CAREER MANAGEMENT AND CAREER PLANNING

Career management and career planning are two parts of one process. Career planning is choosing a direction for your work and writing down the goals and steps that get you there. Career management is the continuing work of carrying out that plan, checking it against what happens, and changing course when your situation or your priorities shift.

Researchers define it the same way. In their textbook *Career Management*, Jeffrey Greenhaus, Gerard Callanan and Veronica Godshalk call it "a process by which individuals develop, implement, and monitor career goals and strategies." Former Intel chief Andy Grove put it more plainly in *Only the Paranoid Survive*: every worker is "the sole proprietor of his or her own career."

Planning decides where you are going. Management is everything after that, for as long as you work.

Career management means steering a whole working life

Career management means every choice that shapes a working life: the jobs you take and the ones you turn down, the skills you build, the people you stay in touch with, how you handle a bad year, and when you decide to leave. Companies use the phrase too, for their training and promotion programs. For most readers, though, the career management meaning that matters is the personal one. You own it, whether or not anyone at work is helping.

The loop has four parts:

1. **Plan.** Set a direction and a few goals with dates.
2. **Act.** Do the steps: the course, the project, the conversation, the application.
3. **Review.** On a set date, compare what happened with what you planned.
4. **Adjust.** Keep the plan, change part of it, or go back to step one and plan again.

Then you act again. Most people who say their plan "did not work" stopped after step two. They never reached a review where they could have changed it.

Where career management and career planning differ: scope and time

Career planning and career management differ in scope and in time. A plan is a document you write at a turning point. Management is a practice that runs for decades.

A plan you never review is a route map for a trip you are no longer taking. People change what they want and companies reorganize. The review is where the plan catches up.

Career planning is only the first of four repeating stages, plan, act, review, adjust, and most plans fail because people stop after acting and never reach the review.

The Purpose of Career Management (and What Planning Adds)

Done well, career management and career planning mostly pay off by protecting you. Managing your career on purpose means fewer expensive wrong turns: the two years in a role that was never going to work, the promotion that pulled you away from the work you did best, the job you stayed in because leaving felt like admitting a mistake.

For workers, it keeps the big choices in your hands

Why is career management important for the person doing it? Three reasons.

- **Nobody else is watching the whole picture.** Managers change every few years, and company programs cover one employer. You are the only one who sees every job you have held.
- **Small corrections are cheaper than big ones.** Asking for a different project this quarter costs less than quitting in three years.
- **You spot a poor fit before it turns into burnout.** A regular check makes you ask whether the work still suits you while there is time to change it.

Planning adds the thing to measure against. Without a written direction, reviews turn into a vague feeling about whether things are going well. With one, you can ask a plain question: did I move toward it or not?

For employers, people who manage their careers are easier to place well

Career management improves employee performance mostly through better matches. People who can name their strengths, and the conditions they do their best work in, ask for the right projects. Their managers can then put them where they do their best work. Companies also tend to keep people longer when the next step is visible inside the firm, and not only at a competitor. If you run this from the company side, our guide to career

succession planning covers how the employer's plan and the employee's plan have to line up.

Three habits, checking against evidence, asking two people to rank you, and forced choice, make a self-rating of your strengths more accurate.

The Career Management and Career Planning Process in Six Steps

Six steps, each ending with something on paper

1. **Self-assess.** Write three strengths with one example apiece, two kinds of task you would like more of, and two you would like less of.
2. **Explore.** List three to five roles or directions. Look up the daily tasks for each on O*NET OnLine, and talk to one person already doing each.
3. **Set goals.** Write one 12-month goal and one three-year direction. Make the 12-month goal specific enough that a friend could tell whether you hit it.
4. **Build the action plan.** Turn the 12-month goal into SMART goals: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound. Then list three to five actions to finish within 90 days, each with a date. Make at least one of them a networking action with its own date. "Network more" is not an action; "coffee with two product managers by March 15" is.
5. **Execute.** Keep a simple log: one line a week on what you did and what you learned.
6. **Review and adjust.** On a set date, decide to keep the plan, change part of it, or start again from step one.

If you are working out how to create a career management plan from scratch, steps one to four produce it in a weekend. Steps five and six are the career management part, and they are the ones that keep a plan alive.

Review the plan every quarter, and after five kinds of news

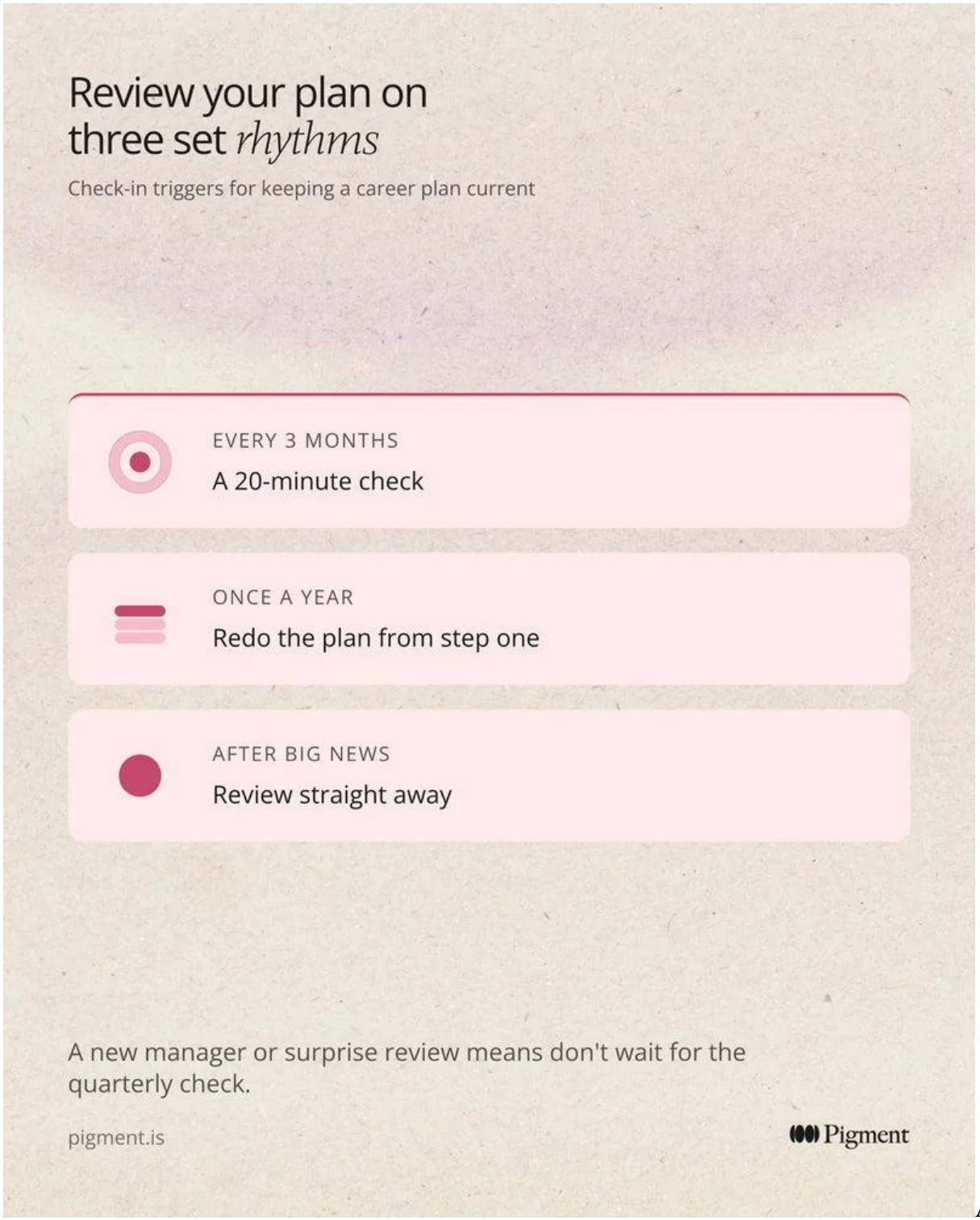
A light check every three months takes about 20 minutes. Ask three questions. Did I do my 90-day actions? What did I learn about what I like and what I am good at? Does the 12-month goal still make sense? Once a year, go back to step one and redo the plan properly.

Some events call for a review straight away, even between scheduled checks:

- A reorganization, or a change of manager.

- A performance review that surprised you, in either direction.
- A job offer or promotion you did not expect.
- Signs of burnout that last more than a few weeks.
- A life change that moves your priorities: a move, a new child, a health problem, a partner's new job.

A caution about checking too often: reviewing weekly turns every bad day into proof that the plan is wrong. A quarterly check is frequent enough to catch drift and slow enough to ignore the noise.



A career plan gets reviewed on three rhythms, a 20-minute check every 3 months, a full redo once a year, and an early review right after big news like a new manager.

A Worked Career Management Plan Example

Here is a career management plan example for a composite reader, built from a situation that comes up often. Maya is 31 and four years into a data analyst job at a mid-size

software company. She is good at the work, has been restless for about a year, and is weighing a move into product management.

Where she is now

Senior analyst with strong reviews. The work is going well; she wants more say in what gets built.

Self-assessment

Strengths, with evidence: turning messy data into a clear recommendation (her slides get forwarded to leadership), and making numbers make sense to colleagues outside the data team (the sales team asks for her by name). Wants more of: deciding what gets built, and working with more people. Wants less of: long stretches alone cleaning data.

Three-year direction

Product manager on a product where data drives the decisions.

12-month goal

Own one product feature from problem to launch, inside her current company.

Next 90 days

Tell her manager about the goal by the end of month one. Sit in on a product manager's planning meetings for four weeks. Volunteer to write the analysis for one upcoming feature decision. Talk to two product managers who came from analytics about what they miss and what surprised them.

Review

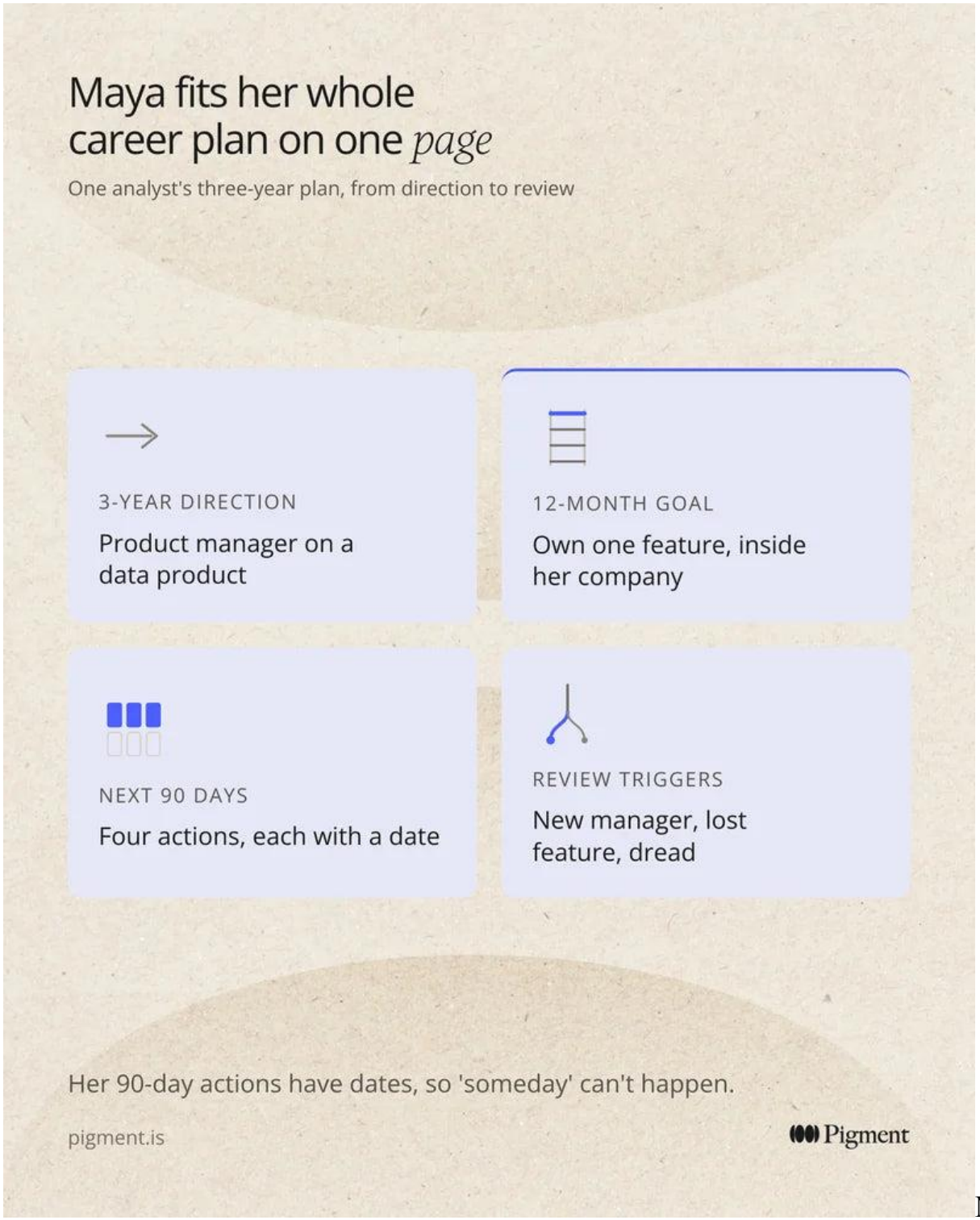
A quarterly check on the last Friday of each quarter. An early review if her manager changes, if the feature goes to someone else, or if she finds herself dreading the product meetings.

Fallback

If product work turns out to be mostly meetings she dislikes, look at analytics lead roles that keep her close to the decisions.

Two things make this plan work. The goal is small enough to test inside her current job, so she learns whether she likes product work before she bets a job change on it. And one of the review triggers is a feeling: if she dreads the meetings, that counts as evidence.

Now suppose the first quarterly review shows she loved the feature analysis but found the constant stakeholder meetings wearing. She keeps the direction and changes the route, looking for a product role on a small team with fewer stakeholders. That is career management and career planning working together: the plan set the direction, and the review changed the route. For a blank version with every field, use our field-by-field planning template.



Maya's plan fits on one page, a 3-year direction into product, a 12-month goal she can test in her current job, dated 90-day actions, and review triggers that include how she feels.

Career Management Across Career Stages

The psychologist Donald Super’s life-span model describes a career as a series of stages across a lifetime, from exploring, to establishing yourself, to maintaining what you have

built, and later stepping back. The labels are decades old, but the idea still holds: career management and career planning look different depending on where you are.

- **Students: widen the list.** Try many kinds of work cheaply, through classes, part-time jobs, and projects. Goals are about finding out what you like. Review each term.
- **Early career, roughly the first five to ten years: build proof.** Choose skills that carry over to other roles. Job changes are normal here and often useful.
- **Mid-career: choose on purpose.** You finally have enough evidence about yourself to plan precisely, and the most to lose from drifting. Career management for working adults at this stage is mostly about fit: staying where your strengths get used, or moving deliberately.
- **Late career: shape the last stretch.** Many people move to fewer hours, advising, or teaching others what they know.

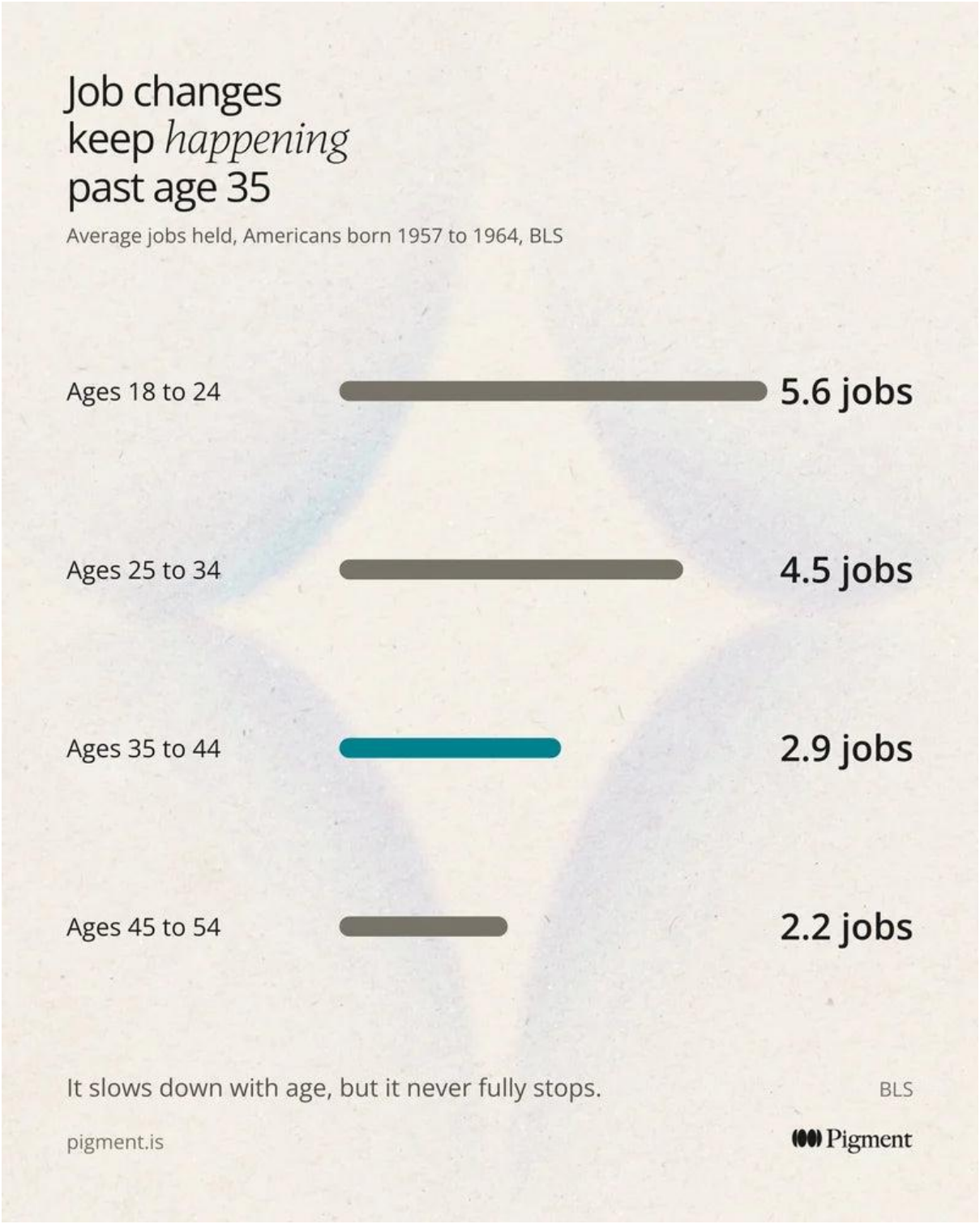
Job changes do not stop after your twenties. In a long-running federal survey, Americans from the late baby boom (the group born between 1957 and 1964) held an average of 2.9 jobs in their forties alone, counting ages 35 to 44. From 45 to 54 the figure was still 2.2, and across ages 18 to 58 it came to 12.9 jobs per person. Changing jobs in your forties is ordinary, so a plan that assumes one straight ladder will mislead you.

Managing a career pivot or lateral move

A lateral move, to a different role or team at the same level, can feel like standing still. It is often one of the smartest moves in a career. It adds skills, widens the circle of people who know your work, and can put you in work that suits you better without waiting for a title change. Maya’s plan above is a lateral move in practice. We compare the two directions in lateral vs vertical career moves.

For a pivot into a new field, break the risk into pieces. Try the new work on the side first. Move inside your current company if you can, since people there already trust you. Keep a fallback written into the plan.

Setbacks belong in the loop too. A layoff, a missed promotion, or a bad year is a review trigger. The plan that comes out of that review is often better than the one before, because it rests on harder evidence about what you want.



Americans born between 1957 and 1964 kept changing jobs into their forties, just less often than they did in their twenties.

Career Planning Tools That Help, Matched to Each Step

Tools help with career management and career planning at specific steps, and each kind measures something else. Pick one that matches the step you are on.

What it measures	The step it helps	Examples	Cost
Interests: what you say you like	Explore	My Next Move and its Interest Profiler	Free
Strengths and personality	Self-assess	CliftonStrengths, Big Five tests	CliftonSt engt $24.99; n any tests are ree
Aptitude: what you do well on timed tasks	Self-assess	YouScience, Johnson O'Connor	Varies by prov
Labor-market facts: tasks, pay, outlook	Explore and set goals	The Occupational Outlook Handbook, O*NET OnLine	Free
Working style and the conditions you last in	Self-assess	Pigment	$79