

## Should You Be a Career Lifer?



By [Antoine Tirard \(INSEAD MBA '97D\), Founder, NexTalent, and Claire Harbour \(INSEAD MBA '92J\), Founder, Culture Pearl](#)

**The stories of three executives who made the counter-intuitive choice of staying with the same employer for most if not all of their career.**

As experts in disruptive career change, we have at times wondered: What about those professionals who stay put? Is it by choice? Is it good luck? Is it a cop-out? Since very few careers are for life these days, we sought out executives who have stayed with one company for the bulk of their career to answer our questions. What drew them in? Why did they stay?

### **Amadou, the DHL family man**

When Amadou entered his first graduate programme at age 25, he had already accumulated almost twenty years of work experience, much of it full time. The eldest of nine brothers and sisters born to illiterate parents in Senegal, he helped his father run a Bata shoe store every day after class

from the age of six. All the while, he was expected to maintain excellent grades in school.

By the age of 12, Amadou was managing the store single-handedly, as his father had opened more outlets in faraway cities. When he was 17, the family business had extended to include a hotel where he worked full time during the holidays. Amadou never questioned this gruelling routine and saw it as part of making headway in life.

After high school, Amadou moved to London to improve his almost non-existent English language skills. Although he received scholarships, he also worked full-time nightshifts in hotels as it gave him “a warm place to do my homework, to get a decent hot meal and to be paid”, an arrangement he found “absolutely ideal”.

Amadou quickly earned a variety of qualifications, including an MBA. He then went on to work one year for Club Med in Tunisia, as financial controller during the day and Bob Marley cover singer at night. Returning to Europe, he found a role in a German transport company, where he had to adapt quickly to a German-speaking working environment. By age 27, he was the company’s CFO.

In 1996, Nedlloyd, a shipping company, headhunted Amadou. Thanks to his skills and savvy, he not only survived a succession of mergers that made him part of the DHL empire, but he played an instrumental role in managing the firm’s successful integration. He calls this his “major stroke of luck”. Eventually, he joined the DHL head office and took on roles of increasing responsibilities across geographies. He is now the CEO of DHL’s forwarding business for Middle East and Africa.

So, how has Amadou sustained his passion all those years? He credits a sense of gratitude and duty to the company that believed in him when he was “just an immigrant with poor German”. He also refers to his tough childhood, which helped mould his character. Today Amadou feels that nothing could replace his DHL “family” and the many friendships he has formed across the globe.

While he has had moments of frustration, “patience always wins out,” Amadou says. His purpose and values – such as connecting people and improving life for all – are aligned with those of his company. His piece of advice for young people considering becoming “lififers”: “Instead of being too

demanding of your employers, learn to grab opportunities. 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.”

### **Anna, the high-flying Swire executive**

While Anna was growing up, her love of horses – and perhaps her natural authority – **inspired a dream** of becoming a mounted policewoman. With her father in the military, her family moved around the world. When Anna took a gap year, the family was posted to Tokyo, and she woke up every morning to an amazing urban landscape which included a sign for Swire on a nearby building.

As it happened, Anna became acquainted with some of the Swire staff. She found their lifestyle, with its frequent change of location, company and role, deeply attractive. However, at that point in time, Swire did not admit female candidates to its management trainee programme. This fact did not deter her and by the time she was in university, she only wanted one thing: a place on that programme. Luckily for her, one of the authors (Claire) had recently paved the way by becoming the first woman management trainee.

In 1990, Anna secured a spot. Founded some 200 years ago, Swire tends to hire people on the assumption they will stay for life and answer calls for job transition willingly and swiftly. Anna started at the group’s airline, Cathay Pacific. In 2007, she became its general manager for Southeast Asia. “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,” she says.

Later, feeling a bit restless, Anna stretched herself by taking on non-executive director and volunteer roles and offering her services on strategic projects within the organisation. Eventually she became the COO at Air Hong Kong, a Swire joint venture company. In 2013, her biggest challenge yet arose when she was promoted to Cathay Pacific’s General Manager Aircrew, a tough role meant to develop grit and resilience.

One year ago, Anna became a director at Swire Properties and now leads HR activities for this burgeoning real estate business. The switch to a new industry and environment suits her constant desire to learn. While headhunters have reached out over the years, no offer has ever surpassed what Anna has, whether in terms of the total package or the quality of the company. “Unlike most of my peers and friends in other careers, I absolutely

adore getting out of bed every morning to go to work,” she says.

Nine years away from her retirement, she has already planned a degree in Equine Science (remember the mounted policewoman dream?), as well as courses in Italian language and cuisine. Until then, she wants to help ensure millennials and dual-career couples become enthusiastic Swire “lifers” like her.

### **Ricardo, the BNP Paribas globetrotter**

Ricardo had received two enviable offers from Parisian firms but his parents asked him to return home to Spain to complete his second degree in business administration. By the time he went back to France, economic conditions had changed and he was unable to secure a job.

As Ricardo struggled in Spain too, he devised an audacious plan. He wrote to several banks, admitting he knew nothing about their business, but describing his abilities confidently. It worked and BNP asked him to join its new international programme in Paris.

He first buried himself in the world of corn, oil and foreign exchange, but soon realised that the company’s “management school” was the internal audit department, so he transferred. This led him to meet the company’s brass, including the head of private banking, who invited him to join the business line in Miami or the Bahamas.

Ricardo and his family thus set off to Florida in 2000. As regional COO, he focused on the intricacies of the merger between BNP and Paribas, before taking direct responsibility for the operations of its two private banking units in the Bahamas.

Having learnt a great deal in the Americas, Ricardo held up his hand for a role in Asia, with a larger, more diverse team and greater call for strategic vision. He thrived despite various challenges, including the 2008 financial crisis. However, after five years, feeling anxious about his career progression, he asked his company about his next career move.

Just when Ricardo decided the operations track was not for him, the firm invited him to become the head of HR for Private Banking in Paris. He first thought: “This is either a casting mistake or some kind of sanction.” Eventually, he learnt that 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. On that basis, Ricardo agreed to take up the role, with the understanding that different doors would open for him.

Five years later, he returned to Asia in a Private Banking general management role. But it did not yield the same feeling of accomplishment. So when he learnt that a rare opportunity as global head of HR for a different business line was opening, Ricardo perked up. For the first time, he went through an official recruitment process which led to his appointment in 2018.

Would Ricardo have had a better career had he ventured outside? “Definitely not! I would not have enjoyed so many diverse roles and opportunities, nor would I have attained the seniority I have,” he says. He has also found increasing meaning in what he does, especially in HR. “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 for deeper meaning has been met without the need to leave.

## **How to succeed as a career lifer**

### **Do’s**

1. See the big picture and consider your career as a marathon, not a sprint.
2. Carefully choose a company that genuinely invests in talent and provides diverse opportunities.
3. Stay open and flexible, trust your company to know more than you do about your development.
4. Continuously cultivate and leverage your internal network.
5. Find a balance between selfless duty and speaking up – pick your battles.
6. Find opportunities to extend your horizons, by getting involved with non-profits for instance.
7. Keep a disruptive approach to your career, even if your employer stays the same.

### **Don’ts**

1. Equate long service in one company with a stale career.
2. Believe that you always have to move up – you can also be stretched by lateral moves.



3. Fail to see the development offered by an unpopular assignment.
4. Choose the wrong time to speak up for your career development.
5. Be impatient – but recognise the pitfalls of staying too long in the same job.
6. Be complacent – always challenge yourself and stay up to date.
7. Be closed to calls from headhunters – it is a chance to learn about the market and appreciate your good fortune.

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Antoine and Claire are the co-authors of **Disrupt Your Career: How to Navigate Uncharted Career Transitions and Thrive**.

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