

"The Right Time to Change Jobs"

by Rick C. Hornberger

Today's job market is rich with opportunity. Reminders abound. A friend accepts an exciting new position. Neighbors move for that once-in-a-lifetime promotion. Hot executives dominate the news. It's enough to make you wonder, is it time to change jobs?

That's not an easy question to answer. A new job, after all, might bring you higher pay, more authority, greater responsibility, a better chance for advancement -- even a better working environment. On the other hand, making a move for the wrong reason can send you down a treacherous path, away from your ultimate goal.

Consider the tales of two former clients. Their names are changed but their stories are true.

Jim Peters dreamed of becoming sales manager for a national construction firm. Having spent five years as a salesman for a Georgia-based construction firm, he believes it's time to move on, feeling underpaid and seeing no room for advancement. After quietly talking to a few local firms who are hiring sales people with his level of experience, he accepts a higher-paying job with an architectural firm.

Four years later, Jim is ready to move again. While he enjoys his boss, the work is more difficult than his former job, and chances for advancement are non-existent. What's worse, the 10% raise Jim engineered by job hopping was also paid to his successor at his former construction sales job.

Given his disenchantment with architectural sales, Jim opts to return to construction sales. Learning that Washington, DC is one of the hottest building markets, Jim starts to hunt there. But no firms are willing to increase his salary because his experience in architectural sales commands no premium. One firm offers a job with no salary increase, and Jim accepts, rationalizing there will be opportunity for advancement later.

Jim relocates to Washington. But disappointment surfaces a few years later when his hoped-for promotion fails to materialize. Jim eventually purchases a fast-food franchise with his brother-in-law.

Bill Doyle, a civil engineering student with top academic honors, hopes to head a design team for one of the top national engineering firms, designing luxury hotels. But no civil engineering firms recruit at his college, and his resumes generate no interview requests from his target employers. He settles instead for an offer from a local power utility upon graduation.

Three years later, Bill hears of the exceptional salaries civil engineers are earning in the Texas oil fields. This time, a resume mailing yields an offer and 25% salary increase with a major oil firm. Bill bites. Five years later, the oil slump hits, and Bill is laid off. After six

months of searching, he finds a job designing pulp and paper plants for a 20% pay cut. Eventually, Bill finds his way back into hotel design -- but as an individual designer, not a manager, for a national chain of rather boring hotels.

Both Jim and Bill made a fundamental and unfortunately common mistake. They were willing to change jobs for apparently better offers, but their moves never advanced them towards their ultimate career goals. The end result was a lot of movement that didn't lead to a desired destination.

Don't let the same thing happen to your career goals. With basic career planning, you can find the right jobs and know when to accept the right offer.

The following career planning method uses straight-forward common sense. Don't be fooled by the simplicity. The difficulty comes in execution. You'll need discipline, self-evaluation and commitment.

### A Two-Step, Sure-Fire Plan

My advice boils down to two points: adopt a career goal and then develop plans to execute it. These two steps allow you -- not fate -- to control your advancement.

Your career goal should be a specific position in a specific industry. For example, you might wish to be an executive editor of a technical publications company, or the chief engineer of a major auto parts manufacturer.

Your job plan will have two elements. Your long-term plan will be a list of all the jobs you must hold to reach your career goal. This plan should include not only job titles, but all the skills and experience you'll need for each post. Your short-term job plan will list the skills and experience you'll need to move up the next rung of your ladder.

For most of us, there is no shortcut. Only with a goal can you know when you've arrived. Only with a plan can you be confident that you'll arrive on schedule, or at all.

To choose a fitting goal, candidly assess your experience, skills, interests, strengths, weaknesses, enthusiasms and aversions. If you find self-assessment difficult, have a close friend help you, or consult a career counselor. Once you have a clear picture of how you best operate, you can select a career goal that conforms to your character.

### Questions, Questions

Try to get a feel for the day-to-day reality of the post to which you aspire. Research is paramount here. Spend time at the library. Read relevant books and magazines. Talk to executive recruiters. They know what it takes to flourish in a given role. As you begin to clarify your goal, interview people who have achieved it. Find out if you really want their responsibilities and hard work. (Either way, it's best to know beforehand.)

To begin establishing your job plan, ask your role models how they rose to their present positions. Chart their career histories and consider the composite result a very rough road map.

You can't follow their advice verbatim, because the career landscape is always shifting slightly. For example, foreign languages may become important as your business or industry becomes more international. You may need expertise in a process or technology that didn't exist when your mentors were at your stage.

Therefore, be sure to ask your interviewees two additional questions: What qualifications will his successor be expected to have and what knowledge did he lack - but wish he had - when he began this job?

As you begin to see the path to your goal, interview people who hold the jobs along your way. The better you understand what lies ahead, the better you can meet the challenge.

When you're ready to get on your plan, timing becomes paramount. You should seek each new job as soon as you're prepared to succeed in it. Moving before you have the skills and confidence can be disastrous to your career and your company. Besides, there's no need to move too soon or too high just because an outstanding opportunity comes prematurely. There are always opportunities for outstanding talent.

Likewise, there's no career benefit in staying on your present job once you've prepared for another one. Loyalty and stagnation are two different things. As soon as you're ready for more responsibility, seek it.

As you advance, keep abreast of changes in your industry. Changing regulations, technology and business conditions have the potential to alter both your path and destination. Remain flexible and periodically review your plans and goals.

### Keep A High Profile

Your reputation within an industry is highly influential in gaining interviews and securing new positions. Never assume that doing good work is enough. It's simply a good start. The best way to develop your reputation (and keep up with the job market) is to become active in a trade association. Serve on a committee in the area of your interest, write articles for your group's journal and agree to speak when invited. These initiatives advertise your commitment to your field.

Cultivate a network of successful people within your industry. Make it clear that you respect their attainment and want to emulate them. Most people will be flattered and happy to help. This network will provide an early warning of the best openings, which are rarely advertised.

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If you have the choice, it's better to remain employed and learn about openings through your network than to quit your job and sleuth full-time. Your attractiveness as a successful employee is worth far more than extra hours to shop.

To review, effective career management requires a goal, a plan and good timing. Choose a goal that is worthwhile yet attainable. Develop a plan based on thorough, up-to-date industry knowledge. Seek your next job as soon as you have the skill and confidence to advance.

Do these things consistently and well. You will realize your true career potential.

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