



LORAIN KASPRZAK

ADVANTAGE MARKETING CONSULTING SERVICES, LLC

Managing Your Career Transition

Sooner or later during our professional careers, most of us will change jobs, get promoted, move into a different line of work, or even get laid off. My experience is a good example. I moved from an entry-level R&D engineer to a commercial development engineer, later to a business planning manager, and then on to a corporate marketing manager's role, before starting my own management consulting practice. I am certain that I have at least one or two transitions still ahead. While planning this column, I began wondering: What do we need to know to manage our career transitions more effectively?

Assess your strengths and interests. For someone whose mantra was "Might as well jump!" early in her career, I learned the hard way that it is crucial to do some introspection and planning *before* making a move.

"When you're preparing for a transition, think about your strengths — your talents and skills," says Lisa Silvershein, founder of Ark Career Coaching (Basking Ridge, NJ) and a certified behavioral coach who helps professionals in transition. "Then consider what you're passionate about and what you do well. For instance, are you happiest working with people or are you better at developing new processes?" Silvershein often recommends that her clients read the book *Now Discover Your Strengths* by Marcus Buckingham.

Your new position should be aligned with your talents, skills, and interests. If, for example, you are a senior engineer contemplating a promotion to engineering management, think about whether you really want to handle that position's administrative and supervisory duties. "The new role has to be something you will enjoy doing and that will fulfill you," says Silvershein. "If not, then you shouldn't take the position."

Also, think about what will make you shine in your new position and how you will make your mark. Don't go in like a bull in a china shop, advises Silvershein. Ask questions first and make sure you understand the perspective of the people who are working in that area, so that you can learn from them first.

Sabine Knedlik, senior facilities systems engineer at biotech firm Shire HGT (Boston, MA), has been fortunate to find several jobs during her career that have excited her and given her a sense of purpose. "The first time I was exposed to process safety, I knew that it was my passion — what is better than knowing you can make the workplace safer?," she says. She also feels fulfilled in her current role as a facilities systems engineer, because she is passionate about ensuring that the company's equipment operates reliably to make drugs for patients.

Reach out and learn. A job title may sound exciting, but you need to understand what the position's responsibilities are before making your move. Don't go into the new job uninformed and expect to be successful, Silvershein advises. For example, if you are moving from an R&D position to sales, "ask a successful salesperson to meet you for a cup of coffee, and ask him or her to describe a typical day and what contributes to their success." These insights can help you decide whether the job is right for you.

You may discover that you will need to update your skills or broaden your knowledge. Fortunately, you have many training options, including AIChE's webinars and other educational resources (www.aiche.org/resources/education) and online universities, that can help you come up to speed.

If formal training doesn't appeal to you, consider volunteering as a way to build your résumé. This approach worked for Wendy Young Reed when she wanted to move from a traditional process engineering role into sales. "My volunteer roles in AIChE were highly valuable in helping me to gain marketing and business experience before making the leap," she says.

Reed, now a business development manager for Chemstations (Houston, TX), also worked with a career counselor. As Silvershein points out, "a good career coach helps you explore all your options and asks powerful questions to get you thinking. A coach can also help you set realistic goals, and hit the ground running in your new position."

It is important to have a network of colleagues and friends who can help you. Silvershein offers this tip: "Reach out to others in your network, and ask if they will be your informal 'board of directors' to help guide your decision making during transition."

Stay positive. Career transitions can be exciting if you are willing to cultivate a positive attitude. To lower your stress level, reach out to a mentor or an empathetic friend when you need a pep talk or advice. Read inspirational books, such as Napoleon Hill's *Positive Action Plan*. If you like to write, keep a journal of your experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Go back and read it from time to time to see how far you have come.

Finally, embrace the transition. "If you feel that it's time to try something new, don't be afraid of change," concludes Knedlik. "You can gain a lot of knowledge and a diverse background from switching positions."

Read more of the interview with career coach Lisa Silvershein on AIChE's *ChEnected* blog: <http://chenected.aiche.org/?p=58381>.

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