

The Career Plateau: Knowing When to Move On

By Cecil Gregg

At one time or another in virtually every professional's career, the thought has occurred at least in passing: Would I be better off working somewhere else?

For some, job dislikes that range from brutally long commutes or an "impossible" boss to non-motivating compensation can make it fairly simple to determine the answer. But what if you feel that, although you're relatively satisfied with your position, you sometimes have a nagging feeling that the job is ultimately not a good fit for you? Or you see little opportunity for further professional growth? When things are neither terribly bad nor terribly good, how can reasonably successful managers and executives know if – and when – it's time to move on?

Look Before You Leap

It's hardly news that professionals today make career changes far more frequently than was common in the past. Thirty percent of chief financial officers polled in a Robert Half International survey, for example, said the average tenure of a top financial executive is five to six years. In

some industries, of course, job longevity is much shorter.

The decision to voluntarily leave a position is frequently not the result of any sort of dissatisfaction, but is prompted by the arrival of an unexpected offer from another company or simply the desire to retire. Sometimes, however, the urge to move on comes about when people reach a career plateau – a loss of momentum and sense of disengagement with a job. The cause is often difficult to pinpoint, but the realization is, at best, distracting. In fact, over the course of your career, few dilemmas will create as many internal struggles as a growing feeling that a job no longer meets your needs – either professionally or personally.

The prospect of pursuing a new opportunity can be enticing to those in this situation, but a move requires careful consideration to ensure it will provide a truly positive change. Knowing when a transition is called for – and what to seek in a new position – requires time for introspection and an approach that is strategic, focused and well-thought-through.

What Attracted You in the First Place?

If you are among those realizing that your job does not motivate you in the way it once did (or you had hoped it would), first revisit the considerations that initially drew you to the position. Was it growth opportunity, compensation, security, the ability to work with someone you respect; or a combination of factors?

Now think back on what occurred after a length of time with your current firm. Have any of the positives that originally attracted you to the job failed to materialize? Or was there a time when you felt proud of your achievements? If you were satisfied at one time, it's important to understand what contributed to your sense of accomplishment.

Also assess whether you have been able to follow your preferred working style. For instance, if you like approaching problems conceptually with a view toward the big picture, have you been able to continue this approach, or have your responsibilities evolved into areas that seem confining to you? Perhaps you

enjoyed working independently in the past and don't feel comfortable with a current management role. Whatever your particular case, the key is to identify what works best for you and what brings the most satisfaction. Asking yourself such questions will help you to better define which events and circumstances may have subsequently dampened your enthusiasm – and whether a move could be a solution.

Don't Jump to Conclusions

Keep in mind that pursuing new professional opportunities doesn't always mean moving to a different company. If you once had fulfillment, which somehow drifted away, there's a chance that making efforts to perform on a more regular basis the types of activities you've identified as important to you with your current firm could give you a new "lease" on the job. If you feel under-challenged or your efforts are being put to waste, for example, ask your current employer for new responsibilities. If none are forthcoming, it may be a sign that it's time to seriously consider other employment.

A career plateau can actually be a blessing in disguise: an opportunity to take note of what has happened in the past, where you are now, and where you would like to go in the coming months and years.

What Are Your Current Values and Preferences?

There is, of course, the possibility that instead of simply getting off-track from your original goals and preferences, your priorities themselves have changed. Before deciding to make any major move, it's critical to reassess your objectives as well as your underlying attitudes about your career.

Put simply, what worked for you at one time may work no longer. Your professional and personal priorities may have changed over time, which means whether or not the current job gives you (or gave you in the past) a sense of accomplishment, your goals are no longer a match with what they were when you took the job.

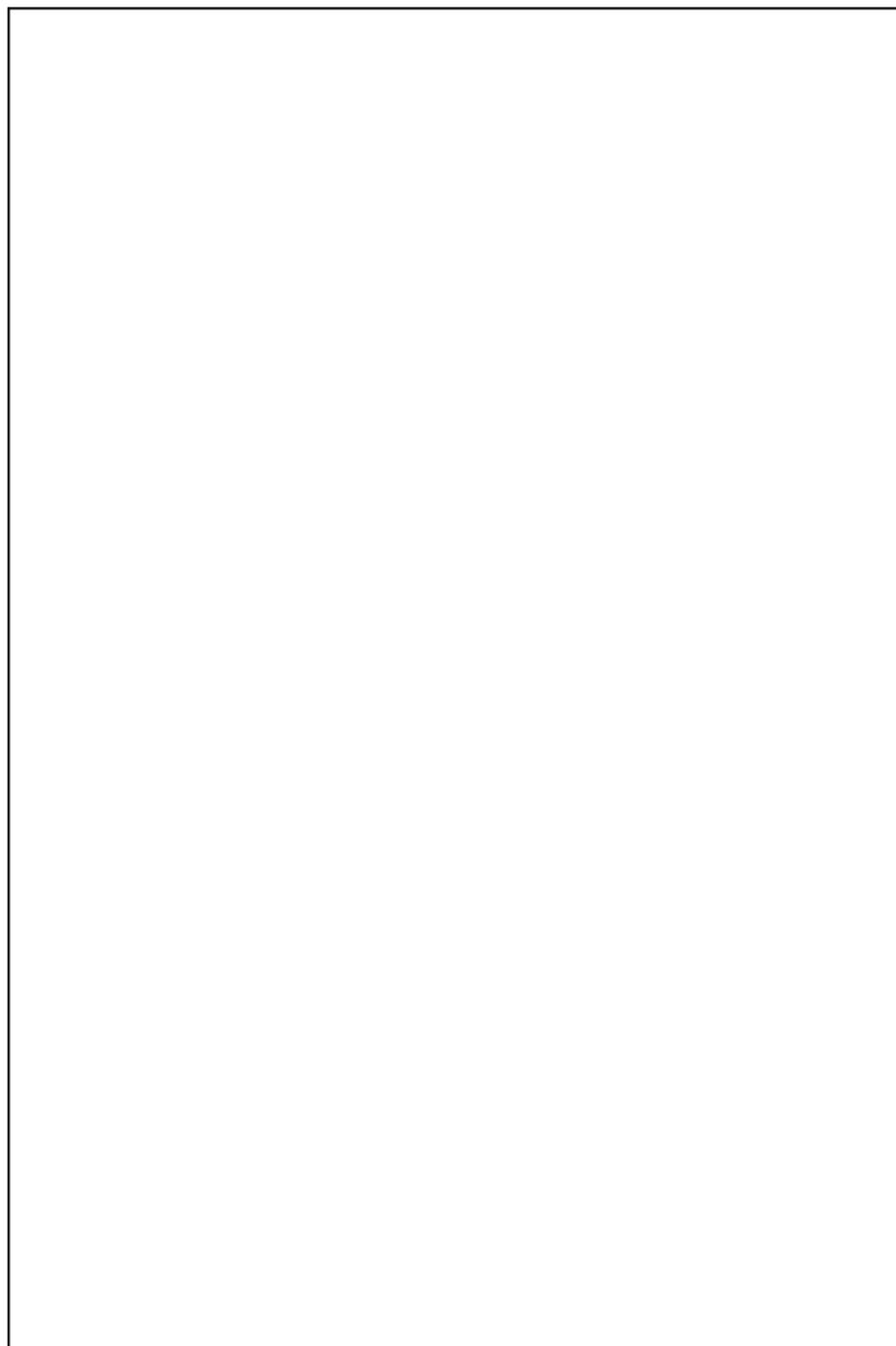
The situation should certainly not be viewed as a failure; many professionals outgrow their original career objectives as they advance. The biggest mistake you can make, however, is to automatically pursue another position without pausing to carefully consider all the factors that may be at play. Instead of a crisis, a

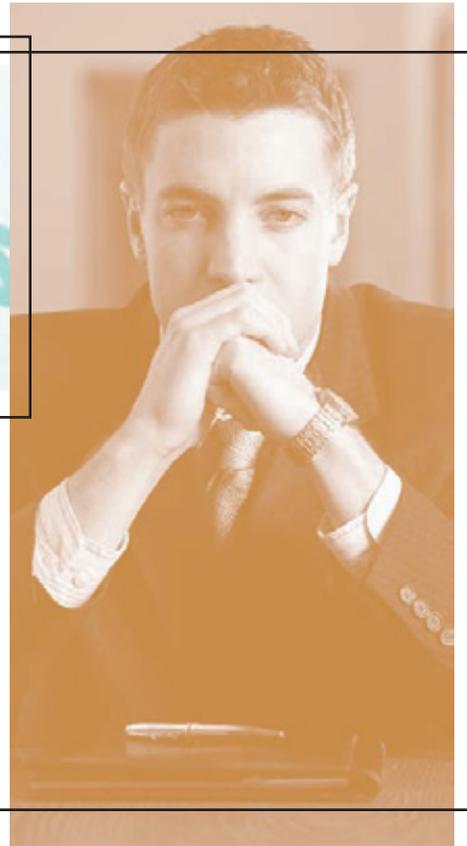
potential transition may be seen as an opportunity to step back from the whirlwind of your daily work routine to get to know yourself and what really drives you. This reduces the possibility of making a change only to fall back into a sense of professional malaise in the new position.

An honest self-evaluation can help you to begin transforming your negative feelings into a greater sense of challenge and achievement in your career. By assessing your values and preferences from many

angles, you can gain a broader perspective of what sparks your highest job performance as well as what gives you personal enjoyment. And if you do determine it's time for a change, getting better in touch with what most motivates you will help you create criteria for a new job and focus on what it will take to get there.

If there's no room left for upward movement in terms of job responsibilities, salary, or both, you may need to make a fresh start at another organization.





Look for the Signs

Once you have reassessed your values and preferences, signs that it's time to move on may become more obvious. When you step back and really think about it, do any of these statements fit your situation?

- You are not on the fast track.
- Your boss takes you for granted or has little confidence in your abilities.
- Coworkers frequently take credit for your work.
- The company's ethics and values seem inconsistent with your own.

If these or similar scenarios strike home, it may be painful to admit – especially if you've invested considerable time and energy in your career with this organization – but it's better to come to terms with the situation sooner rather than later. If you've had any of these feelings, investigating other firms may be the right path for you.

Another indication that it could be time to make a change is if, on closer investigation, advancement or additional raises seem unlikely in your current position. Also think about your skill set. Do you have the chance to develop your existing abilities and acquire new ones? Or do you find that you're performing routine tasks over and over again? If there's no room left for upward movement in terms of job responsibilities, salary, or both, you may need to make a fresh start at another organization.

What about the health of your firm? Could your company become a takeover target? Have there been repeated reorganizations that could indicate a lack of direction at the top? What about the firm's balance sheet? If your company's financial condition is not a matter of public record, you'll need to look for more subtle signs that something is amiss. If your recommendation to hire

additional staff or purchase new software is declined without good reason, for example, it could indicate that the firm is having financial difficulties. If you suspect for whatever reason that business is foundering, you must decide how closely you can afford to tie your own professional fortunes to those of this particular organization.

Then there's the matter of work/life balance. By reviewing your professional and personal goals, you may decide that your dissatisfaction springs not from a specific work-related problem but from personal concerns. Perhaps you feel your job prevents you from spending enough time with family or pursuing other goals, such as earning an advanced degree or becoming more active in professional

organizations. When your work/ life balance becomes skewed, and a reduction in hours or greater flexibility in scheduling are not options at your current firm, finding new employment might be the only way to restore your equilibrium.

Taking some time off to consider your options in more detail can be more helpful than many people realize.

Apply What You've Learned

If you do determine you are ready to leave your firm and make a career transition, you'll need to create a plan. Try to apply your preferences to a situation in which you feel you would thrive. In other words, target new companies, new industries, or even new professional pursuits. Most people will naturally gravitate toward remaining in their current industry because that is where they consider their marketability the strongest, but don't be afraid to think outside of familiar areas as you consider potential goals. There may be many different avenues you can take toward job satisfaction.

The next step as you consider a new path is determining what it will take to get you there. Making this assessment calls for honesty. How prepared are you for a making a change? Even if you've already decided you'd like to pursue a move, choosing the right time involves evaluating your current repertoire of skills. Do you need further development to reach your goals? To find out, research the prospects for your profession's future and new directions in your field. Contacts in your network can help you to identify these and to determine what any emerging trends you discover could potentially mean for you.

In addition to competencies required for your particular profession, also assess your time management and interpersonal abilities. Are you as organized as you could be? Are your communication



and leadership skills as strong as they could be?

Time Off to Reassess

In creating your plan, taking some time off to consider your options in more detail can be more helpful than many people realize. A hiatus gives you the chance to step back and consider sky's-the-limit alternatives you would never have the time or inclination to pursue while working full-time. A break could give you more time to research potential employers and continue your career audit. During this phase, a career coach could help you turn your ideas into reality. You also would have the opportunity to become more involved in professional organizations that can help you forge new relationships. Contributing your expertise on committees and group projects may bring you a different sort of career fulfillment during your exploration process.

As it is for many people, if a period of missed income will create a hardship for you, there are other options than simply sticking it out with your current position.

Working as a consultant, for example, could be a wise interim step. Becoming a project professional offers two major advantages: a continued income stream and a chance to explore a new industry

“Many hiring managers view contract work as an extended interview, during which they can assess a potential employee’s performance and fit within the organization ...”

or even a new field before making a full commitment. You may find, for instance, that you prefer working at a small firm, where your contributions are more noticeable. Being exposed to different companies also can broaden your profes-

sional network, enabling you to meet individuals who can serve as mentors or help you find work in the future. And consulting often leads to full-time work. Many hiring managers view contract work as an extended interview, during which they can assess a potential employee’s job performance and fit within the organization, making it beneficial to hire a person on a project or contract basis before extending a full-time offer.

Reaching a career plateau, if you allow it to go unaddressed, can become a significant drain on your energy and positive outlook. On the other hand, it also can be an opportunity to be more proactive about bringing new life to your current position or to focus your attention on entering a new phase of your career. **N**

Cecil Gregg is the Southwest district director of Robert Half International, the world’s first and largest specialized staffing firm with a global network of more than 350 offices throughout North America, Europe, Asia, Australia and New Zealand. For more information about our professional services, please visit www.rhi.com.

