given her the prize, though “it has not all been roses”. Dek

readily admits that as a flexible, adaptable and “ready to go” executive, she has had to be on constant alert, ready to leave to firefight on a regular basis. She has “lost” several boyfriends to that lifestyle, which is a matter of regret to her, as she would have loved to marry and have children. She also mentions the discrimination she has received repeatedly, as a pretty Filipina in Hong Kong, where the common perception is that the only work she must be doing is as a maid, a karaoke singer, or worse. However, that position of being potentially cast as a victim has only made her stronger, as did the regular assignment of the tougher jobs to the “acquired company people” like her. “Just watch out, I will make you eat my dust” has been her devise through this sort of incident.

We interviewed Dek only a week after she had announced her retirement, as she now wants to catch up on the friends and family she feels she has neglected. So we obviously had no reason to ask her about her future in the company. However, she was clear on one thing: “This is the company that gave me my dream, so I will stay as long as I am happy, and will not bite the hand that feeds me”. Headhunters? “Constantly, but I have never been tempted, as, not only have I always been given the chance to grow here, but the financial and other benefits are unmatched. There is no price on a dream. I will always have loyalty and forever be grateful”.

These four stories are certainly touching, and we can see many indications that company loyalty pays off with a rich diversity of roles and challenges, as well as the inevitable ascent to seniority, but what can we conclude beyond this?

Firstly, it must be stated that not everybody is going to find the same happiness and motivations as our four subjects above. And of course, there are fewer and fewer careers of this kind available, as companies pay less attention to longevity and more to short term productiv-

How to Succeed as a Career Lifer

Do

1. See the big picture, consider your career as a marathon, not a sprint
2. Carefully chose a company that genuinely invests in talent and provides diverse opportunities
3. Stay open and flexible, trust your company knows more than you do about your development
4. Continuously cultivate internal relationships, leverage your internal network for current and future roles
5. Find a balance between selfless duty and proactive speaking up
6. Find opportunities to extend your horizons in other ways, such as extra training, involvement in non-profits
7. Keep a proactive approach to your career, see the journey as endlessly disruptive, regardless of the fact that your employer's name does not change

Don't

1. Equate long service in one company with a stale career
2. Believe that you always have to move up – lateral moves can be extremely developmental
3. Fail to see the development offered by a stretch or unpopular assignment
4. Choose the wrong time to speak up for your career development – pick your battles
5. Be impatient – but recognize if you stay too long in the same job
6. Be complacent – always challenge yourself and stay up to date with your industry and professional developments
7. Be closed to calls from headhunters – rather see these as a chance to learn about the market and appreciate your good fortune

ity. The fact of being a lifer is surely a paradox, and, in many cases at least, a coincidence as much as anything else. Perhaps Dek and Amadou felt a stronger than usual sense of loyalty and gratitude, but Anna and Ricardo did not set out with long-term intentions or any “need” for gratitude at all.

Whatever the level of loyalty and enjoyment, it emerges that grit and persistence are needed, as no journey through a lifer career will be without its rough periods. But, our subjects certainly show that it is possible to push on through, to be gracious through adversity, and that the long-term payoff for this approach is priceless.

On the other side of the formula, is there scope for companies to make even better use of people by taking them through a growth curve that might look steep and even unpredictable at first? And can this be done not only with “lifers” but also with those who join later? Is this an argument for hiring more disruptive profiles

too? We think so, as the attributes of these lifers end up being about flexibility, and a constant desire to grow and learn, as well as a certain wisdom and maturity that come from reinvention.

In the end, it may not much matter whether the big changes come inside one organization or in a series of moves from one to another. What seems to be more crucial is the shift from one country or culture to another, or from a corporate function to an operational deployment. Disruption can come from anywhere, and the propensity to seek it out is not limited to those who make grand external moves.

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