

Why Lateral Moves are Important to Your Career Growth

For a long time people saw career moves in stark terms, any direction but up, was down. Today, the world has changed and many workers now know that progress can be made even when your career veers sideways in the form of a lateral career move.

"The stigma of lateral moves has largely faded away," says Joanne Cleaver author of [The Career Lattice](#). The recent economic recession helped to normalize lateral moves. Companies, scrambling to keep employees, instead of laying them off, moved many into alternative positions to keep them in the company until the economy improved, she says. But even in an improved economy, lateral moves still have benefits.

"Lateral career moves can be beneficial to your career when done strategically," says Vicki Salemi, a career expert for Monster. "It's a form of pivoting—if you don't want to continue on the path of your current job and because it's not the best fit for your skill set, interests or culturally, making a lateral move can set you on the right path."

Workers today change jobs fairly frequently. Gone are the days where a career was spent in one job. Today the average worker stays in a job for 4.2 years, according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), and there is some evidence that younger workers are even more prone to [job hopping](#). "I think that in the past there was a stigma to lateral moves because they were basically used as parking lots," says Cleaver. Employees were often parked, sometimes to run out the clock to retirement.

People today make lateral moves for many reasons. Sometimes it enables them to focus on other life decisions, such as having and raising children or caring for a family member, says Cleaver. Lateral moves can also be used get you out of a bad situation. "Whether you work for a toxic boss, the environment is unhealthy and/or unethical, layoffs are imminent or you know

you're stuck in a dead-end role, a lateral move is key to moving on," says Salemi. "You will eventually move up, but right now you need to focus on moving on to a better opportunity—one that will give you the ability to grow, learn and flourish. "

You can also use a lateral move to better position yourself within the company if, for example if you're stuck in a department with lackluster performance. "Early in my career, I worked in training as an assistant and I knew that I wasn't going to develop my skills any further if I continued up the ladder in that department," says Salemi. "Since my foot was already in the door and I got positive reviews from all of my internal clients, it positioned me well to make a lateral move into international HR, where I knew I could grow and learn. The move proved to be a prosperous one—I got promoted twice within three years."

But a lateral move isn't always the right one to make. Sometimes it won't solve your problem. "If you're looking to get out of a toxic boss situation, ask yourself if the environment and company are toxic, too - if yes, then you're just escaping from one bad situation to another one," says Salemi.

There are some other important questions you should also ask before taking the new position, says Cleaver.

- What is the strategic value of this position?
- What are the critical business problems I will be tackling?
- Where have people gone from this position in the past?

Define where you ultimately want to go to determine if the move you intend to make will get you there. Even a seemingly unappealing option might provide you with valuable skills that can help you achieve your dream position, says Cleaver. But be wary of making too many lateral moves at once. "I discourage making several lateral moves back-to-back," says Salemi. "The idea is to make one lateral move to reposition your career so you can accelerate on your new path, not to bounce around from one position to the next at similar levels

and subsequently, salaries."

What if you don't know yet where you want your career to take you? "That's OK, too," says Salemi. "What you should do is ask yourself if the new position will set you up for growth and more. Essentially, are you interested in it? Will you enjoy it? Is it a path you see yourself pursuing in the long term and if not, will the skills at least be transferable to a related field? If the answer to both those questions is 'yes,' then absolutely go for it."

By kelly Bilodeau

Published: Mar 20, 2017



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