

The 6 Biggest Science Career Hazards – and How to Avoid Them (Part Two)

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Potholes pock the road to career success – Will you be able to veer away by recognizing them in advance? Or, has your career seemed to constantly place you in their path?

Our industry specialty is biotechnology and nanotechnology. I've often noticed that many industry writers believe that a job with these young companies is sheltered from the hazards that can interfere with solid progress up the corporate ladder in older industries. Their feeling is that many employees will benefit from just riding on the coattails of these emerging industries. If you play your cards right, they say, and position yourself with a company destined to be in the "top tier," your career will go into auto-pilot.

I don't believe this is so. Career hazards still exist, and can be even more dangerous at the speed that things move in technology companies. Making a poor decision is like hitting a pothole in the road at 200 mph instead of 30 mph. Let's say, for example, that you make some career blunder that inadvertently delays your next promotion 12-18 months. During that time, your company grows from 85 to 150 employees. Can you imagine the effect of remaining on a plateau while the company grows like that around you?

In a more traditional industry, we would know exactly what position is ours in the next promotion – and the one after that. There is a track record to tell you what lies ahead. But today's

startups (whether they are biotechs, nanotechs or even dotcoms) don't offer you the luxury of pre-determined career paths. That is why it is a good idea to review some common career hazards on occasion. This column identifies and discusses two more career hazards: the science-versus-management question, and the effect of avoiding lateral moves.

The Pot of Gold at the End of the Management Ladder

Many forward-thinking startup companies have established dual-career ladders for their employees. This method of organizational structure allows professional growth without demanding a move into management. In a single career ladder, the only route to advance up the corporate hierarchy is to go into management – otherwise you face “plateauing” in some technical position. With the dual ladder, at some point you are faced with a decision that will dramatically affect your career success and job satisfaction. Is there a pot of gold at the end of that management ladder? Or, is it fool's gold? The rewards can look great from a distance, yet you might be disappointed if you find management less satisfying than doing good science.

Although the intent of a dual-ladder organization is not to lock you into a particular course, your decision to turn at one branch or another can begin a trip down a one-way street. How can you decide which turn to take? Must you decide at all? How can you determine whether you will be successful in the endeavor?

Although many Human Resources departments offer guidance and outside consultants offer help, there is no sure-fire recipe for success. There are, however, methods that will aid you in making a more informed decision.

Stan Sewitch, a human resources consultant in San Diego, disputes a common belief. “Management is not an additional set of responsibilities requiring new skills to be added to one's

professional repertoire,” Stan says. “Management *is an entirely different career* from that of the individual contributor in science.” Sewitch, formerly the Director of Human Resources for a San Diego biotech company, indicates that technical professionals too often believe that managing people is a skill to be acquired – like learning a new laboratory technique. They find out too late that this isn’t the case.

The critical factors involved in making this important career decision must be seriously considered, and it is wise to use personal assessment and professional planning methods specific to your branch of the sciences. Although it goes beyond the scope of this article to discuss these specifically, most H/R departments in companies with a working dual ladder system can offer solid advice on which direction might be best in your case. The point is to make an informed decision.

When I see someone stumble on the “dual ladder,” it is usually a highly competent technical person who for some reason is convinced that going into management was his or her only choice to grow in the organization. Luckily, many employers in these industries offer the scientist a chance to remain at the bench and still progress upwards. Have you thought about which direction you are headed and why?

Don’t Let a Good Lateral Move Pass You By

To refuse a good opportunity, any opportunity, simply because it doesn’t earn you an immediate payback, is a serious career mistake. One common misconception rampant among job seekers is that a lateral move is a bad thing. Let’s analyze lateral moves and why they are seen as negatives, despite overwhelming evidence that an occasional lateral move deserves serious consideration.

A lateral move is one in which you move to a new job for the same pay. To take a similar position, doing the exact same work, for a comparable company at the same rate of pay may not be a very exciting scenario. In such a case, a lateral move does nothing for you (unless, for example, it moves you to a desired geographical location or improves your commute). But, an added ingredient or two can change the situation entirely.

Let's say that you are a fermentation microbiologist who has worked exclusively with bacteria and yeast. The new position, although a lateral move financially, puts you into a team that is developing a new therapeutic by scaling up the process in large-scale mammalian cell culture. One of the most valuable things a microbiologist can offer an employer is a broad-based knowledge of processes involving both prokaryotic and eukaryotic cell types. So, this additional experience reaps a benefit several years down the road that dramatically eclipses the short-term picture of a lateral move. Those who are enjoying very successful startup company careers will tell you that you have to analyze your opportunities using a longer-range view than that typically used by the job hunter. And remember, it isn't always on the outside that you find these unique situations.

I'm a strong believer in the power of a good lateral move. I urge you to be constantly on the prowl in your present organization for ways that you can increase your storehouse of knowledge by a change to a new department or project. After many years of scanning resumes and debriefing candidates for my clients, I've learned that often the best people come from varied backgrounds and skill areas.

The plant manager we found for a nanotech tools client with a brand new, state-of-the-art manufacturing facility was chosen because his experiences combined process and facilities engineering, project management, quality assurance, and

operations. This fellow got this sought-after job simply because he was sharp enough to have seen that a few lateral moves over the years would add to his mix of marketable skills. He told me about his philosophy to add at least one salable skill to his resume every 18 months. If more than a year had gone by without the addition of some interesting, new challenges, he would find a way to incorporate the desired new experiences into his job. With a Fortune 500 company most of his career, he would regularly press for opportunities to move sideways and into new projects and responsibilities. For me, this fellow was proof that you can achieve the desired effect of a good lateral move without filling up the resume with lots of employer changes.

Startup company careers are no different than those in other industries, except for the pace which we keep – and the effect of even the smallest miscalculation on our present and future positions. In the final chapter of this series on “6 Career Hazards,” we’ll discuss those who remain interpersonally deficient despite being technically competent, and the dubious consequences of failing to use negotiation skills properly over the course of a career.

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