

Lateral Career Moves

Lateral career moves are being considered by some as the new way to the top. With many organizations becoming flattened and leaner, the ladder to the top has lost some rungs. Due to this new employment landscape career professionals are encouraging their clients to not only think up, but to also think “sideways.”

Definition of a Lateral Career Move

In a lateral career move:

- You move to an equivalent role in an organization.
- You maintain a job title at the same level.
- You stay in a similar salary range.
- You may or may not change teams, departments, offices or even organizations.
- You may or may not report to the same manager.
- Your job responsibilities change, affording new challenges and opportunities.

Advantages of a Lateral Career Move

In some circumstances, a lateral career move may be smart for your career. Examples include:

- **Avoiding a Layoff** – A lateral career move could be smart when you think your department is under-performing, your position may be eliminated, a large layoff is anticipated, or a company merger or shutdown looms. The same or similar job in a new, expanding and more profitable environment is better than no job. It can head-off any financial pressures related to unemployment and help avoid large gaps on your resume.
- **Increasing Advancement Opportunities** – “Moving over” could lead to “moving up.” You may currently be in a situation with your present employer where the prospects for a promotion in the foreseeable future don’t look good. So making a lateral move to another department, or even another employer, may open new doors for career advancement.

- **Promoting Skill Development** – A lateral move could provide you with new opportunities for education, training and skill enhancement. Enhancing and diversifying your skill set can make you more valuable to your present employer, as well as a new employer. It could lead to a promotion, increase your protection from being downsized, and/or elevate your marketability for a position outside your current organization.
- **Seeking an Organizational Fit** – It's not enough that we have the interest and skills to perform a certain kind of work. We must also feel like we "fit" the personality of the team and the culture of the organization. If your values are inconsistent with those of your present department or organization, a lateral career move to a place that feels like more of a fit can increase your career satisfaction.

Remember, the department or organization you enter is not always the one you remember when you leave. Organizations, through leadership changes and restructuring, can experience changes in culture. This change may be enough to cause you to consider a lateral career move.

- **Finding a New Supervisor** – One of the biggest reasons employees leave their job is because of a supervisor who they perceive to be unsupportive or unable to help them reach their full potential. A lateral career move may provide an opportunity to find a supervisor who can put you in a position to succeed and realize career happiness.
- **Reigniting Your Passion/Seeking New Challenges** – If you've been in your position for a number of years, routine and boredom may have started to settle in. The position may not present the opportunity for new tasks, responsibilities or projects. A lateral career move may help reignite your passion by presenting you with new projects to be completed, problems to be solved and challenges to be confronted.
- **Expanding Your Network** – Networking, by far, is recognized as the most effective job search and career advancement strategy. Making a lateral career move can help you make new contacts and expand your network. In addition, the best time to network is when you don't need it.
- **Changing Perceptions** – Sometimes, if you've been in a certain position for an extended length of time, it may be hard for management to see you through a different filter. A lateral career move could showcase your skills in new ways, attract some attention, and allow different management to see you through a different lens.
- **Moving Closer to the Action** – A lateral career move from a small and/or non-strategic part of the business to a larger and/or faster-growing part of the business can prove to be a good career decision. Getting "closer to the action" could help you get noticed much more quickly.

- **Enhancing Your Bottom Line** – The lateral move may result in the same (or similar) salary. Although the new job may contribute to increasing your bottom line. Factors such as decreased contributions towards things like health insurance, a shorter commute time, a performance evaluation system that increases opportunities for raises-bonuses-commissions, a larger company contribution to your 401(k), and more can make the lateral career move financially appealing.
- **Improving Your Total Compensation** – Most people think of new jobs in terms of starting salary. But it's important to look at total compensation – salary plus benefits. The new job may offer a better health-dental-vision plan, childcare benefits, flexible scheduling, telecommuting, tuition reimbursement, an enhanced retirement plan, and/or other items that are congruent with your personal and professional needs and desires.

Making a Lateral Career Move in Your Existing Company

Lateral career moves can be of real benefit to a company:

- They allow a company to keep people with good performance records, while also preventing them from going to a direct competitor, by offering them new challenges and opportunities – and keeping them “fresh” and engaged.
- They also allow a company to save on the costs of finding and training new employees.

From your perspective, any career move should be based on well-defined career goals and a strategic career plan that are the result of a thoughtful and reflective self-assessment and career exploration process. You must proactively develop and implement your own career plan. Any goals and plan should, at a minimum, have the criteria of “purpose and passion.”

It's important to note that not everyone's path makes sense as a vertical trajectory. You have to know what's right for you based on the development of well-defined career goals. It could be up, down or even sideways (a lateral career move).

So a lateral career move will be of benefit to you:

- If it truly brings you closer to achieving your well-defined career goals – it's a logical step in the right direction – a forward step down the career path you've identified.
- If the job responsibilities connect you with a sense of purpose – in other words, you see your connection to a larger organizational mission – and the mission is one you believe in based on strongly held values.
- If the job connects to your passion – a genuine interest in what you're doing – performing the work that you love.

In addition:

- You need to envision what your “next up move” will be (if that’s the direction you’d like to head). What skills does this position require? Which of those skills are you missing? Will your lateral career move get you closer to addressing those missing skills?
- You also need to consider the organizational culture. Are employees who make lateral career moves viewed as those who just don’t have the skills to get promoted? Or are lateral moves viewed as a positive step in the career advancement process?
- Although any career change is a risk, and can result in failure, you want to be clear about what level of risk you’re willing to take on based on the nature of the lateral career move.

Addressing a Lateral Career Move with Your Supervisor

In ideal situations, a manager and an employee will have a good working relationship. Through periodic performance reviews and career planning sessions, the employee will have made their career goals clear – and the manager and employee will have put a plan in place to help the employee achieve those goals. So, in this case, the idea of a lateral career move would most likely not be a surprise – it would be part of the plan.

But the reality is that some manager-employee relationships are not as proactive. So a manager may not be fully aware of the employee’s goals or ambitions. This will require an honest and frank discussion between the employee and manager to dispel any assumptions or misconceptions. It’s important for the employee to get the “buy-in” of the manager. Communicating well defined career goals, and how the lateral career move fits into those goals, will help the employee create understanding with their manager.

An employee may also want to consider having a preliminary conversation with an official or unofficial “mentor” within the organization to test the idea of a lateral career move. Seeking out a “senior member” of the organization who can provide wise counsel may help the employee prepare for a conversation with their manager.

In addition, an employee can talk to other employees who have made lateral career moves to discover whether their career goals and ambitions are still being supported by the company. If you find success stories within the company, that’s a good sign.

So should an employee put this request in writing? It depends – mostly on the culture of the organization. Organizations with a strong hierarchical structure may require something formal (in writing). Flatter organizations may not require this kind of formality. Human resources can also be a resource regarding any policies and procedures related to lateral career moves.

Making a Lateral Career Move Outside Your Existing Company

If there's a specific company of interest to you that is more prominent and/or faster-growing, or an individual that you believe you could learn more from, a lateral career move outside of your current organization may be a good strategy. But do your homework first.

How much do you know about this other organization? Is their organizational culture a good fit for your personal and professional values? Do they value "lateral career moves" as a positive career strategy? Does the position they have to offer match your interests, personality characteristics and skills? Will a move to a new position and organization help you advance the well-defined career goals that you've established?

If it's a particular individual you're looking to work with, proceed with caution. They, like you, may be looking to move over, up or out of the company. If you have a relationship with this person, it may be good to have a frank conversation with them to assess their career aspirations and commitment to this specific position and organization.

Addressing a Lateral Career Move During the Hiring Process

With more and more companies embracing lateral career moves as a career strategy, they have come to view it as a "growth opportunity" and not a "parking lot." So, there's an assumption that if you're interviewing with this company you've done your research and know that they view and support lateral career moves. This should set the stage for your conversations during the hiring process.

In the hiring process, you essentially have to answer three basic questions. Your answers to these questions will go a long way in influencing and persuading others.

- Why this position?
 - Be able to explain that you truly know the position and career (an informed choice).
 - Be able to communicate your deep passion for this work.
 - Be able to explain how this position fits nicely into your career goals, as well as how the company can benefit from you achieving those goals.
- Why here?
 - Based on your in-depth research, be able to explain why this company is a great fit.
- Why you?
 - Out of all of the candidates for the position, why are you the best?
 - Be able to explain your "unique selling proposition."

Lateral Career Moves – Industry vs. Organization

In general, lateral career moves are not industry-specific. They are more organization-specific, based on the type of organization.

In flatter and lean organizations, which most organizations have become or are becoming, lateral career moves can be viewed as energizing challenges (as opposed to career stoppages). If an organization values new challenges, ongoing skill development and flexibility, there's a good chance that lateral career moves will be viewed as positive. Most 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.

On the other side, more hierarchical and rigid organizations may value trajectory more than agility. In these organizations lateral career moves may be viewed as someone who doesn't have the skill level to "move up," so the only other way to move is "out."

Overall, lateral career moves will succeed in places where both leaders and workers dedicate themselves to making what's good for the company coincide with what's good for its employees.

Criteria to Consider Before Making a Lateral Career Move

Before making a lateral career move you should ask yourself these questions:

- Does the potential new position fit into your well-defined career goals? Will it bring you one step (or maybe even several steps) closer to achieving those goals? In addition, how many future choices does this lateral career move give you?
- Do the responsibilities connect with your "sense of purpose?"
- Do the responsibilities connect with your "passion?"
- Will the position help you develop those "missing skills" that you need to secure the position you ultimately want? Will you be assuming more leadership responsibility?
- Will the new team, department, office or organization be a "fit" for you – from a personality and culture perspective?
- Does your current or potential new organization view and support lateral career moves as a career advancement strategy or a career stopper? Consult with Human Resources for any specific policies or procedures that may exist.

- What are the overall pros and cons? Analyze the position on its merits, rather than its name. Make your list and review it with your supervisor, mentor, and/or trusted colleague. Seek the benefit of “fresh eyes.”
- Are you willing to accept (and maybe even embrace) the risk involved in making this move? Will the reward outweigh the risk involved?

In Closing

The path of career advancement is no longer straight and narrow. It can be filled with detours and side roads that eventually get you to the same destination. This requires a practice of strategic patience and professional persistence. It could be worth the wait!