

Landing a Great Job only to find it's a Dead Job

Shôn Ellerton, September 28, 2021

5 lessons I learned when I jumped too quickly when accepting an executive's role.



Before I jump into the five lessons I learned, allow me to add my story beforehand. Otherwise, just skip to them below.

My Story

There's nothing like being offered that dream position in a new company. A position of high responsibility. A position that demands the best of your skills and energy to ensure that it is fulfilled. Believe me, it does not come often, and when it does; when we get that acceptance email or letter, our emotions often get the better of us. This happened to me nearly ten years ago.

I was one of the national team leaders in an Australian nationwide engineering consultancy on the rollout of telecommunications and ICT projects. Having reached, what I perceived to be a 'glass ceiling' in the organisation, I reached out to prospect for alternative opportunities in the jobs market. In hindsight, had I might have exercised a little more patience, I might have broken through that 'glass ceiling'; however, I made the decision to exit and accept a new glowing opportunity in a potential rival consultancy to set up a new telecommunications arm as a business development manager.

How I got the role was interesting but probably quite normal and common. It was through a friend of a friend that I became acquainted with. He called me up saying that he heard that I was looking for another opportunity in the workplace. It so happened that this friend of a friend was the state manager of a nationwide property and engineering consultancy organisation here in Adelaide at the time

and had the power to initiate new people into the business at the drop of a hat. He met me at the bar down the road and offered me a pint. We sat down and ended talking about stereos and Pink Floyd most of the time with the last remaining few minutes to ask me if I'd be willing to set up a new telco arm in the business. He already had a copy of my CV, being given to him by our mutual friend. I said I was interested, to which he replied that I should pop down to the office later in the week. I did just that, and there in front of me was the contract ready for me to sign. No formal interview. No HR. Just ...there... in front of me. The contract. Forgetting to ask my questions which I had thought I had indelibly etched in my mind, I simply signed it.

Still, without asking the questions I ought to have asked my potential new boss, I rucked into my existing workplace the next day and handed in my notice effectively burning my bridges. The excitement and emotion got the better of me and I later learnt that it is prudent to step back, take some time and think more clearly. I did none of those things!

The role was an executive one and I received the salary and benefits afforded to me in that position. I had the *carte blanche* to explore and seek out new opportunities in the market. That included all the perks that came with the job. The travel in business class, the gold Cabcharge card, flexible working arrangements, all the software, computers and smartphones I needed, memberships to select clubs and being invited to many meet-and-greet parties and functions with other executives from other firms. I created my own schedule and began the role with a great degree of fervour. Superficial I am aware, I got to wear great suits as with the other executives without feeling out of place and *felt* that I had traversed over the great glass ceiling above. Everything was laid out for me. The laptop was already there ready for me to use, fresh with new software installed. They even asked what smartphone I wanted. The office secretary did what I asked who said to me that it wouldn't look right if I did any stapling of papers or printing and so forth. I wasn't used to this and I felt somewhat awkward.

Anyway, I got straight to work. I wanted to know where documents were stored, what the protocols of the business were, who the team are, what do they do, what skills do we have in the business. The Adelaide office was only a small one, but my role was a national one which meant that I would be often engaging with those in other state offices in New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia.

Things were looking good. I got to travel to head office in Sydney, a sleek and modern environment with cushy chill areas, open-area tables (which I didn't really like), really nice kitchens with the best coffee and excellent snacks, and of course, the Friday arvo beer and wine session, all free on the house, was to die for. I was invited to various training courses and was able to meet up with a wide variety of quite important people in varying disciplines in the business. I got free control to travel interstate and meet up with prospective clients I called up on the phone to rein in new business. All in all, it was an exciting time, but it was also short-lived.

I began to realise that I was struggling and losing energy in the role I was in. If one is familiar with taking on the position as a business development manager, it is not remotely dissimilar to a 'glorified' salesman. It takes a lot of energy and requires a lot of support from the business. I took it on the premise that, being in such a position, that I should not require a great deal of handholding. In hindsight, this was a big mistake. When joining a new company, one cannot possibly know all the procedures required to make a successful contract. I was demonstrating my 'low-maintenance' appeal by deep-diving into the company's documents looking for marketing material, capability statements and company profiles. My boss or my friend's friend, was not the most approachable character when it came to asking for advice. I took this as a sign that I had to do my own research and findings without pestering him. Indeed, it appeared that he lacked any enthusiasm to my findings, of which I had several potential opportunities requiring some assistance from the business to fulfil. Moreover, he moved from Adelaide to Sydney leaving me to run my own devices in the Adelaide office.

The months passed and I ambled away looking for more opportunities but every time I presented them to my boss, now in Sydney, the response was of no enthusiasm and worse, no interest at all. I began to wonder what I was there for. Then I noticed the trend of snobbery which prevailed in the executive ranks. I was called out for using the public train service from Sydney Airport to North Sydney instead of using the gold Cabcharge card, the bizarre reasoning that executives should be using the private taxi service instead of the commoner's way. Each day, it became more and more of a chore to work in a nearly-empty office. And I grew weary.

Then one day, a call came out of the blue after I responded to a tender to project-manage a telco project. It was from a major construction contractor who

had a turnkey contract with one of Australia's major mobile telco operators. It so happened, and I'm not making this up in any way, that very moment, my boss along with three other high-ranking officials in the business were flying around from state to state making shotgun redundancies due to a major restructure in the business. This was known to only the very top brass and included my boss at the time. The four of them came into the office and two others and I were led one-by-one to be fired. In our eyes, that was essentially what it was. I even might have had the potentially successful tender in my hand when this was happening as well but cannot quite remember. After we were made redundant, the four of them took a plane and went to another state office and made several other executives redundant as well. The three of us made way for the nearest bar and that was that. Oh yes, I forgot to mention that this was in the space of just eight months.

5 Lessons I Learnt

1) When receiving an acceptance offer, keep one's emotions in check and ensure that all the right questions are asked of the company. For example, what support will I get? Why am I being hired and if so, why the decision to hire now? What are the long-term prospects and manifestoes the company wish to adopt in the ensuing next few years? There are many more...

2) When landing an executive's role, it often does not pay to show egalitarianism or solidarity to others working for you or to show that you are doing good by being too humble. For example, if you are offered business travel, never suggest to go coach class to save money to the business. You may earn brownie points with those under your order, but it only shows a form of virtue signalling to other executives that you are trying to be humble by saving money or doing the work which employees in the lower ranks should do. However, if it is one's intention to set an example for others in measures of being more frugal or doing tasks to assist others in the business which are not normally done by the executives, then do so only after ample time to settle in and be a little more 'part of the furniture'. Newcomers are often treated with suspicion by many, especially those who are not earning the same paycheck.

3) Never fear that you are asking your boss too many questions for feeling of awkwardness. I wrongfully believed that being in a higher position that I would be largely maintenance-free and not need to ask so many questions.

4) Before accepting a new position, always make it one's prudent task to be interviewed by others in the business and/or be introduced to others one will be working with. When I started work the first, no one knew who I was or what I was going to be doing except the secretary and my boss! This was a major failing on my part.

5) Don't be too enthusiastic at first. No one in the office likes to see a jumping-for-joy and over-enthusiastic new employee trounce into the office. Especially one who is brought in as an executive. That signals change!

The Good News

There was a silver lining to all this. As soon as the chap who worked for the construction company learned of my redundancy, he made an introduction for me to visit the Adelaide branch and meet up with the office manager, who, in the space of not many days, got me to join the company to bid for NBN and Optus works.

I'd love to read any experiences like mine!