

Using Lateral Moves to Further Your Career

By BNET Editorial

published on BNET.com 5/02/2007

Given the proportion of your time that you spend working, you probably want your job to be an interesting part of your life.

It used to be that to keep things interesting you needed to keep getting promoted. In today's lean and flattened workplaces, frequent promotions have ended up on the employment scrap heap alongside the notion of a "job for life." Fortunately, today both employers and employees are discovering that lateral career moves—between basically equivalent jobs—are a creative way to build exciting and rewarding futures for individuals and companies.

What You Need to Know

Why might a move to a different job in the same pay range with the same employer be a good move for me?

For one thing, you'll broaden your skills and experiences (good for you), and for another, you'll offer your employer more value (good for them and you, too).

Your willingness to move laterally may improve your job security, protecting you from being laid off as your company downsizes in one department while expanding operations in more profitable divisions. And at the same time, if things don't work out in the company where you're employed now, you'll leave with increased marketability—your added skills and experiences can make you more attractive to a potential new employer.

Employers, likewise, are coming to recognize lateral moves as a way of retaining valuable employees (as well as protecting themselves from losing valued talent to their competitors). Top talent is difficult and expensive to identify, recruit, train, and retain. Top talent is also hungriest for new challenges and growth opportunities and will be quick to leave if not fed with them. Employers are beginning to understand that moving eager employees to new assignments within the organization is an extremely valuable approach to employee development, and one which will serve them well in the future.

Might a lateral move reflect negatively on me?

Not necessarily. As with almost every business decision, you get the best value if you make your choice for reasons that make sense in terms of your overall long-range plan and then learn from your new experience. A lateral move can be made for myriad reasons, and you may experience some surprising benefits in the process (for example, understanding the ways other parts of the business

run; making new connections and friends). Capture those benefits as “added strategic value” for your career and you may actually boost your career prospects in the long run.

How can I make sure that I don't get stuck on the slow track?

That's a risk and it's one to “put on the table” before moving to a new job internally. Employers that support skills development and open communication across the whole business are the most likely to understand the value of placing their high-potential employees in a wide variety of their business operations. After all, the best C.E.O.s tend to be the ones with the broadest exposure to the full spectrum of corporate functions. However, if you observe that your company's most senior leaders have achieved their success having experience in but a lone department, you might consider either staying on your current departmental ladder or even changing employers if your career plan involves a need or desire for wide variety.

Before deciding, you might consider a conversation with some senior leaders around the organization as well as consulting managers in the Human Resources department for their perspective. There never are any guarantees for a career, but it can be helpful to state your concerns directly to the people who can influence your future in the organization.

What to Do

Think About Your Motivations

Does the next logical upward step in your career path require certain experience that you don't yet have? Have you just finished a protracted period of high-pressure productivity and need a lighter load for a short time? Are you taking demanding classes to increase your market value in the long run and need a less strenuous set of responsibilities during your workday? Are family needs preventing you from keeping up a demanding travel schedule or dealing with intense pressures? Are you committed to the company in the long run and want to understand as much of it as you can? Or do you simply want some variety?

The better you understand your motivation for considering the move to another post, the easier it will be to assess the opportunity when it's offered to you.

Here are some key questions to ask yourself when considering the option to move sideways within your organization (or perhaps, in certain circumstances, deciding whether to take a less demanding job):

- If your company is downsizing, or if there are other elements in your life requiring more of your attention and energy, will a lateral move help you stay happily employed? (Better to move within your company's payroll than off it.)

- Will a lateral move give you valuable on-the-job exposure to business functions that will help you to move upward at another time? (Train today for a potential opportunity down the road.)
- How receptive is your employer to the principle of hiring from within and providing lateral experience in order to develop employees—will it really help your career here?
- Is there a monitoring system in place within the organization so that your career path will be tracked and your new skills will be appreciated and tapped later on? In other words, will you get credit for acquiring your new skills and experiences? Is it likely you will be afforded opportunities to apply your expanded capabilities toward possible promotions or other options for growth?

Look at Your Organization’s Internal Employment Policies

Find out if there is a policy in place that supports lateral moves. Talk to employees who have made that choice to discover whether their long-term career ambitions are still being protected. Are there “success stories” where others have benefited from such internal moves (in the way you hope to benefit)?

Work Out Where the Growth Areas Are

In selecting a new assignment with your current employer, you may want to seek out opportunities in areas in which your company is thriving or continuing to expand. Talk to other employees in those divisions to discover what the environment is like and whether senior management is supportive of individual ambition and career development—or just plain supportive of people who work there.

Consider the Desirability of the Available Openings

Would you have to take a pay cut? If you did, what are the financial and emotional implications for you in doing that? How long do you think you’d remain interested in that particular work? Does the new department show promise for continued growth and opportunity? Is the management team of your chosen department well received and respected among their own superiors?

Work Out What You Enjoy about Your Current Work

Think about what you like best about your job as it stands and try to work out if you’ll find the same elements in your prospective new assignment. How will you stay in touch with your current team

members? Would you be able to return to your present assignment when and if you desire? If not, would that make an important difference to you?

Think about the Chances of Success and Failure in Your Potential New Assignment

What most appeals to you about the new position? How well does its duties and responsibilities fit with your skills, talents, and interests? What might not fit so well with your current skills or interests? How sure are you that this is a potentially good fit—and as good as or better than the job you're leaving? Work out roughly how long it will take to achieve your current level of proficiency in your new assignment. Are the measures of success acceptable to you? Are the requirements for upward mobility on this new ladder attractive to you? Does what you know of the working environment attract you? How does it compare with the area that you'd leave?

Keep In Mind Your Prospects Outside the Company

Does this new internal job present eventual opportunities for expanding your marketability in the external job market? Will it provide you with technical training and experiences to boost your competence? Overall, is it likely to reward you sufficiently for the risk you'd be taking now? And you are, of course, taking some risk moving to a new position.

Plan for the Changes

Be sure you and your new manager work out a plan to integrate you into the new team as smoothly as possible. You may have put a great deal of advance thought and work into making the transition, but your new coworkers may not be so ready for you as a new player.

Don't assume that just because you're a long-standing employee in the company, you're instantly going to be at home in this new division. If you're replacing a beloved former coworker, you may run up against resistance to your presence. Do as much as you can to make yourself welcome in the group. The good news: since you are working for the same company, you already know about the overarching culture and you should be able to "get up to speed" and make new friends fast.

What to Avoid

You Discover that Your New Job Will Be Cut Only After You Have Left a Secure Position

Do your research before you jump. Investigate this new assignment, just as you would if you were applying for the job from the outside. Understand the roles that this particular position and the department play in the company's long-term plans. If you cannot see how this work serves your employer's mission critical objectives, hold out for another opportunity. No sense taking a new job only to lose it a short time later.

You Become Slow-tracked

If you make a lateral move, especially if it is to reduce your stress load temporarily for a personal reason, you may find yourself accidentally on the list of "expendable" employees. Be sure to invest time regularly to market yourself to colleagues throughout the business. For example, go to key meetings on a regular basis or have lunch with your former manager to stay in touch with developments in your original department. Stay current with your company's developments and objectives. Position yourself to make another jump into a more critical job as soon as you're ready to make that move.

You Make Too Many Lateral Moves

When you make a lateral move, try to take a job that pays you in some special way, even though it's on the same level in the organizational chart. Make a move with a purpose that serves your interests. Learn something. Add variety to your life. Or make a lateral move to learn deeper management skills elsewhere in the company, and then return to your original department at a higher rank.

Lateral career moves should be used as a valuable strategic career management tool and, when you're able to discuss your recent career path in those terms, you'll find that a lateral move can be an excellent springboard to an even better future.

Where to Learn More

Books:

Bolles, Richard. *What Color Is Your Parachute? A Practical Manual for Job-Hunters and Career-Changers*. Revised ed. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2007.

The Princeton Review Guide to Your Career, 6th Edition. New York: Princeton Review, 2006.

Jansen, Julie. *I Don't Know What I Want, But I Know It's Not This: A Step-by-Step Guide to Finding Gratifying Work*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.

Web Sites:

"Don't Disregard a Lateral Move," AECWorkforce.com:
www.aecworkforce.com/advice/article.asp?a=33

Guidetoyourcareer.com: www.guidetoyourcareer.com

"Lateral Moves Can Open New, Fast-Track Career Doors," TechRepublic.com:
http://articles.techrepublic.com.com/5100-10878_11-5053853.html

"Lateral Moves: When Do They Work?," Monster.com: <http://wlb.monster.com/articles/lateralmoves>