

# Earth, Air, Fire and Water: The Elemental Nature of Sustainable Careers

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## Introduction

“Population aging is unprecedented, without parallel in human history—and the twenty-first century promises even more rapid aging than did the century just past.” The United States currently claims the third largest senior population with 46 million behind behemoth populations of China (127 million more than 60 years old) and India (77 million over 60). The growth rate of seniors is expected to outstrip all other age classes reaching nearly 2 billion worldwide by 2050 with more than 70 million living in the United States. The pronounced effect on careers, companies and society itself promises dramatic changes.<sup>1</sup> See: <http://www.globalaging.org/ruralaging/world/ageingo.htm>.

## The Realities of Retirement

When Thomas Hobbes, a 17th century British philosopher, condemned life as “brutish and short,” he was not being so much unkind as merely painfully accurate. Survival past 35 was a challenge and only one in a thousand lived past 60. During the industrial revolution of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, average life expectancies increased to between 40-50 years of age. In those days, many people literally worked until they died.

The age of Social Security and the notion of retirement at age 60-65 opened a new chapter for the American worker. Handing out Social Security with a gold watch worked well for government before WW II since the age for receiving social security was originally set at age 65 and the average life expectancy was 63. Following the Second World War, the typical family was a “Leave it To Beaver” two-parent family with a stay-at-home mom, mandatory retirement at age 60-65, and death expected at 75. Pension plans were based on funding 15 years of retirement. If you lived longer, you moved in with one of your children.

Thanks to science, technology and modern medicine, we are now living into our 80’s and 90’s. Because of longer life expectancies, social security, savings and retirement plans often fall short. Many workers are burned out by the time they reach their 60’s and face twenty or more years without a paycheck. Others are wrestling with explosive living expenses. Even with the most responsible financial planning, employees are finding it difficult to make their last dollar meet their last breath.

How can we craft careers so that people are not burned out in their 50’s and 60’s? How do we re-energize our workforce with the prospect of careers going well beyond current retirement ages?

## Alchemy in the Workplace

Twenty-five hundred years ago, Empedocles, a Greek philosopher, scientist, and healer, searched for a way to reconstruct matter. In his search for the basic “roots” of matter, he considered that everything in the universe was made up of four basic elements - earth, air, fire, and water. Empedocles, hailed as a

kind of Einstein-of-his day, theorized that the four elements were not only material and spiritual forces, but depending on their combinations, were also facets of human beings. The quantities of the mix of earth, air, fire, and water in men and women produced different personality types, varying natures and diverse abilities.<sup>2</sup> See: <http://webwinds.com/myth/elemental/htm> In effect, the very nature of humans -- their skills, passion and spirit - was buried in a genetic code consisting of the four elements. Could a model for sustaining and renewing careers also be buried in the writings of an obscure 5th century B.C. alchemist?

## Taking a Page from Indiana Jones

The traditional career can be represented by a horizontal “S - cliff” shaped similar to a learning curve that drops off precipitously at the end. It rises rapidly in the early years, plateaus in the middle years and then drops like a rock at retirement, around age 60-65. The traditional model is no longer applicable because we have pushed life expectancy statistics to new levels. Digging through the four ancient Greek elements, we unearthed a roadmap to sustain and renew careers in a graying universe.

**EARTH** is an element that provides us with the grounding, core values, abilities and aptitudes in which careers take root and grow. Earth nurtures our competencies and shows us a path to follow toward mastery. Taking care of our earthly needs for health, transportation, security, leisure, education, economic security, environment, etc. has driven the creation of professions, trades, organizations and industries and formed the structural grounding for strong careers.

**FIRE** brands us with passion, energy, and inspiration that characterize successful careers, as well as successful organizations. Fire burns within us to improve products and services, help cure the sick, feed the hungry and attack poverty. (Thomas Edison’s exhaustive quest for the electric light utilized hundreds of experiments. Henry Ford innovated a production line for the Ford’s Model “T.” Nobel Peace Prize winner, Muhammad Yunus, changed the world through Grameen Bank, using an innovative idea of microfinance to improve the lives of the poorest of the poor in Bangladesh.<sup>3</sup> See: [http://money.cnn.com/2008/04/01/technology/muhammed\\_yunas.fortune/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/2008/04/01/technology/muhammed_yunas.fortune/index.htm)

**AIR** flows freely about us giving space to the dynamism, adaptability, and inventiveness that illuminate and support successful career changes. Careers may shift over time, yet they remain connected to their roots (earth) and the source of their passion (fire). Freedom (air) allows managers to become consultants, consultants to become teachers, and teachers to create innovative ideas, businesses, and products.

**WATER** is grounded fluidity. It refreshes, sustains, and renews us. It energizes and then re-energizes us. If we were to imagine that careers had features of the element water in them, then those careers could be renewed through pools and rapids, eddies and flows, shallowness and depth, and regularity and unpredictability. The element of water introduces the opportunity for rebirth, renewal and productive discontinuity and is absent in typical careers of the last 50 years.

Like **earth**, careers are still grounded in the individual’s core values, competencies, and aptitudes. They are best pursued when they incite the fires of passion and inspiration. Careers are most likely to be successful if they have the freedom (air) to be dynamic and adaptable. Lastly, the element water is the element that most patterns the tides of life and work. Water patiently settles into ponds of discontinuity while it refreshes and re-invigorates us. Water is the metaphorical element that renews careers.

## WATER – The Most Essential Element

Most traditional career models lack the ancient Greek element of water. How would the water element play a role in renewable careers of the future?

### 1) Employee Rapids and Pools

Careers have times of rapid movement, full of excitement and change. They should also have times of quiet, waiting at the ready to move on or to serve a different purpose without connotations of failure or obsolescence. Water drifts through deep pools at the center of the stream as well as the rush of rapids. Careers should encourage us to dive deep into the silent unknown or to challenge us to move quickly over the rocks in the shallows. The notion of rapids and pools incorporates many different ways of accomplishing a career, all of which are part of the main body of water.

- *Nancy was a project manager for CH2M Hill who was charged with cleaning up a highly complex hazardous waste site. She and her team achieved the estimated 60-year goal in less than 7 years at a cost of 1/5th the original estimate. The project was the quintessential high visibility, high stakes, fast moving, “rapids” of her career. After completing the project, her career trajectory took her to a “pool”, a quieter, but no less important place, where she managed one of CH2M Hill’s businesses while developing future revenue streams.*

### 2) Organizational Rapids and Pools

Companies do not seem to have much trouble creating rapids in their career patterns. Organizations are reeling under global competition. We see many high risk and high visibility positions that require rapid learning and movement. Highly competitive, extreme jobs and fast-paced projects create streams of white water. Negotiating difficult deadlines and climbing corporate ladders are examples shooting the “rapids” that challenge careers.

More now than ever, organizations are challenged to create pools – not stagnant backwaters, but deep wells and eddies – a source for developing future power and energy. Companies lose their competitive edge when they sacrifice long-term investment in talent for immediate profit. For example, some American automobile manufacturers have immersed themselves in profitable gas guzzling SUV’s rather than creating pools of smaller vehicles that run alternative or renewable energy. They have failed to meet the challenge and their very existence is threatened.

Many consulting and engineering firms have pools that are frequently seen as unproductive. Nonetheless, un-billable hours can be deep wells available for business planning and development or shallow eddies to reenergize marketing and strategic planning. Other “pools” draw upon retired employees who are happy to return to work and to provide reservoirs of talent and knowledge. For example, MITRE Corporation has a program called Reserves at the Ready<sup>4</sup>; Monsanto has a program called Resource Reentry<sup>5</sup>; and ExpertSource™ gathers retirees from many companies and rewires them to jobs in aerospace and related industries.<sup>6</sup>

### 3) Pools for Building Mastery

Reservoirs of knowledge provide pools for building Mastery. Teachers and mentors can immerse themselves into enhancing human capital. Verizon is an outstanding example of a company that values knowledge. The company offers an 18-month training course for high-potential, marketing professionals to develop some of the critical skills required as marketing managers and leaders. The company creates teams and then sets up real business projects. After completing the projects, each team presents its results as well as success metrics to leaders as part of their graduation. The pools of learning not only lead to mastering core competencies, but team building, visibility with leaders and contributions to the business in terms of process improvements, projects, and new services.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4) Pools to Refresh and Purify

A small number of companies are considering the notion that pools refresh and reinvigorate the mind and the spirit of their workers. For example, Hallmark grants their artistic employees periodic sabbaticals to wade in streams of contemporary fashion and new trends while honing their skills and regaining their inspiration.<sup>8</sup> Wells Fargo provides a small number of employees full pay and benefits to work in a Volunteer Leave Program for community-based organizations up to four months a year. While these arrangements are scattered, they provide employees with a fresh prospective and an opportunity to recharge their batteries.<sup>9</sup>

From time to time, pools and eddies of water become polluted and fail to support life, particularly when clean water takes a back seat to other goals, such as manufacturing, agriculture, or mining. With some care and effort, water can be filtered and purified to restore life. Careers should have periodic quality check-ups as well, so that the flow is not impeded or deteriorated beyond repair, but regains its health as it moves forward. At MasteryWorks, Inc. we provide computer models that examine and care for the flow of careers.<sup>10</sup>

- *Mark, a SVP of Human Resources in a Fortune 50 company, was engaged in a highly contentious acquisition. Responsible for reductions in workforce and reassignments, he became the target of anger and resentment although the reorganization was necessary. As a result, he began to experience bouts of depression. As soon as the bulk of the acquisition activity was completed, he asked to attend a six-week executive development program in Europe. He needed to get away and “get clean.” After a six-week program, he regained his self-confidence, his self-esteem, and his enthusiasm for work.*
- *Steel workers from factory in Slovakia have up to one month in a mountain every year. The purpose is to restore them, heart, mind, body, and soul, given the very difficult and dangerous work they do.*

#### 5) Channels, Canals, Ditches and Sluiceways

Water allows us to sail through diversionary channels of life and work. We sometimes leave the main body of water to explore other goals such as education, family or community service. These channels allow us to meet needs other than corporate needs for brief periods of time. They allow us to take into account the ebb and flow of our complete lives, not just our work lives, without giving up or compromising our career opportunities. Channels rejoin the main body of water when the metaphorical, fields are irrigated, or recreation and transportation needs have been met. Once returned to the main body, they rejoin the flow of the river.

Diverting water from its normal path offers a salutary effect. Canals and channels provide the connections and networks for safe passage from one place to another. Why not apply the same notion to our careers? Sluiceways relieve pressure and provide a habitat along our rivers and lakes for life to flourish.

- *Jill is a leading CLO for federal government agency. She looks forward to her next career as a hypnotherapist. She took a summer off before starting her current job to study with the country’s leading hypnotherapist to renew herself and begin building her credentials for the future. Now she’s back in the mainstream, transforming a critical government agency.*

In “Off-Ramps and On-Ramps, Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success,” Sylvia Ann Hewett writes that careers need more well-traveled on-ramps so that valuable human capital is not wasted. Although the book is about the need for women to balance work and family, the lessons apply to everyone who wants to temporarily step off the treadmill while pursuing other interests.<sup>11</sup> For example, Intel and GMAC-RFC both have offered sabbaticals for many years as have colleges and universities.<sup>12</sup>

## A Model to Renew and Sustain

Careers that incorporate the ancient Greek elements of water, in addition to earth, air and fire, move much more dynamically between work and non-work activities, and among different kinds of work activities. While traditional careers take on a relatively smooth horizontal S - Cliff curve, we might have expected a bumpy bell curve or a roller coaster, or movement along a lattice, or a spiral, or several starts and stops. But our human capital develops every step of the way, even if we are irrigating a farmer's field rather than rushing over white water in a canyon at breakneck speed. If we can imagine careers that appreciate and benefit from many kinds of human capital development, we will have created careers that facilitate productive work throughout the longer lifecycle expectancies for men and women.

## Conclusion

Because the growth rate for seniors is expected to outstrip all other age classes, we need to build models to re-energize our workforce with the prospect of careers going well beyond current retirement ages. Traditional models are no longer applicable because we have pushed life expectancy statistics to new levels. The quantities of the mix of earth, air, fire, and water in men and women produced different personality types, varying natures and diverse abilities. By looking backward, we found a model to build renewable careers in the future.

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## About the Authors

**Caela Farren**, Ph.D., is President of MasteryWorks, Inc. in Falls Church, VA. She has been a consultant, entrepreneur, and educator for over 30 years. Caela has worked with hundreds of thousands of people worldwide to get them on their mastery path. Caela's practice and company builds strong links between changing trends in industries, changing strategies of organizations and the talents and aspirations of individuals. People who work with her company discover their passion, their mastery path, and bring renewed contribution and high performance to their organizations.

Caela is known internationally for her expertise in developing talent management products and services. Her solutions are user-friendly systems that serve the needs of both organizations and individuals. She is frequently quoted in the media regarding her thoughts and advice on changing careers and work patterns in the nation. Hundreds of organizations have implemented talent management solutions from MasteryWorks, Inc. — consulting, workshops, assessment instruments and web-based talent management portals.

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**Karen L. Newman**, Ph.D., has spent her career in higher education, as a faculty member at Georgetown University and the University of Denver and as a dean at the University of Richmond and the University of Denver. Recently, she has worked with business leaders in Denver to create a new company, ExpertSource™. ExpertSource™ is a social enterprise with a mission to help Boomers engage in meaningful work on flexible terms and help organizations in aerospace and related industries grow, innovate, and thrive through flexible use of talent from ExpertSource™.

Newman earned her MBA and Ph.D. from the University of Chicago's Graduate School of Business and has taught organizational behavior, managing change and teambuilding at Georgetown, Case Western Reserve and Bucknell Universities. She has strong international ties, having also served as a visiting professor at the Czech Management Center and as a visiting lecturer at the Melbourne Business School. Her research includes organizational transformation in Central and East Europe, high performance work groups across cultures, ethical work climates and managerial careers. Newman has written extensively in the management field, having authored or co-authored more than 40 scholarly books, articles, reviews, monographs, and book chapters on topics such as organizational change, workplace commitment and cross-cultural management practices.

In addition to her teaching experience and extensive research and publishing, Newman has consulted with a wide variety of organizations including the Kennedy Institute of Ethics, the Marriott Corporation, General Motors and General Electric. She currently serves on the Boards of SysTest Labs, Junior Achievement, South Metro Denver Chamber of Commerce and Metro Denver Economic Development Corporation. She enjoys biking, hiking, gardening, and golf in her free time.

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