7 Ways to Move Up by Moving Over

Over is the new up in many jobs and industries. Learn how to use lateral moves and other off-the-ladder opportunities for career catapults and avoid getting derailed.

By Robin Madell

Are you looking for that next career challenge but unsure how to get there? Climbing the corporate ladder might not be the only way. Today more than ever, a career detour just might lead to your career destiny. At every level — including the top — professionals, managers, and executives-in-waiting commonly zigzag through several lateral lurches before stepping up to their destination position.

Why has lateral become the new way to the top? The recession is partly to blame — the hierarchy in many companies flattened and compressed during the recession, effectively eliminating rungs that were previously part of the expected climb.

Because of this reality, it has become more important to “think sideways.” If you don’t plan ahead by considering lateral rotations as part of your career development plan, you may end up stuck on your current ladder rung indefinitely, unless you find a way to take a larger-than-usual step up. Yet paradoxically, exceptional advancement is less likely if you haven’t taken the time to boost your experience and confidence with lateral moves.

Cheryl Palmer, career coach and founder of Call to Career, suggested a helpful analogy: “If you’re stuck in a traffic jam and it may be hours before you’re able to move forward, it makes sense to change lanes and exit on a side road where you can more quickly navigate around it. Sitting in the traffic jam and fuming doesn’t get you anywhere.”

For advice on how to effectively turn a side step into a step up, TheLadders asked several career-development experts to weigh in:

Drain, Improve Company Culture, and Attract Top Talent, suggested you must proactively plot your own career plan to make sense of diagonal and lateral moves. “Your employer won’t do it for you, so the first thing to know is that it’s up to you to pursue and land opportunities that advance your career agenda,” said Cleaver.

A great place to start is to envision your next “up” move, and then reverse-engineer the qualifications you need to make a serious run for that position. Cleaver recommended assessing your current experience and skill set to determine what you might need to get where you want to go.

“Ask yourself: Am I lacking hands-on operational experience? Proven expertise in a business skill, such as client retention? A working knowledge of a relevant slice of technology? What skill set would tee up my success in that position?” suggested Cleaver. By comparing the skills required by your next-step job to the skills you currently have, you’ll quickly see the gaps that a lateral move can fill.

2. Do What Needs to Be Done. Your informal self-assessment will likely uncover areas where your skills could be stronger to get you to the next level. Determine specific strategic actions that will help you reach your career goals faster.

“If you are a project manager who wants to become a department manager, you might need two things: a stronger network outside your department so that your reputation is already established with your potential new peers, and broader exposure to customers and clients so you can show that you can drive growth as well as get work accomplished,” said Cleaver.

In this case, she suggested considering a short-term rotation to cultivate relationships with other departments and functions, or working on an assignment that puts you and your team on a customer-facing project.

3. Volunteer Strategically. It can be difficult to find time for volunteer projects in the midst of your primary career responsibilities. But strategic volunteering can be a powerful way to rapidly expand your network of influencers and to backfill business skills, according to Cleaver.

To spin community service into an opportunity for lateral rotation, Cleaver suggested joining an organizational committee whose volunteers complement—yet don’t duplicate—your existing network. Look to your current skills for a logical toehold (for example, if you work in marketing, join the marketing committee).

“Your end game is to transition to an assignment that builds your business skills, once your credibility is established,” explained Cleaver. “So a marketing exec, needing operational and financial management experience, might volunteer to co-chair an annual appeal.” Such assignments tee up results-driven case studies for employees to bring back to their day job, illustrating business skills that prove their qualification for general management.
4. Ensure You’re Still Learning. While sometimes taking a few steps sideways — or even back — can help you move forward, not all lateral moves or career detours will take you in the direction that you ultimately want to go. The trick is knowing which will and which won’t.

According to Melissa Llarena of Career Outcomes Matter, it can be detrimental to take a detour if you’re unlikely to learn anything new in the next position. “If you are switching to gain different skills or expand your network in the company, then a sideways turn could be helpful,” said Llarena. “However, if you are switching into a role where you cannot leverage any of your existing skills, then you should hear an internal alarm go off.” To help avoid a dead end, Roy Cohen, career coach and author of The Wall Street Professional’s Survival Guide, recommended evaluating any lateral move in light of whether it will expand your skill set or neutralize what may be viewed as outdated or “legacy” experience.

Stacey Hawley, Career Specialist at The Credo Company, noted that career detours can be beneficial if they round out your overall experience and practical education. “Some detours enhance your understanding of an industry or related industries—for example, industries that are vertically integrated,” said Hawley. “When determining whether a career detour is beneficial, consider how you will use your newly acquired skills for subsequent roles.”

5. Decide for Yourself What ‘Up’ Means. Part of effective career planning is knowing what’s right for you. If you reach a career crossroads where a move feels wrong based on your own goals and vision—whether it’s sideways, up, or down—listen to yourself. Not everyone’s path makes sense as a vertical trajectory. “We often enter the workforce thinking it’s a straight path to the top,” says certified professional coach Laurie Battaglia. “Usually it’s not.”

Workplace coach Darcy Eikenberg described working with a senior leader who knew that the next available step up on his organization’s traditional ladder would force him to spend more time traveling — something he dreaded with a young son at home. But after he spent time redefining what career advancement really meant to him, he discovered that his current post gave him the flexibility and true advancement opportunity that he wanted.

“He chose to stay put, to recognize that growing in his current role would not be a detour, but sacrificing his personal values would be,” said Eikenberg. “He’s been happily succeeding personally and professionally ever since.”

6. Leverage the Lattice. Whether your lateral move comes about by design or decree, there are ways you can maximize time spent horizontally. One advantage of latticed moves is that they allow you to experience different viewpoints and perspectives.

“Instead of looking down my own ladder, I’m going to look across the lattice of the organization,” said Halley Bock, CEO and president of Fierce, Inc. “Rather than asking for input from people who share my perspective and experience, the question becomes how to embrace and leverage the different vantage points, including those of different generations.”

Offering lateral moves as an alternative to straight-upward movement can be particularly important for the younger workforce, according to Bock. “The opportunity to work among
different teams can give variety and depth to employees’ work experience,” said Bock. She added that Millennials bring a strong desire to share their experience and make a difference—so offering multiple avenues to learn and grow can be essential for retaining top young talent.

7. Create Your Own Promotion. With the collapse of mid-management roles in many companies, an employee with 10 to 15 years of experience may suddenly find there’s no next level in sight—their leaders may be in the same age range with no plans to retire or leave any time soon. Eikenberg said that in cases where you can’t expect a promotion, it may be time to orchestrate your own with a few key strategies:

- Identify the pain in your organization and how you are uniquely suited to help calm that pain from your current position.
- Build a business plan for a new role, department, or service you might lead.
- Communicate with key players in your organization to let your intentions be known.
- Take your efforts as seriously as you would a new job search.

“It takes creativity, persistence, and confidence to create your own next step,” said Eikenberg, “but if you’re truly hungry for advancement in a flat world, make it yourself.”

Robin Madell has spent two decades as a writer, journalist, and communications consultant on business, leadership, career, health, finance, technology, and public-interest issues. She has interviewed over 200 thought leaders around the globe, and has won 20 awards for editorial excellence. Robin serves as a speechwriter and ghostwriter for CEOs and top executives, with a specialized focus on women in business. She is currently writing a book about American 30-somethings.