

## Career progression – getting the balance right

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Laura Fergusson talks to some Futureintech Ambassadors to find out what young people want out of a career in technology, engineering and science.

After four years of working with both secondary students and young graduates, Futureintech has some clear ideas of what young people want out of a career.

Variety, travel opportunities, the chance to be creative, to see tangible results of their work and to work as part of a team are themes which emerge again and again.

But what about career advancement? How much difference does the prospect of progression within a company make when graduates are applying for jobs? Judging by the views of Futureintech Ambassadors, more than you might think.

For civil engineer Matt Sanders, Beca's reputation for enabling employees to develop their careers was central to the company's appeal.

"At Beca there is a clear programme to your career progression and they take a real interest in ensuring that this happens," he

says.

"In terms of variation in my career, I probably couldn't get any more diverse projects if I left the company. We work on a wide range of big projects with plenty of opportunities for myself."

Transport engineer Ashley Gray (pictured) puts it more forcefully. "I would not work for a company which did not offer both the potential for internal promotion and the opportunity for a varied career," he says firmly. "The opportunity for career advancement was the key thing that influenced my decision

when selecting between different job offers."

### More than a pay cheque

While few people graduating today anticipate spending the next 40 years with one

company in the way their grandparents might have, they are disinclined to accept a job with no potential for internal promotion. "No one wants a dead end job without opportunities to advance your skill set and earning potential," comments Paul Fletcher, a geotechnical engineer. Scientist Sharn Hainsworth agrees.

"I left my last job because I felt as though the opportunities that existed when I began had dwindled to the point where I wasn't learning much anymore. If an employer is expecting you to fill a role and never branch out,

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I wouldn't be interested. I work to further my career, not just to make a dollar."

A clearly defined career path for every employee sounds wonderful in theory, but is not always a natural fit with the New Zealand workplace, as engineering consultant Richard Mahoney points out. "When you consider that only a very few percent of New Zealand companies employ over 100 people, it becomes clear that few companies are going to have more than about three levels of defined seniority. Career progression within companies for most comes in the form of increased variety and responsibility of work and larger pay packets, rather than moving 'up the ladder'."

### Size matters

Richard suggests that for a smaller company to boast of the opportunities it provides for internal promotion can either indicate that it is losing senior staff at an unhealthy rate, or that it is growing faster than it may be able to sustain. He believes that while large companies can offer tempting internal progression, smaller firms making the same claims should be properly checked out.

"There are some companies that provide good support for training and career progression, and have made a point of developing internships and graduate training programmes. This is possible because they have sufficient staff numbers and turnover that they know they will take a few graduates every year and can organise a means of dealing with them."

Fletcher Construction is one of these companies. Civil engineer Felicity Glenie describes her employer as able to offer "a vast array of career progressions" as a result of its size.



**"Because of its size, Fletcher Construction can offer a vast array of career progressions. A career path is able to easily change to suit the individual as they gain experience and discover their own areas of interest"**

**Felicity Glenie, Civil Engineer**

"A career path is able to easily change to suit the individual as they gain experience and discover their own areas of interest," Felicity says.

However even in these cases, Richard does not believe that the attractions of promotion outweigh the importance of achieving a diversity of experience.

"People want those jobs because the high quality of training will give them more options in the future, rather than that they want to stay in the company for the long haul.

"In some cases people with 20 years' working for the first company they got a job with may actually be frowned upon. It's a bit like living at your parents until you're 35."

### Don't fence me in...

This view appears to be acknowledged by those companies that are most successful in providing internal training and opportunities.

Secure in the knowledge that they will be able to replace staff, they are able to accept the likelihood that talented staff are likely to move on.

"Soil Suitability Assessment understand that my career will not be limited to just one or two firms in my lifetime and therefore don't try to cage me in by planning my career for me," says Sharn Hainsworth.

A fellow scientist who chose not to be identified supports this view. While emphasising the opportunities that her employers provide, she says: "In spite of this I'd still move around – I don't know many people that want to work at the same place for their entire career and it limits the experience you can gain."

Be that as it may, the majority of those questioned indicated that having prospects beyond their immediate role would make them less likely to search around for other options, particularly if they work for a company which allows them to experience a range of different projects.

"Now that I am with Transfield Worley I think that I will stay due to the potential for development," says mechanical engineer Andy Gunson.

"Prior to joining I would have said that I would be more likely to move around every three years for variety."

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This is backed up by Alif Wahid, an ICT professional with Endace, who says "I am definitely of the belief that long-term career prospects are much more valuable in my field than switching jobs every couple of years."

### Making it work

So how can employers hope to attract and retain ambitious staff if their company is simply too small for rapid promotion to be a reasonable expectation? The good news is that career development doesn't have to mean progressing to a senior role within a couple of years. Just as important to graduates is the understanding that their job can expand with their experience; that they will be rewarded for good performance with greater responsibility, and that



retaining the same job title doesn't mean they are stuck in a rut. And while this may be easier to achieve in a large multinational, smaller firms frequently enable staff to redefine their role depending on their strengths and interests.

**"Long-term career prospects are much more valuable in my field than switching jobs every couple of years."**

Alif Wahid, ICT Professional

Technologist Boram Keam says of his employers, Inghams Enterprises: "There are no regular intakes of graduates every year. Recruitment only occurs on an as-required basis. If there hadn't been opportunities to work in different facets of the business I think I would have looked for a new job elsewhere."

Regardless of the size of the company, in a tight labour market employers increasingly need to demonstrate the value they place on employees' career development in order to hold onto them.

As Ashley Gray admits, "the key point of difference which led to me choosing SKM over similar top-tier firms in the market was their commitment to providing staff with the opportunity to do more and go further."

## VIP funding now available for 2008

Futureintech is once again providing funding for Visiting Industry Professionals to work with tertiary institutions in 2008.

These partnerships can take many forms, from guest lectures to assistance with course planning. The core objective is to support links between industry and tertiary education, to ensure that students gain an industry perspective and are appropriately prepared for the workplace.

Academic staff frequently benefit from a greater understanding of the real-world applications of their subject, while industry representatives are able to take a degree of ownership of the training the future workforce receives.

Futureintech provides a total of \$35,000, to a maximum of \$5000 per project. The funding is made available directly to the tertiary institutions, to be used according to their specific requirements. Visits can be up to three weeks in duration.

Keith Colson, a senior engineer at NextWindow, was engaged by Massey University's Institute of Technology and Engineering in 2007. He focused on enhancing the students' awareness of real world practice, discussing projects he had completed and presenting lectures.

"I enjoyed presenting, and put a lot of effort into making it interesting and exciting," he says.

"I have so much useful information and techniques that I have gathered over my career. This is one way to pass this information on. I only wish this scheme had been running when I was at ATI.

"The more variety and quality input you get to your education the more likely you will succeed in the real practical world."

Applications for 2008 funding close on Friday 28 March. For further information and case studies of past projects see [www.futureintech.co.nz/vip-scheme.cfm](http://www.futureintech.co.nz/vip-scheme.cfm)

## Futureintech News

[www.futureintech.co.nz](http://www.futureintech.co.nz)

The launch of Futureintech's redesigned website last June was highly successful, with visitor numbers peaking over June and July and remaining strong since. Over 16,000 unique users visited the site between May and December 2007, almost 5000 of whom visited more than once.

An encouraging indication that the site is being used by those for whom it is primarily intended is the peak in visitor numbers between 3-4pm – the end of the school day.

### Other publications

It is set to be another busy year for Futureintech publications, with a brochure on careers in biotechnology nearing completion and a poster demonstrating career paths possible with maths and science also due to go to print in February. Further factfiles and brochures are also in the pipeline.

### Calling all Ambassadors

The Futureintech team is preparing for 2008 and the imminent start of the new school year with Ambassador training sessions across the country.

Futureintech Facilitators are always eager to hear from young technology, engineering and science professionals willing to support the school curriculum and work with students to promote their careers. If you or your staff would be interested in getting involved in a practical form of careers promotion which provides a uniquely rewarding form of professional development, please contact your local Futureintech Facilitator.

Happy New Year to all existing Futureintech Ambassadors and Partners. Thank you for your continuing support, and we look forward to working with you throughout 2008.

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