



# Going Out On a Limb: New Desk, New Faces, Now What?

Michael Quiner  
IT Consultant  
California State University, Chico  
Siskiyou 109a  
Chico, CA 95929-0415  
mquiner@csuchico.edu  
Voice: 530.898.6000  
Fax: 530.898.5939

Bruce Arnold  
Director of User Services  
George Fox University  
414 N. Meridian St.  
Newberg, OR 97132-2697  
barnold@georgefox.edu  
Voice: 503.554.2578  
Fax: 503.537.3834

Rich Hinz  
Director of User Services  
Whitman College  
Walla Walla, WA 99362  
hinzra@whitman.edu  
Voice: 509.527.5415  
Fax: 509.527.4962

Keiko Pitter  
Chief Technology Officer  
Whitman College  
Walla Walla, WA 99362  
pitterk@whitman.edu  
Voice: 509.527.4981  
Fax: 509.527.4962

## Abstract

*Someday, maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon...you will change your job and it will affect the rest of your life. It's a common occurrence; people actively court and accept new positions. They do this for professional reasons or for personal reasons.*

*Whatever the reason, it is motivated by a belief that the change will be for the better, better for their career, and better for their life style.*

*Four members of Willamette University's Integrated Technology Services pursued a change this past year. None of them were unhappy with their position or the environment at Willamette University. They all saw this change as a change for the better. One member left for a similar position at a state public institution; another left for a similar, but hierarchically higher position at another Liberal Arts College; yet another left for a higher position at a more religiously affiliated liberal arts college; and the fourth person changed jobs within Willamette University.*

*Was it the right decision, the right move? How long did the honeymoon period last? Good intention notwithstanding, this group will look at how closely reality matches the expectations. We will discuss the challenges faced when approaching a new position, cultural adjustments, and new people. Most importantly we will look at ways to apply the lessons learned to benefit our career development.*

## The Move and The Expectations

There are many reasons why people move on from one position to another. These reasons range from needing to develop professionally, wanting more of a challenge, seeking a better financial situation, or some combination of these reasons. Whatever the reason, once it is decided that a career move is wanted, attention turns to looking at what type of change or position is desired. In looking at potential opportunities, it is important to look at each position critically to see if it fits with personal goals. Some people may look for a complete change of career while others may be looking for new opportunities to

Permission to copy without fee all or part of this material is granted provided that the copies are not made or distributed for direct commercial advantage, the ACM copyright notice and the title of the publication and its date appear, and notice is given that copying is by permission of the Association for Computing Machinery. To copy otherwise, or to republish, requires a fee and/or specific permission.

©1998 ACM 1-58113-066-6/98/0010...\$5.00

advance in their chosen profession.

Looking at potential opportunities involves evaluating the position, the institution and the community. The process is not just that of an institution selecting a person, but it is a process in which you need to actively select the institution and the position. It is also a time to critically and realistically evaluate your current position. Even before applying, it pays to do some homework. You may want to contact friends and associates to determine if there is a good fit between you and the potential position. Although the interview process will expose you to some of the people, and can give a glimpse into the institutional culture, a one or two-day interview will not provide an adequate picture of the position or the place.

During the interview process it is obvious you will be asked many questions related to your qualifications. Equally important, but often overlooked, is the need for you to ask questions of your interviewers. These questions give insight into the workings of the department or institution and help define what can be expected from the position. Remember that while you are putting your best foot forward, the institution, in order to recruit you, is presenting the position in a positive light as well. Use time outside of the formalized interview, such as lunch, to ask questions that will reveal the true culture of the institution.

In theory if you make a carefully analysis of both your current and prospective position and the reason you are looking for something new, the decision-making process should be simple. In reality, it is not a straightforward proposition. The position may be everything you want, but the community may not be a match for you. On the other hand, it is the location where you and your family really want to live, but the position might not quite be in line with your career path. You also have to consider such factors as salary, moving costs, a job for your spouse or partner, fringe benefits, quality of schools for your children, and so on. Whatever the case, you need to take the time to do a careful evaluation.

When a offer is proffered it is time to complete your evaluations and start negotiating. It never hurts to ask for more compensation than is initially offered. You must remember that there are things besides the salary that are negotiable. Other such factors include moving expenses, tuition cost for your family, flexible hours, modem connection for your home (to

allow for flex hours), training/education benefits, and more.

If you did all of the above, expectations of the position should be realistic. There is confidence in knowing everything was done to ensure a good match. There is excitement in starting a new job, with new challenges and opportunities. There is also the anticipation of getting involved in an organization and becoming a valued team member. The time between accepting the position and actually starting is filled with thoughts of the opportunities and possibilities, realization that you are moving on and growing both professionally and personally. This is truly a time of excitement, anticipation and confidence in your decision. Whether these feelings are justified is determined by the first experiences in the assignment.

## Initial Reaction

Initial reactions break down to where your desk is located and the people with whom you come in contact on the first day! You don't even get to think about your job on your first day. Your new employer may have thought about your equipment and supply needs, telephone, or computer. Then again they might have completely forgotten that you were starting that day. People in your new office may or may not take you on a tour introducing you to everyone or have lunch with you. Although this may bias your initial reaction, don't let it. This is not an indication of how they feel about you but more of how busy they are.

The first task on your plate will be getting to know your colleagues. Theory is that to succeed you need to spend as much time as possible talking to them. Spend time talking both formally within the work setting and informally at lunch or "at the water cooler." Sometimes you'll find a person who is willing to share their wealth of experience and knowledge, letting you know important details about the people and the institution. This person could be a gold mine, but take the information with a grain of salt--they may have their own agenda. It is very important that you come to your own conclusion.

Then there is getting to know the people collectively, or the culture of the institution. Each institution has it's own culture. Don't be lulled by the similarity between your new place and somewhere you've been before. Everyone knows that publics are different

than private schools, and that big is a different world than small, but you'd be surprised how different two small liberal arts schools can be. Culture is very difficult to change.

While you are getting to know the people around you the reverse is also happening - they are reacting to your arrival. This reaction will depend on your institution and the position for which you were hired. One reaction may be "friendly, but apprehensive" and another would be "high expectation" of everything you can make right upon your arrival. Listening to people's opinions and sharing credit when your plans prove worthwhile will go a long ways towards easing their apprehension.

Whether the initial impression is positive or negative the best advice is to just ignore these reactions for the time being. Time and further experience will temper your attitude. After going through a honeymoon period your job will start to normalize and you will have a better gauge for judging the wisdom of your career choice.

## Honeymoon Period

The honeymoon period is the first stage of your new professional life when your mistakes are handled softly "because you are new here" and your successes earn easy praise. In some cases, expectations for your work are low while you become familiar with the job, the people, and the place.

This period does not last forever. In some places it may be so short-lived as to be inconsequential, others may experience a protracted honeymoon. Most likely, the honeymoon period is a result of your supervisors (and co-worker) wanting to make a success out of their hiring decision. This is the period when you can ask for software, supplies or equipment that you need to succeed in your job. This is a time when you can try out new idea with support, and if you succeed, you will have even more support in the future. Support for your ideas comes easy. This initial support, however, might prove provisional and insubstantial until evidence of your abilities start to accumulate.

If you experience a honeymoon period use it to your advantage. Ask the questions that only a new person can ask, the kind that give you real insight into how things operate and who has the real power. Meet as many people as you can, using the excuse of being

new if nothing else. Be forthright about your ignorance and your desire to learn and be helpful and most people will respond in a positive manner. If your workload is intentionally kept light while you get acclimatized, use the opportunity to observe and note the workings of the unfamiliar systems at your new position.

There can be a dark side to this period, however. Your honeymoon period is also your "probationary period." If you take too much advantage of your honeymoon period and do something beyond that boundary it can color or prematurely terminate your professional reputation. If you are being treated with "kid gloves" it can be hard to get an accurate definition of your role and what is expected of you. Team members may perceive you as a threat and treat you as an outsider, giving you inaccurate information or attempt to use your inexperience to further their own agendas.

## Heart Of Darkness

Even if you have done the homework and found a position that seems to fit well, even in the relative calm of the honeymoon period, it is natural to experience second thoughts and some discomfort. After all, career changes are events of growth and development, which are always accompanied by stress. These stresses can be evidenced as nostalgia, confusion or negativity.

A major crisis arises when the realization dawns that new and uncharted waters are about to be sailed. Even the most self-assured can have doubts about their ability to navigate obstacles that appear formidable because of their scope or their impact on others. As the course ahead becomes clearer it can seem daunting and cause some desire to return to the comfortable and the familiar.

A second stress can be added when just what was sacrificed for the current position is called up for accounting. Certainly the comfort level is left behind, but also the personal attachments and investments in friendships and the trust built between co-workers are left with the old job title and institution. These two factors alone can cause a sense of homesickness.

Further, culture shock is a real factor to consider in dealing with a new position and new people. When even relatively simple tasks, such as acquiring office supplies, become unfamiliar and complicated

processes, it can sap confidence and create a great deal of uneasiness. These shocks can lead to re-evaluation of the job change and many find themselves asking "I wonder if they filled my old job yet?"

Accelerating the problem is the often ubiquitous nature of the initial job priorities. The priorities initially communicated can't be taken at face value, you need to assess what the real priorities are, even if enthused about your plans to tackle the stated missions. What the institution states in the courtship period, desires for change, looking for fresh ideas, may be more theoretical posturing than anything else. They may be, in fact, looking for someone to validate their current processes. The institution may not be as prepared for change as they like to imply.

Realizing that these stresses are working, usually just under the surface, is important to neutralizing them. The negative aspects of cultural re-adjustments and hindsight really have no weight in the matters that decided the move in the first place. New systems can be mastered, new relationships can be developed, and new challenges can be overcome. It is helpful to keep in mind the realities of the past job and why the change was pursued in the first place.

The honeymoon phase, as described above, is the perfect time to "capitalize on your weakness". Because you are new and in unfamiliar territory the option is yours to experiment and stretch or to withdraw and stagnate. The later course will cause the discomforts described in this section. The bolder course, investing greater efforts in learning the new culture and cultivating new relationships with co-workers, will bring you greater accomplishments

## Moments Of Glory

Whether the job is what you expected is largely a matter of how well you interviewed the interviewers and did your other homework. Still, there are those subtle differences between the shining face that was presented while you were being recruited and the naked truth about the position. Often what was written on the job description isn't the whole picture of what will be coming across your desk.

This incongruity can be the greatest opportunity. Keep in mind that very few positions are cast in stone. You are a new person to the job, and maybe it's even a new position at the institution, so there is

room for growth and initiative. The real "glory" will be gained in performing the duties you accepted and frustration can be avoided by realizing the limitations of your position.

Get a feel for the way things are done before you think about changing them. One reason institutions hire from outside their community is to gain from new perspectives and experiences, but they may only want someone to substantiate what they already believe. No one is looking for you to come riding in on a white horse and change everything before you even get out of the saddle. Find the balance, the way to make changes that work within the culture while moving the institution forward.

People vary in their reactions to change. Some will be open to new ideas and rally to your side. Others will resist change, either openly or under the cover of saying "yes" but not following through. This latter group can take months to convince, but when you see attitudes change it will be very satisfying.

If you placed in a position where you need to start off running, you may not have an option of finding out what makes each person "tick" before needing to work interactively with them. Just proceed carefully. Make sure to communicate what you are doing and why. Also, it is important that you let the other person know what makes you "tick." It's not just a matter of your learning to work with them. You need to let them know how they can work with you.

Small successes early on build a groundwork that leads to bigger accomplishments as your institutional knowledge and reserve of confidence and support grows. It's important not to let the impact of the small wins get lost in the day to day routines, as more ground is covered the satisfaction gained from the positive resolutions early in your new position will provide a strong foundation for future success.

## Lessons Learned

Most career changes go through some discreet phases. There is the decision to change positions and the expectations that build about the new job. There are the important first impressions of the new institution and work mates. Usually there is a honeymoon phase before the stresses and successes of a new professional position are experienced.

Each of these stages offers unique opportunities and there are lessons to be learned in every stage. Research and groundwork are valuable before and during the move and expectation. The initial reactions should be tempered and initiative taken to get to know the new environment.

There have been cautions given about pushing for changes too quickly in the honeymoon period and in reacting too strongly to the stresses presented by any life change as radical as taking a new job. A lot of attention has been given to the importance of getting to know the team of people that you find at your new position. More valuable than the salary, or the benefits, more important than your job description or the location of your desk is the relationship and communications established with your co-workers. Just remember these points:

- Do your homework.
- Be honest in your evaluations.
- Don't cling to first impressions.
- Get to know your co-workers.
- Don't dwell on the past.
- Work to make a difference.

Development and career goals will lead most of us to new positions and institutions at some time. It truly is "going out on a limb" and the results can be both terrifying and exhilarating. Having made the decision to make a professional change, it is up to us to make it a positive event in our lives and to use the opportunity to grow.