

## It's About Choices

Humans are creatures of habit. All of us develop comfort zones, perceptions, emotions and attitudes based upon our past experience and using this foundation; we make decisions, right or wrong. I admit that this is how I live my life and although I promise myself to try to think more “out of the box”; I don't succeed as much as I would like. I feel at times that someone set my internal operating system “Properties” feature to this default: “Accept no new ideas”. This may be due to nothing more than the stress of trying to meet all of my responsibilities effectively, while attempting to prioritize and remember the details. Nonetheless, in spite of my best efforts, I occasionally recall a long gone comic strip character who remarked, “We have met the enemy and he is us”.

I began my career with a regional contingency recruiting firm in December 1975. I had just left the US Air Force where I had been a communications maintenance management officer. I had grown tired of the bureaucracy and the politics that pervaded my career. I worked in a headquarters in Germany, developing policy and procedures and also providing management assistance to Air Force units scattered all over Europe in support of NATO. The military services were shrinking as the Viet Nam War ended, and my job had evolved into one headquarters manpower study / reduction / downsizing after another and my mind was numb from the politics and petty rivalries. As I made my transition back to civilian life, I knew that I wanted a career that would allow me to work hard and enjoy a reward for my efforts. Many corporate jobs looked like the military with different uniforms and methods of saluting. Career testing revealed that I would do well in sales and marketing. As I analyzed my preferences further, I knew that I would succeed at some form of solution-based, consultative sales, where I would provide a service and not a product. I literally found the recruiting industry quite by accident, but was intrigued by its process. It also appealed to me because my success would be based purely upon my own abilities and efforts and not by office politics.

Contingent recruiting is a high pressure, high turnover business. I belonged to a regional firm that had a chain of about twelve offices, each of which had an average of fifteen employees. One office issued one hundred twenty W-2 Forms for one year to keep fifteen people on its staff. The veteran recruiters, though fewer in number, were never too friendly with the newer employees because they were going to fail anyway. Seasoned combat infantry troops treat fresh replacements much the same way. New employees would simply go to lunch and never return or management would let them go for lack of results. It is not an easy business, but somehow I survived and have managed to do so for some time. When I became a senior recruiter, I resisted tradition and listened to the ideas of my newly hired associates, because they did not have the prejudice that seems to creep into all of us as we gain experience. On numerous occasions, a less experienced recruiter would create a successful match that the more seasoned pro said couldn't be done, simply because the raw recruit didn't know any better. I always tried to learn from this.

Sometimes ignorance can be bliss. Whenever I have forced myself to move beyond my comfort zone I have enjoyed more growth and career satisfaction.

Many of us are at career crossroads. It's not bad enough to be out looking for your next job, but to do so in one of the worst employment markets in memory adds to the challenge. In addition to that you are trying to position yourself in ways that will make you more attractive to potential employers. Many of these issues come to mind:

- Do you take a lesser job or hold out for a position that is equal or comparable to our previous one? Nothing is etched in stone on this one. Some companies will automatically disqualify anyone who is interviewing for a less senior position. Everyone has experienced these eliminators, "You're overqualified", "We can't afford you", "You won't be challenged" or "Why would you consider such a move"? The answers to these questions are in respective order, "You're too old", "You'll leave for a better paying job at the first opportunity", "You will be a threat to your boss" and "I'm desperate because I can't pay my bills". Other companies will be more accepting. Some hiring executives are more enlightened and see the opportunity in hiring someone who may be overqualified for a position. If the hiring executive has enough self-confidence, they will view hiring someone who may have been a peer as a way to strengthen their own "bench" of management expertise. You have to decide which is the better course. By not taking a lesser job, you may be saying that I am confident in my skills and their value and will not compromise; or you may be letting your ego get in the way or reality. By taking a lesser job, you may be saying that you are flexible and will consider any appropriate opportunity, or some may think you are desperate and lack confidence in yourself. There is no easy answer. Make your decision and don't look back. Whichever path you follow, you will always have supporters and detractors. Your decision will be influenced by the other factors below.
- Do you take less money or hold out for more? I think the choice is fairly clear on this one in our present market. If the opportunity being offered is the job you want, working with people you can trust and like and in a stable, growing company, then you should take it, if the compensation will allow you to live your lifestyle. Some companies will evaluate job candidates on their salary history. Anyone who condemns you for such a decision in our present market is not reasonable.
- How low should you go? That depends on you. The leads we share prove that there is still considerable downward pressure on compensation. You have to look at the offered compensation. Is it realistic, even if reduced, or is it backlash to the hot market of the late 1990's? Once again, you have to balance financial need and opportunity. If you are more senior and see retirement on the horizon, will this lower paying job offer you a stable environment and a good match to your 401K or will you miss the chance to contribute more to your retirement savings because your income is less? Many corporations are reducing or eliminating 401K matching contributions and are forcing employees to shoulder even more of the cost of benefits. If your prospective employer is offering a generous benefits plan

with reduced compensation, it may be worth it. Bear in mind that companies change their benefits frequently.

- Should we become contract consultants and give up hope of finding a permanent position? Many former CIO's and senior IT executives find that they enjoy being high-level consultants and project managers. Should our career become a hybrid of consulting and permanent work? Most hiring executives like to see some planning in a person's career. It may not matter, if all of your consulting engagements and permanent positions are in the same industry, showing an attempt to build subject matter expertise. If your resume includes a mix of permanent and contract jobs with little pattern or relationship, you may find that you will not compete as well where industry knowledge is important. I did a search for a Fortune five hundred electrical products manufacturer and had to find an IT Director for one of its major product groups. I personally reviewed the resumes of well over one hundred candidates. Many had left manufacturing during the last recession in the early 1990's. They had typically held positions in insurance, banking and healthcare with no pattern and with short tenure that precluded them from acquiring valuable industry knowledge. Many of them had been self-employed consultants between each permanent job. My top candidates all had unbroken track records as IT executives in manufacturing companies. Two of them came from my client's top competitor. Both held MBA's and excellent stability in their positions. They displayed strong leadership and management skills. My client did not want to look any further.
- How will potential employers judge us in the future? Most buyers of goods and services want the best quality for the best price. Where does your quality lie? What are your real strengths? What do you most enjoy doing? If you were a CIO in your last job, hated the politics and miss being a Director of Applications or Infrastructure, then perhaps you should target only those jobs. Many senior IT executives have said that they don't want the top job, but will make a great number two, because they will keep the boss out of trouble and not threaten them.
- How old are you? Your choices are fewer when you are older and more senior. If you are in the over fifty set and have a decent nest egg, this might be the time to seek interim CIO or long-term management consulting opportunities. Many companies that (illegally) judge you to be too senior for a permanent position, may be glad to hire you on a contract basis to help a newly promoted or hired thirty-something clean up a department or do strategic planning. On the other hand, you may be a very attractive candidate to a CEO who is a contemporary in age. S/he may be more comfortable working with someone her or his own age.
- What are our financial needs? If you have a seven or high six figure net worth you will feel less pressure waiting for the right job to come along, than if you have a thin bank book. Only you and your banker know for sure.
- Someday you will be working and hiring others. Be as compassionate and understanding to them as you expect others to be to you in your time of need.

We lack control over much of what influences our lives. Many of us feel powerless in the face of present economic and political conditions, some of which are unlike anything previously seen. Your control then becomes your self-determination of who and what you

are and how to present that to prospective employers. In his play Hamlet, William Shakespeare's main character said, "This above all: To thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man". If you know yourself, your integrity and honesty will be evident, allowing you to sell yourself effectively.

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Ed Pospesil  
Chairman  
Technology Executives Network Group

Vice President  
Bruner Consulting Associates, Inc.  
33 Elizabeth Street, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor  
Derby, CT 06418  
epospesil@brunerconsulting.com  
[www.brunerconsulting.com](http://www.brunerconsulting.com)  
Phone: 203-732-7084 / 866-566-2224  
Fax: 203-732-9033

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