

A Career Move

Written by Nick Sanders

Thursday, 28 September 2017 00:00



Joe's goodbye lunch was held on Monday. He's leaving the company after four years, moving on to a much smaller contractor just down the street. He said he wasn't looking to leave; but when he heard about the position and the compensation, it was too good to refuse. He's leaving a DCAA support/compliance position and will become a Manager of (General) Accounting, with oversight of Accounts Payable and Payroll.

He's leaving a year before he would have vested in the company's retirement plan.

He's making a career move.

Pat worked for me 20 years ago. Pat was the sole breadwinner for his family but he didn't have a college degree. He asserted that his job didn't require one. His assertion was correct! His job didn't require a college degree—but his career absolutely demanded a college degree. He was never going to move from his current position without one. I counseled him to pursue a degree (after all, the company would reimburse him for the expense), but he resisted. Subsequently, he was at a significant disadvantage when he was laid off and had to look for a new job.

Pat didn't understand the difference between a job and a career.

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Most of us have jobs but a far fewer number of us have careers. The job is what you are currently doing, whereas the career is what you want to be doing the rest of your life. The career is your progression of jobs, moving (hopefully) upwards in terms of responsibility and authority, and compensation and respect. You work your job but you manage your career. One is tactical; the other is strategic. One is right now; the other is long-term.

The job is about right now. It's about what's right in front of you. Accordingly, the job requires the ability to listen, to understand, and to execute. In contrast, the career requires vision: the vision to see what isn't there—but what might be there in the future with the right combination of effort and luck.

Managing your career requires you to be honest in your self-assessment of your current skills, strengths, and weaknesses. Then you need to take action to add to your skills, build on your strengths, and remediate your weaknesses. In Pat's case, he needed to understand that his career demanded a college degree and that he needed to go get one. In Joe's case, he understood that his lack of supervisory experience was going to hold him back and that getting that experience was more valuable (in terms of future roles, responsibility, and earnings) than vesting in a retirement plan.

A career move is any change you make in order to advance your long-term career potential. It's taking a lateral transfer—or even a seeming demotion—in order to gain skills or experience or to remediate a weakness. A career move is an investment in your career. As such, it's an investment in yourself.

Career moves also require some level of courage—the ability to leave your current comfort zone in search of new challenges. That courage isn't as common as it should be, and so many people work hard at their jobs without also working hard at their careers.

I've been in the work force more than 30 years, either as a corporate employee or as an employee of a very large consulting firm. I've run my own consulting firm while maintaining full-time employment as a corporate employee (with the knowledge and approval of my employer and my clients). I've made several career moves during that time. I left a large aerospace/defense contractor with an amazing retirement plan in order to join a smaller environmental remediation contractor where I could get more cradle-to-grave experience. I left that small environmental remediation contractor to join a somewhat larger aerospace/defense contractor where I could get supervisory experience as well as other key skills—for no

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additional compensation. I escaped that contractor to join a multi-national engineering services provider where I learned other skills, including management of contracts and subcontracts. After a while, I had been exposed to so many skills, and had accumulated so much experience, that I was ready to be a consultant. The point is: I was managing my career.

A good boss discusses your career development plan with you. A great boss creates opportunities for you to develop against your career plan. That being said, your career is not the responsibility of your boss.

You need to manage your career. You need to identify what career moves would be helpful and be open to them when they materialize. Sometimes it might mean taking a new position within the same company and other times it might mean leaving the company in search of skills, experience, and responsibility. You need to know what move would be right for your career and you need to have the courage to make the move when the opportunity presents itself.

Are you up to the challenge?