

The Interview, Part 5: Don't Sow the Seeds of Your Departure

Many executives claim that whenever someone is hired, a bullet is fired into the air and they spend the rest of their time at a company dodging it. How well you do your homework before accepting and as you start a new position may determine how quickly the bullet hits you. This week, we will explore reasons why the careers of senior IT executives derail. Hopefully, this article will help you in your discernment process when you are anticipating an offer.

How do you determine whether a position is right for you?

- Ask the hiring executive to explain the departure(s) of previous incumbents. If any of them was fired for poor performance or if they left for vague reasons with political overtones, try to learn as many of the details as possible. You need to decide whether your predecessors fail to perform or if top management had unrealistic expectations? What was the political climate? Perhaps the last CIO was brought in to make changes originally championed by management. Many CEOs have withdrawn support and reversed direction on new initiatives when they meet with resistance from other team members. New hires can become sacrificial lambs when top management does an about face and needs to save face.
- Look beyond the job description. Ask top management to list the specific, business-critical, deadline-driven, actionable and measurable accomplishments that you must achieve in order for you to be successful in your new role. What are the challenges facing anyone who accepts the job? What caused previous incumbents to fail? Are they considering internal candidates? If you're hired, what will be your relationship with them? What kind of support can you expect from other members of your team? Try to determine who would be opposed to your projects and ultimately your success. More detail is better.
- Is this the work you want to do? As you review a position description, you will see multiple duties and responsibilities and you may be able to do all of them. However, you may be passionate about doing only a select few while your potential employer may be interested in others. You will appear to fit such a position on paper and in person for awhile, but before too long, you and your employer will become unhappy. Don't stop interviewing and asking questions until you learn these potential differences. If economic pressure is forcing you to accept a position that is a good fit but not a great one, you should at least be aware of the differences and know where you may have to make a special effort to avoid being terminated during your first year. Only you can decide the price you are willing to pay to be employed in the wrong position.
- Be certain in your own mind that you can accomplish these tasks. You should allow for some stretch of your abilities to deal with unfamiliar responsibilities. You must also factor in some of your time to deal with unpleasant and urgent surprises.

- Test for inconsistencies and disagreements among your interviewers. If top management and your future peers disagree on your role, do you really want to join their team? Once again, if checkbook pressure is forcing you to accept a position that you would dismiss in better times, knowing the political landscape before you join will at least give you the opportunity to plan a strategy which will help you survive.
- How do you make decisions? How does your potential employer make decisions? A bad fit here will cause you considerable frustration. Company culture is more than the difference between wearing a suit versus business casual dress. If you act quickly and autonomously, you won't last long in a layered company with committees and analysis paralysis.
- Avoid accepting any offer until you can do this diligence. I have seen many IT executives who have been terminated from their previous two or three jobs. Mergers and top management changes with their political fallout are inevitable. On the other hand, I have seen some very capable IT executives who in a few cases have survived such turbulence simply because they knew what they had to do and how to do it well. Excellence and competence can transcend politics on occasion.
- Consider the potential damage to your career if you fail to do this detective work. You may be frustrated now by extended unemployment, but a decision made in haste could beach you again in the next six to twelve months. Do you want to face this same agony again so soon? If financial expedience is forcing your decision, adopt a consultant's mindset. This position has a definite beginning and end.
- Use your network before and during the interview process. Speak with contacts in competitors, vendors and customers, if possible. They may all have valuable information.
- If your instincts or "gut" say that a position is not right for you, it's not. Try to determine why. The likelihood of you changing this job to suit you is low. If you accept it anyway because you need a job, do your best work and try to gain experience that will add value to you for your next search.

So you have accepted the job. What do you do now?

- Don't make promises you can't keep. Consider your risks before promising to deliver. Your job is to bring order from chaos, streamline business processes and solve business problems. Have a clear understanding of all the issues before acting.
- Learn how to sell expectations to your customers in their language. This can be very valuable when your people have to solve their technology problems. Sell expectations you can exceed.
- Be sure that you are expert in the business issues of your new company or that you can achieve this status in short order. Be able to speak like an insider.
- Make your customer feel that you and your department will do your utmost to solve their problems. Nothing will damage your reputation faster than a lack of urgency or attention to detail. As a newly hired executive, you are taking control

of previously unknown employees. Let them know from the outset that you expect them to provide the best and most rapid possible service to all customers at all times. Deal with them firmly and swiftly when they don't. Others will get the message.

- What kind of legacy do you wish to leave with your new company? When you leave this company in a few years, what do you want people to say about your accomplishments, character and behavior? Are the accomplishments and contributions you want to make the same ones your employers want? What is the corporate strategy? What are your peers' goals? Learn them and support them. Do you want to be remembered as an executive who brilliantly delivered on the wrong projects and priorities?
- I have said in previous newsletters that trust is the key concept in hiring. Hiring executives evaluate candidates to determine who best will do the work the way they want it to be done, with minimal surprises. Candidates explore companies attempting to learn which one will give them the most rewarding career in return for their best effort. Many executives begin to fail when they allow this bond of trust to be broken.
- No matter how much diligence you do in advance of accepting a position, things may still go wrong for reasons completely beyond your control. While everyone wants to avoid this, it happens, and is more painful for senior executives because it usually leads to extended unemployment.

You are walking in with a clean slate. No one has any bad memories about you. Do your best to keep it that way. It is impossible for any newsletter or article to cover every contingency. If you are experiencing unique circumstances, please contact me at any time to discuss them.

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