Career management: choosing the game

Jasper Mardon

This is the first of a series of articles by Jasper Mardon offering down-to-earth advice on career management. Among topics he deals with in future columns are how to succeed without alienating co-workers, making contacts, choosing friends and mentors, ethics, efficient office organization, communicating, and changing jobs.

Approximately 26 of Mardon's immediate colleagues and subordinates have received—between them—44 gold medals, fellowships, and other awards including the 1992 Gunnar Nicholson Gold Medal awarded to Borge Wahlstrom.

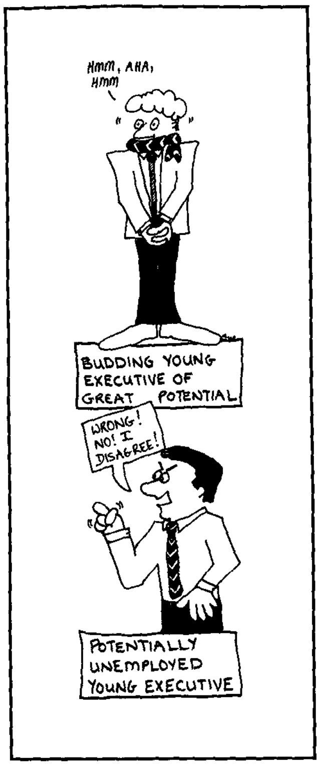
Choosing the game, picking the team

In order to set your course for a successful and rewarding career with any large organization, you must first choose the game. This means understanding your own skills and aptitudes and choosing your area of activity.

The types of games include administrative, legal, technical, marketing, and engineering positions, among others. Your choice of career activity should be based on matching your strong points with requirements of various activities. For example, impatience can be fatal to a sales person, but impatience can sometimes be an asset for someone in a technical position.

Once you know your game, you should select the type of company you would like to join. The successful company provides good training, but a lower rate of climb. When selecting the company, your immediate superior is a key factor. What is his or her record for producing able people? Remember that recognition comes as a result of achievement. The combination of company and supervision should provide work that will make achievement possible and have the authority to make recognition likely.

Frequently, a young recruit may feel that he or she does not have access to such information and may simply be glad to be offered a job. This kind of thinking, however, often starts people off on the wrong road of life in the wrong direction. It is extremely important to make the effort to evaluate your strong points and to find out what you need to know.



The company: small or large?

Companies, like people, have distinct characters. But unlike human beings, whose characters are formed at an early stage of their development, the corporate character can change over a long period. When setting your career course, if you want to produce at your maximum capability, it is important to select a corporation whose character is compatible with your own. The following are some guidelines for recognizing and defining the corporate character:

1. What is the company's general reputation in the industry? Do not rely too heavily on this factor, however, as it takes five to 10 years for the average person in an industry to recognize any change in the character of a company.
2. What is the impression suppliers have? Good field sales staff selling equipment that requires contact with senior management usually can provide an impartial opinion about a company.
3. What is the history of the union-management relationship? This information should be obtained from union officers.
4. What is the reputation and philosophy of the president, the CEO, or both? This will be strongly reflected in the corporate character, particularly if individuals have held these positions for any length of time. To further guard against sudden change, assess these factors among managers one or two levels down the ranks.

Once you have decided upon a compatible corporate character, you must decide whether you would be more productive in a large corporation or a smaller, closely knit company. Each has advantages and disadvantages.

Large corporation

- Offers more jobs with reasonable remuneration and recognition
- Presents less chance of early recognition because company objectives are often obscured, making it difficult to apply imagination to objectives
- Tends to overlook employees until they have risen to senior-level positions
- Often offers well-planned training opportunities
- Frustrates because of excessive red tape, slow and often ponderous decision making, excessive management by committee, and higher-level political infighting.

Small company

- Limits advancement opportunities because of its size, potential for persistent personality conflicts, and other characteristics
- Gives recognition more easily because of ability to measure contributions and relate rewards accordingly
- Offers opportunity to be known by all superiors and subordinates
- Lacks planned training opportunities
- Limits red tape and political infighting but may be dictatorial.

Your game is chosen. You have been hired by a company that is right for you. You are ready to play. But before you can take the step from observer to participator in the *management* of the company, you must become a *member* of a team. An employee, particularly if he or she is a new recruit, should follow some basic guidelines for becoming part of a team.

1. Refrain from controversy for six months, regardless of how strongly you think you know best.
2. Remember that the time required to undo the effects of poor management is related to the length of time it has been in operation.
3. Identify the true positions occupied by players.
4. Establish that you are trustworthy.
5. Establish the personal touch if you have natural empathy for people, but do not pretend if this does not come naturally.
6. Use key players identified in No. 3 to obtain a thorough grasp of the operation.
7. Pick one point on which you can make a major contribution and make it. TJ

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