

LATERAL MOVES

72%

of the 17,261 candidates surveyed in 2010 by Right Management moved to a similar or lower level when they landed new jobs.

CAREER



THE WAY WE WORK

How to Make a Smart Lateral Move

Moving straight up the ladder is not as common anymore, due in part to the economy. Now companies are pitching sideways moves as a career enhancer. Are they?
By Jena McGregor

FIVE YEARS AGO Los Angeles-based headhunter Kirk Hoyle couldn't get candidates' attention unless he dangled a title change, a boost in the number of direct reports, and at least a 15% bump in pay. Today it's a different story: Many executives, he says, are willing to take jobs with similar titles and pay in exchange for little more than a shorter commute

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Photograph by FREDRIK BRODEN

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“Over is the new up.”

—Joanne Cleaver, author of the forthcoming book *The Career Lattice*

or a more stable future. The lateral move, once derided, is getting a second look. “Everyone has a subconscious weakness right now,” Hoyle says. “There’s a lot of insecurity about the future.”

After three years of near economic standstill, people are ready for new challenges, different responsibilities, or at least more solid footing. According to a poll by the consultants at Right Management, some 84% of employees planned to look for jobs in 2011, up from 60% the year before. But with job growth stagnant, new business ideas on the shelf, and baby boomers choosing not to retire, making a move straight up the chain currently looks about as likely as making a voluntary decision to step down.

The good news: A lateral move—if done right—no longer puts you at risk of hitting a dead end. Conventional wisdom posits that sideways moves are like pressing the pause button on your career, an idea that has stuck around even as organizations grow increasingly flatter. But with the complexities of a global business environment and the economic realities of trying to do more with less, agility is becoming as important as trajectory. As Joanne Cleaver, an author of a forthcoming book about making smart lateral moves, puts it, “Over is the new up.”

Some companies are encouraging lateral moves explicitly. Deloitte has popularized the notion, both in-house and with clients, of a “career lattice” rather than a “career ladder”—a metaphor for the often sideways or diagonally up-or-down directions in which careers move today. (Cleaver’s book addresses a similar topic.) Employee groups at insurance giant Chubb recently held career workshops that addressed how to make the right kinds of lateral moves.

And the cable provider Cox Communications has begun talking about the value of sideways career steps as part of formal development discussions with employees. Cox’s vice president of talent and development, Erin Hand, says the shift is a conscious one: “Organizations are marketing the lateral move as a development opportunity rather than as a parking spot.”

Figuring out how much your company stands behind such marketing is up to you. Lateral moves may not always carry a stigma these days, but they must still be chosen carefully. Which means doing your homework—about the company’s financial prospects if it’s an external move, the true responsibilities of the job, and what the future opportunities really are. That’s especially true the more senior you are, says New York City-based career consultant Donna Schwarz. If you make a mistake, she

Sideways Advice

SEEK MORE RESPONSIBILITY

A key question to ask before making a lateral move: Even if a job has the same title and pay, how much more leadership responsibility does it offer? Says career consultant Donna Schwarz: “Your skill set is pretty solid by this point, and the next moves up are all about being able to influence and direct others.”

WATCH FOR TITLE INFLATION

Remember that “one company’s VP is another company’s director,” says New York City-based recruiter David Staiti—a phenomenon that’s particularly true as companies that can’t afford to raise salaries dole out lofty labels instead. Analyze the job on its merits rather than its name.

ENLIST HR

If you’d like to stay in-house, use company resources. IBM, for instance, has a suite of software tools that not only maps out the sometimes sideways moves employees might need to make to get from point A to point B in their careers but also links them to people in those jobs or business units for information. Find out what your company offers.

KEEP YOUR OPTIONS OPEN

Cathy Benko, vice chairman at Deloitte and the author of a book called *The Corporate Lattice*, says that a good way to analyze a lateral move is by assessing how many future choices it gives you.

SCORE QUICK WINS

If you are switching industries, you’ll need to prove yourself. Marketing director Mary Anschutz says that when she jumped from the beer industry into software, scoring a few early publicity coups helped her earn colleagues’ respect.

KNOW YOUR COMPANY

If the move you’re considering is in-house, make sure your company respects the idea. Lateral moves are probably good choices in flat global enterprises that appreciate a breadth of skills, but less so in those that still rely on silos.

LOOK FOR REAL GROWTH

Many people are lured into a lateral move by the prospect of a growing company. Make sure the hiring is for newly created jobs rather than replacements for current positions.

says, “how many more moves do you have left?”

Most important, whether you’re moving across the company or across industries, make sure you’re prepared for the cultural differences the new job will probably bring. When Valarie Wilder, a group sales manager for a San Diego resort, decided to move to a more stable property earlier this year, she used LinkedIn to discover that most of the team had been with the resort for years. That was a good sign, but it also prepared her for the culture change: “I knew it could take the staff some time to warm up.” While that’s true with any job, the greater risk you take on with a lateral move makes that research all the more critical. **■**