



# The **ABCs** of a Kaleidoscope Career

by Lisa A. Mainiero, Ph.D.  
and Sherry E. Sullivan, Ph.D.

An exodus of amazing proportions is quietly overtaking corporate America. The twentieth-century linear career model, of rising to the top of a corporation and being a big, fat, ethically unscrupulous powermonger is, frankly, dead. An anti-corporate, suit my own lifestyle, not yours—Kaleidoscope Career is being born.

Employees today are defining success on their own terms and opting out of the 7 am to 9 pm rat race. Instead of living to work, people are working to live. Tired of the inflexibility of standard work hours and the lack of concern for work–family balance, employees are leaving corporate positions in favor of more flexible career options.

A successful career is no longer viewed as working for a single firm forever. Rather than define their lives and self-worth in terms of a preordained, often constraining career track, workers are creating their own Kaleidoscope Careers to suit their lives.

Workers today are rejecting the standard corporate contract in droves. But why? Is it all about family and work life balance? We think not. The answer behind the so called opt-out revolution lies in more complex issues and trends resulting from a paradigm shift in how careers are developed, created and shaped—by both women and men—that will be a defining force in the future of work. A revolt has begun—against corporations that don't permit individuals to have meaningful careers and lives while being true to their own values.

We have written this article because a seismic shift is taking place in the world of work, a shift that others have only begun to notice. Our book, *The Opt-Out Revolt: Why People Are Leaving Companies to Create Kaleidoscope Careers* (Davies-Black, 2006), presents the results of a groundbreaking five-year study that examines women's and men's career patterns. Our research shows that the interplay of work and family, and work and self, are inexorably intertwined. Separating out career decisions from other life decisions is a relic, an artefact of twentieth-century old-line manufacturing thinking.

The media has focused only on the issue of work-family conflict by showcasing a number of high-profile women who left corporations to spend time with family, calling this a new workplace issue. But there is much more to the story. The issue affects men as well as women. We argue that it is more of a "revolt" than a revolution that is going on. "Down with the corporation! Not my father's career!" says the new careerist. "I'm going to do things my way, and to hell with your demands!"

It is true that people, especially women, are leaving their jobs and making a statement that they are protesting against work environments that don't permit them to have a life. People are also revolting against organizations that don't permit them to be true to themselves or don't provide challenging work. Not only issues of work-family balance have ignited this change, a complex interplay among issues of authenticity, balance, and challenge is causing a workplace revolt of mass proportions. Look out, Mr. CEO. If you don't listen up to the sounds of footsteps exiting your doors, soon you won't have anyone listening to you anyway.

## Kaleidoscope Careers

To understand the changes that are taking place in this new age of careers, we developed a model, the Kaleidoscope Career Model, to illustrate how women and men think about and enact their careers today. A Kaleidoscope Career is a career created on your own terms, defined not by a corporation but by your own values, life choices, and parameters. Like a kaleidoscope, your career is dynamic and in motion; as your life changes, you can alter your career to adjust to these changes rather than relinquishing control and letting a corporation dictate your life for you.

Consider the working of a kaleidoscope: as one part moves, so do the other parts change. Like a kaleidoscope that produces changing patterns when the tube is rotated and its glass chips fall into new arrangements, workers shift the pattern of their careers by rotating different aspects of their lives to arrange their roles and relationships in new ways. They evaluate the choices and options available through the lens of the kaleidoscope to determine the best fit among their many relationships and work constraints and opportunities. As one decision is made, it affects the outcome of the kaleidoscope pattern.

The patterns often differ for women and men. Rather than being nakedly ambitious, we found women chose a set of options that was the best fit at the time, while always considering how their decisions would impact others in their lives. Men, on the other hand, dance to the beat of a different drummer. Men often compartmentalized their lives and their careers, focusing on work, *then* family, wishing for more flexibility in the process. We call this the “male straightjacket.”

There is a “yin/yang” aspect to men and women’s careers—while men are stuck in the male straightjacket of work, more work, and yet more work, women adapt and change their career objectives in accordance with relational needs and demands. We found men and women respond to the same career and life issues, but often in a different order. Men are more sequential in how they deal with life and career issues. Women are integrators, and this is why so many women are concerned about the issue of balance. Women are trying to do it all, at least some of the time, while men are doing what they must. Examining the underlying reasons why women and why men make the decisions about the transitions and priorities of their lives makes for fascinating discourse.

The interviews for our book provide a window into how men and women weigh certain factors over another in their career decisions. We offer the kaleidoscope metaphor as a new way of thinking about careers emanating from gender issues, valuing gender and context rather than making it “invisible” in the study of careers. The Kaleidoscope Career Model shows how women and men shift and move the facets of their lives around to find the mosaic that best fits their life circumstances and their own wants and needs, even if those choices defy typical definitions of career success.

## The ABCs of the Career Kaleidoscope

We found there were three reasons that led women, and also men, to take stock of their career decisions and make changes and transitions to meet their needs for their lives, families, and themselves. These parameters reflected:

- an individual's needs for **challenge**, career advancement, and self-worth juxtaposed against
- a family's need for **balance**, relationships, and caregiving, intersected by the person's need to say,
- "What about me?" "How can I be **authentic**, true to myself and make genuine decisions for myself in my life?"

We call this the "ABC Model of Kaleidoscope Careers." Just as a kaleidoscope uses three mirrors to create infinite patterns, kaleidoscope careerists focus on three "mirrors" or parameters (authenticity, balance, and challenge) which combine in different ways throughout the lives of individuals, reflecting the unique patterns of their careers.

Consider, for example, a woman's career using the artistic metaphor of a kaleidoscope. The colors of a woman's kaleidoscope are reflected in these three parameters, shaping her decisions as one aspect of the kaleidoscope, or color, takes on greater intensity as a decision parameter at different points of the life span. Over the course of the life span, as a woman searches for the best fit that matches the character and context of her life, the colors of the kaleidoscope shift in response, with one color (parameter) moving to the foreground and intensifying in color as that parameter takes priority at that time in her life. The other two colors (parameters) lessen in intensity and recede to the background, but are still present and active as all aspects are necessary to create the current pattern of her life/career.

At one point, she may delay having children in order to devote more energy to her career. At another point, she may subjugate career ambitions for the sake of her family needs. Later in life, she may forge ahead, searching for meaning and spirituality in her life. Somewhere in the middle she may be most concerned about balance and relationships in her life. Her context shapes her choices. Therefore, "opting-out" becomes a natural decision based on the fit of the colors of her kaleidoscope at that point in time. Her career does not dictate her life. Instead, she shapes her career to fit her life as marked by her distinct and changing personal kaleidoscope patterns over her life span.

Most men, however, respond to a different career agenda. The male straightjacket causes most men to be singularly focused on their career achievements. Climbing the layers of the corporate pyramid becomes a quest for fulfillment. Challenge is defined as making more money, achieving new positions, and taking on more clients. Because the careers of men often do not require a career interruption to care for family, men pursue challenges in their careers well past age 50. Authenticity, for men, is defined differently. For many men, authenticity becomes a drive more to become one's own man rather than to seek new passions or smell the roses. Issues of family, balance, and relationships become appreciated more in late career than in early career.

A lot of men, especially younger, GenX and Millennial Generation men, are saying “To hell with that.” “Not my father’s career” has become their new mantra. Younger men are starting to have Kaleidoscope Careers, also. We interviewed a number of men who decided to become stay-at-home dads while supporting a more career-defined wife. We also interviewed men who were using technology as a means of working from home, who were developing a lateral career, defined as having multiple clients, rather than a linear career, defined as working for one corporation and moving up the career ladder. These men had the courage to say, “Forget it.” They courageously revolted from the corporations for which they had worked to define a life and career on their own terms.

We found that each of the Kaleidoscope Career parameters, or decision-making questions, were active as signposts throughout a person’s career. Certain parameters predominated at different points in the life span, forcing decisions about opting-out or staying-in the workforce. The strength of a parameter to shape a career transition depended on what was going on in that person’s life at the time. If money was needed, then career issues took priority. If family balance was needed, then adjustments were made to better serve family needs. If both these parameters were not active, then the individual could take stock, smell the roses, and ask the question, “Am I doing what I need to be doing with my life?”, and become more centered, reflective, and spiritual in the process.



## Authenticity, Balance, and Challenge

Workers today have three major needs that are causing the opt-out revolt. Having seen big, bad corporations downsize their parents into oblivion, contemporary workers are not willing to fall into that trap. Their needs are not being addressed, so they are saying, “Take that job and shove it. I ain’t working here no more.” So what **are** the ABCs of a Kaleidoscope Career?

**The need for authenticity:** Authenticity describes being genuine and true to oneself, knowing one’s strengths and limitations, and acting on the best information at the time. The need for authenticity is the quest to find one’s true voice. During our interviews, this theme or parameter is the most difficult to unearth because it was often drowned out in discussion about bad bosses, lack of advancement, bringing children to soccer games, and the continual infringement of caregiving demands. But this was the voice of women and men as they reflected upon their decisions to ask, “Did I make the right decision? Does this decision make sense for ME as well as for others around me?”

For some of our respondents, authenticity took the form of artistic or leisure pursuits that they followed in spite of other demands on their time. For others, it took the form of being true to oneself at work, being secure in one's knowledge or style as a manager. For still others, it was reflected in a long-awaited dream at the end of child-rearing and salary-earning that culminated in a perfect retirement. We met one woman who left work to form her own catering business. We discovered one man who gave up his accounting job to write a novel. Another developed a secondary, post-retirement career selling items on E-bay. Although finding authenticity is difficult to describe, we heard this theme over and over again from individuals in late career. When competing demands are eliminated from the personal regression equation, this theme was the end result.

**The need for balance:** The need for balance, defined as bringing items or factors into a state of equilibrium, was the Holy Grail for most of the workers we spoke with. Although women want successful and challenging work lives, the need for balance might overcome one's wishes for a more directed, upward-driven set of career accomplishments. Seeking a job closer to home to better suit the needs for children was often viewed as a means of achieving a better equilibrium while adjusting to the needs of others. Prioritizing one's children as a reason to leave the workforce was another means of achieving balance.

Balance is a nexus issue for people as the demands of their work outstripped the time available to spend with family or for themselves. Unfortunately for many, imbalance is part of the human condition. We heard all kinds of stories about running to meetings from a teacher conference with pantyhose slipping, dashing home to attend a child's soccer game while discovering there is a crisis at the office that keeps the phone calls coming and requires rushing back to the office with child in tow, taking lunch breaks to bring an elderly family member to a doctor's appointment, but getting delayed for the important worldwide 2 pm conference call, and travelling between airports miles away from home but catching time to read a book to a child over the phone to put her to sleep.

For most people, there just aren't enough hours in the day to do it all. Leaving work is sometimes the only hope of regaining sanity from the corporate rat race. The need for greater balance—less work demands, more family time—often was used as a reason for a career transition in mid-career, when the demands of child-rearing and work accomplishments peaked.

**The need for challenge:** This parameter reflects a worker's need to learn, grow as a person, and find stimulating, exciting work. Both men and women want stimulating work. Boredom is not an option for most. The challenge of innovating a new product, defining a new entrepreneurial enterprise, partaking in a "stretch" work assignment is a key motivation, or need for achievement, that many workers mentioned as a driving force in their careers.

Challenge is the voltage of work achievement. When people are given a stretch assignment and are challenged in their work, they don't mind putting in the extra hours that are required to get the job done. Challenge springs from the underlying source of creativity and drive that exists within each individual, and spurs the accomplishment of great things. Challenge can be a powerful motivator. For some people, it is a validation of who they are or a way to learn and grow. For others, it is a way to develop a base of expertise. For still others, it was manifested in a need to help others as well as a validation of who they are.

## Timing of the ABCs

Our research showed that the three ABC parameters—challenge, balance, and authenticity—ebb and flow in intensity over the course of a life span. For example, early career is the promised land of possibilities, not probabilities. In early career, men and women equally pursue the thrill of the hunt, the quest for the brass ring, the desire to achieve in their work most profoundly. This was the time when the flame of challenge burned most brightly. Both men and women were motivated to make their respective marks on their firms, show what they could accomplish, and define a work identity for themselves. Some moved to different firms to accomplish their goals. Others took on additional responsibilities in the jobs they worked. Still others developed new ideas and processes, using creative thinking, as a means to accomplish their goals.

As people grow older, their priorities shift. For women, the desire for challenge remains but is pushed into the backdrop to be replaced by a new parameter—the need for balance. For men, the desire for challenge remains longer and, arguably, stronger—but the quest for authenticity shares center stage. While women worry about whether they should start a new business to achieve flexibility and balance, men are concerned about developing a style that is all their own. Men continue to seek work challenges while the more prominent pattern for married mothers is to request reduced work schedules and sublimate their needs for challenge elsewhere. By restricting their work hours, these married mothers are usually removed from consideration for more challenging work assignments that might require travel to adventurous locations away from their families or require more face time at night and weekends.

When men and women reach their thirties, and even into the forties, there is a fork in the road. Men continue to pursue work challenges, while most women back off to make room for the more relational aspects of their lives. The kaleidoscope shifts for women, while the pattern remains linear for most men who are in the breadwinner role. Some women do continue to pursue career challenges, if they have a stable life structure in place, such as a competent and treasured nanny or grandparent or a stay-at-home husband—to whom they can delegate the daily demands of child-rearing. For those in more egalitarian, shared provider families, there is more give-and-take to each partner's Kaleidoscope Career pattern.

Looking at the life span, women and men were concerned with their career challenges in early career, but for women, the point at which they slowed down was a function of their child-rearing years, at 25, 28, 35, or 40, or 45, depending upon what age they chose to have their children. The timing of children and family issues impacted the timing of her Kaleidoscope Career pattern. Women, especially those who re-entered the workforce, were concerned with the balance of family and work throughout their lives, at least until their children left the nest. Therefore, most women did not feel free to pursue their career ambitions until their nurturing duties were handled elsewhere, or completed by virtue of the ages/needs of their children. This meant that women had a “slow burn” for their career trajectories, often peaking early, but not reaching their stride until mid-forties or beyond.

Men had a longer, more fruitful period of securing challenge for the most part, usually well into their forties and beyond. Most men had the luxury of pursuing their career ambitions, considering their management style and options, and entertaining thoughts of career advancement, for a longer, more stable period than experienced by women. But life sped up once they became plateaued in mid-career. This was a difficult transition period for most men, and it usually hit in their late forties and fifties. The realization of “Is that all there is?” opened the door for most men to reconnect with and consider family issues late in career.

When the primary obligations were complete, the picture changed again for men and for women. When his duties of providing for his family were completed, a man could then relish his free time and family relationships. When a woman’s duties of nurturing her family were discharged, a woman could then concentrate on being authentic, true to herself, and perhaps even returning to the workforce to explore new challenges. In short, the timing of men’s and women’s kaleidoscopes oppose one another and shift again in the dance of their life span demands.

## A Manifesto for Personal Change

So—have you had it? Are you fed up? Are you ready to say to your boss, “Take this job and shove it?”

You know, you only have one life to live. Why live it in a corporate box?

Are you wondering if your values are aligned with your work? Have you been concerned lately that who you are does not match what you do?

Are you finding that you are asking “meaning of life” questions lately? Do you want—desperately—to take the time to “smell the roses”?

Then you might be ready to chart a Kaleidoscope Career based on the ABCs of Authenticity, Balance, and Challenge.

First, do a “values life sort” of what is important to you at the present time. Lay out, on a piece of paper, all the aspects of life that you value or have valued in the past. Key career values might include variety, autonomy, creativity, influence, expertise, status, and—oh, yeah, that—(financial) security. Key life values might include humor, duty, adventure, collaboration, community, courage, diversity, enjoyment, friendship, health, inner harmony, integrity, justice, love, order, personal development, physical fitness, self-respect, leisure, spirituality, and wisdom.

See if you can identify the top 10 values that describe who you were in your early career. Then re-sort and see if you can prioritize the top 5 values of your life right now.

If your values sorts are kinda similar, you might want to stay the course, as your values match your career for the moment. But if more of your current values fall in the life values category, you might be ready to consider your options.

Think hard about how you can move out of your current job and lead a more fulfilling career that more adequately suits your dreams. What **are** your dreams? Did they get drowned out in the flood of mind-numbing information from your employer? There's more than one way to make money, Bud. Maybe you can start your own business. Or maybe you can live more simply. Or maybe—just maybe—you can do it all.

Another thing you can do is keep a journal of your life and work experiences. Jot down pearls of wisdom at the end of each day. What was interesting that happened today? What bothered you about your day? At which points in the day did you feel unfulfilled? Sad? Lonely? Happy? Don't worry about writing too much or too little; you will find the writing gets easier each day.

After a month's worth of entries, look back at your journal and see what you can discover about yourself. What themes repeat? Themes about how you use your time, about your wishes and dreams, or about what makes you content versus frustrated may begin a process of self-discovery.



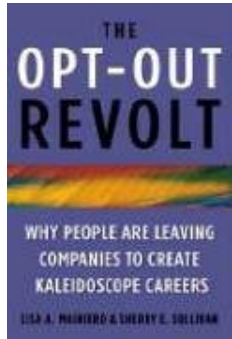
Think about the point where your passion meets your destiny. Many of us have spent years in unfulfilling careers that we started simply because back in college it seemed like the right thing to do. But times—and you—have changed. Do you still serve the world best in an accountant role? (Not to knock accountants—we all need their services.) Could you have a life as a teacher? A book author? Is it time to finally open your own business? What obstacles might be in the way? A good adage is that if we love what we do, the money will flow. Don't get crazy here, but if you don't love what you are doing, why do it?

If you won the lottery and had all the time in the world, what would you do? Would you play golf? Hike up a really big mountain? Garden? Travel? Watch TV? Sleep? Cook? And once you had your fill of leisure activities, what would be next?

Think about how you would spend your time if you had time to spare. Would you volunteer in your community? Doing what, exactly? Would you work for the environment? Work with children? Help the local government make policy decisions? Run a charity fund-raiser? Assist in the care of the elderly?

When you have thought all this through, you may be on the road to having a Kaleidoscope Career. Remember—a Kaleidoscope Career is a career created on your own terms, defined not by a corporation but by your own values and life choices. The time is now. Get off your butt and do something interesting with your life.

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For more details or to buy a copy of Lisa A. Mainiero's and Sherry E. Sullivan's book, *The Opt-out Revolt* [click here](#).

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lisa A. Mainiero and Sherry E. Sullivan are professors of business management and the authors of *The Opt-Out Revolt: Why People are Leaving Companies to Create Kaleidoscope Careers*, published by Davies-Black. Visit their website [www.theoptoutrevolt.com](http://www.theoptoutrevolt.com) to learn more about these authors.

For more information on Kaleidoscope Careers, see *The Opt-Out Revolt: Why People Are Leaving Companies to Create Kaleidoscope Careers*, authored by Lisa A. Mainiero and Sherry E. Sullivan, or visit their website [www.theoptoutrevolt.com](http://www.theoptoutrevolt.com).

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