Effectively Navigating
Changing Careers

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So, you are thinking about a new job? Well, you are not alone. Our ever-evolving digital environment has people clamoring to grow their skills in everything from software engineering to cybersecurity to diversity and inclusion. Before you shell out hundreds or thousands of dollars for that certification or an advanced degree, or jump to a role just because it's available, pause for a moment to figure out why you are looking in the first place?

Why are you changing careers? Have your passions and interests changed? Are you looking for a new challenge? Do you simply want to grow in your current role? Are you no longer connected to your organization and its mission? Or has a new opportunity been presented to you? For each of these scenarios, the first step involves a little "soul searching" to understand what's driving the need for change, and more importantly - what you are looking to gain from the change?

It's essential to understand what you want from the new opportunity. Working in recruiting, I always ask candidates, "If you could create the ideal role, what would it be and why?"

This is a great way to identify dissatisfiers in your current role and highlight what's critical in your next opportunity. Do you need new challenges? Balance? Advancement? Mission-driven work? It's important to be able to articulate the "what must be true" to yourself so that you can communicate that to potential employers. Once you figure this out, you can start planning your move.

In figuring out how to find the new opportunity, your network becomes vital. Start reaching out to your contacts to find out organizations you should consider. 85% of jobs today are found through networking, meaning it really is about WHO you know. Start setting up coffee and lunch dates with trusted members of your network to let them know your aspirations. They become advocates and make you aware of opportunities as they arise. Research is also critical at this stage. You should check GlassDoor and LinkedIn to find out about companies you might want to consider, and determine if you have connections there who can validate your research. Keep in mind this is a long game. Good career moves take time, so start your research and networking early. If you wait until the need is urgent, chances are you'll be too willing to settle for something less than ideal.

"If you could create the ideal role, what would it be and why?"

This is also the time to learn more about the necessary skills for the role you want. Use your contacts and ask about certifications and education. Are they really required for the job you're seeking or does the company view on-the-job training and learning potential more favorably? In many instances, certifications without hands-on experience don't carry much weight. Leaders are looking for people who have the skills already or the aptitude for learning. For some roles, some skills are necessary before you can even be considered. If you want to be a software engineer, for example, you need to know how to code. Period. Unless you are willing to start over in an entry-level position, leaders will expect you to understand how to code - many companies require applicants to pass a coding test as a part of the applicant process. Have realistic expectations for the roles you seek.

What if you ARE looking to make a total career change? I get this question a lot given I started and spent much of my career in Technology but moved to a role in Human Resources (HR). I was able to do that because of my network. There were several leaders in HR whom I'd worked with closely over the years who recognized my transferable skills. I partnered with HR on many diversity recruiting events before joining HR, so I was a known entity in the organization. When a Diversity Recruiting Lead role became available, my HR network reached out to me. They knew my work and knew I'd be interested. Even though I didn't have direct HR experience, I did have experience driving results in recruiting, a passion for diversity, and a great partnership with the Diversity Recruiting team. This enabled my transition to HR.

Always know what your strengths are. What is your secret sauce, and how can it be a lever for the career you want? If you are a phenomenal program manager in Technology, how can you take those same skills to drive results in HR? It's a lot easier to make a move when you have a transferable skill set. This is another place where your network becomes critical. Is there a leader, co-worker, or even better - a former boss - in the area you want to move to who knows you and your great work? Why does that matter? Those individuals are going to be more likely to bet on you because they believe in your potential and have confidence that you can drive results.

Before you jump to a new role, make sure it's the right opportunity, and there is strong leadership to support you. In the end, trust your gut and be patient. Great opportunities take time!

A few tips to keep in mind for your current role and if you're looking to make a change:

1. Build relationships with people in a variety of fields and at different levels (both leaders and people in the trenches). This is helpful when getting insights into opportunities, as well as creating advocates to help you move to new opportunities (potentially at the same company). Be prepared to be disappointed. Your initial attempts at career change may not be successful, but learn from them and be ready to try again.

2. Collaborate with others and give them a chance to see what you're capable of while also gaining insights into other roles. You'll also give leaders opportunities to see your strengths in new areas. Ask questions and probe.

3. Prove Yourself by continuing to deliver great results in your current role. Leaders are more likely to take a chance on giving you a new opportunity outside of your current wheelhouse if you're a proven commodity. I can't underscore enough that leaders are taking a risk by hiring you into a role that is not your core expertise. Help them see your skills and strengths, so they feel good about bringing you on board, even if you have a lot to learn in your new role.

Shavonne Gordon,
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