

Staying happy and productive as a mid-career professional

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Continuous learning, even for reasonably experienced and PhD-level workers, is both valued and expected.

You know how to do your job well and, in fact, you have been doing it well for a number of years. The big existential question facing an employee in this situation is, Now what?

At the recent Association of University Technology Managers annual meeting¹, a panel of experienced technology transfer experts tried to answer the question. Anna Amar of the US National Institutes of Health, Pasquale Ferrari of the University of Maryland and Jason Wen of Boston College tackled the tricky assignment of advising attendees on how to remain motivated and engaged in the workplace during the middle phase of one's technology transfer career. The target audience were people who are not new to the licensing profession but who are also not in the later stages of their careers. The panelists defined mid-career professionals as employees with approximately 5 to 15 years of experience in that job function or in that particular field. The take-home lessons from the workshop, some of which were generated in a lively discussion between audience members and the speakers, are applicable to all biotech professionals. Whether you are a research scientist, a product manager, a regulatory expert or a patent attorney, the same pressures and challenges exist for those of us who are in the middle of our careers.

Can't get no satisfaction? Look at yourself first

One of the recurring themes that came out of the workshop was that an even mildly disgruntled employee in a mid-career slump should first try to find ways to make her current job more satisfying and challenging. Remember

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that not everyone can be the boss or even be the number two person. If you aspire to be a leader in your organization or your field, it is imperative that you take on a wider range of assignments—including joining special project teams or task forces or serving on a committee—even if some of those activities are done in an unpaid or volunteer role or on a temporary basis. If you don't have any people reporting directly to you, seek out opportunities to manage interns, volunteers or students to gain managerial experience. If you are not deriving great satisfaction on the job, you have a few other options left to consider before deciding to actively look for another position: (i) work on yourself; (ii) find a mentor; (iii) get actively involved with an outside professional association in your area of expertise; (iv) write, speak, mentor others and/or teach; (v) work with a mentor, career coach or even a personal coach to 're-frame' your thinking about your current job status as well as modify problematic behaviors that are a drain on your productivity, such as learning to better deal with conflicts and improving time management skills. Your goal should be to raise your emotional intelligence. Beyond certain baseline factors such as credentials and intelligence, often the only difference between successful, happy and productive employees and stagnant, bitter and inefficient ones are these individuals' emotional intelligence levels².

The news isn't encouraging for those who feel that they needn't bother to seek yet another



graduate degree given their years of hands-on work experience and the educational credentials they have already earned. Most workshop participants agreed that we are in an age where continuous learning, even for reasonably experienced and PhD-level workers, is both valued and expected³. Failing to keep current by either pursuing a specialized graduate degree, whether an MBA, a law degree or a professional master's degree⁴, or neglecting to obtain a key credential or certification, such as the Certified Licensing Professional, Registered Technology Transfer Professional, Regulatory Affairs Certification or registered US patent agent, may not only hinder your ability to be promoted but could even result in your termination. Do not wait to obtain these qualifications until you are bored to tears in your current job or are desperate to find another position. Lastly, if your employer will not reimburse you for additional graduate course work or for particular certification and/or registration program fees, you must seriously consider paying for this essential training out of your own pocket. For many professional positions in the pharma and biotech industries as well as in the university environment, the reality of the

hypercompetitive job market is that you must possess certain minimum formal credentials to be competitive for even some entry-level professional positions.

Specialist versus generalist

In many professional-level positions, regardless of your specialty, you must be both a generalist and a domain expert. In a small organization setting such as a startup company, it is best to be a jack-of-all-trades—for example, scientists should have a good understanding of basic finance, human resources and legal matters. In a large organization such as a pharma company or major research university, it is usually best to be a specialist and to work in a well-defined niche as an expert—for example, biotech patent law or business development in the therapeutic drug space.

Move up, move sideways, move on or just stay put?

Beware of inertia and feeling too comfortable on the job. As one speaker pointed out, “where the magic happens” is often at the edges of your comfort zone, where “failure is an option.” Accept assignments or projects that you aren’t sure you have the skills or knowledge to easily complete successfully. Resist the urge to horde

information; be a sharer of ideas and of your expert domain knowledge within your organization and your professional community. Sometimes a lateral move can be just as rewarding and challenging as a move up. The trick is to be open minded about new opportunities and actively seek out those opportunities within your current company or university (or as a volunteer outside of your workplace). A current major trend is for organizations to preferentially hire people who have experience working in at least two of the three major sectors: academia, industry and government/nonprofit. Finally, often you must be willing to leave your current organization to continue to grow and have a chance at taking on a more senior role.

Toot your own horn, learn from the best and test the waters

Document what you have accomplished on the job and all of the training you have taken. For example, licensing professionals should maintain a detailed deal sheet. Spend some time updating and polishing your online profile on career-related social networking sites such as LinkedIn (and post a professional photograph—avoid the temptation to include snapshots of your children or pets).

Your LinkedIn profile should include recommendations and endorsements from former bosses and colleagues as well as links to slide decks from talks or lectures you have given or to blogs, papers or articles you have published. Emulate the stars in your profession by joining the associations or groups they belong to and by tracking their career development. Read job announcements in your field to keep informed about the skills and qualifications employers are looking for and be receptive to inquiries from recruiters. Test the waters by applying for positions you are interested in even if you are happy in your current job—the feedback you receive (whether an outright rejection or an invitation for an in-person interview) will be invaluable as you chart your career development path.

COMPETING FINANCIAL INTERESTS

The author declares no competing financial interests.

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