

MOVING BEYOND THE WORLD OF DELL... (AND WHAT A BIG WORLD IT IS!)

After a year and a half of being a career manager, I realized that I wasn't alone in getting caught up in the limited perception of the outside world while at a large company (or any company that is pervasive in your life). The trick is to recognize it, and then know what to do about it when you are ready to make a move.

I joined Dell in 1999, excited to finally make it into the premier company I'd been courting since I moved to Austin. It was THE company to be at in Austin. Everyone knew Dell, had a Dell or wanted to work for Dell. Everyone. Dell was my world for almost nine years.

I would frequently do a mental check on whether I was ready to leave. Every time, I came back to the same basic questions: Where else can I go in Austin that will offer the same benefits, pay, stability, advancement, recognition, etc...? My answer was always the same...nowhere. So I stayed...until I discovered that my desired career path didn't exist at Dell! When I realized that making my next career change required leaving, I panicked.

I had no idea where to start to embark on a career outside of Dell. I had no network beyond the thousands of people I worked with every day. I also had the humbling realization that my years at Dell did not carry the same weight I expected it would at the companies I was targeting for my next career move. That was a harsh reality to walk into when I made the choice to leave...an even harsher reality when the choice is made for you.

Fortunately for me, my path led me into career management, an industry where I am now learning exactly what career opportunities exist in Austin and beyond. To my amazement, it is astounding the volume of opportunities that are available. I have pulled back the curtains on the micro culture I had lived in, and have discovered there is a great big world out there! Of course, the challenge now is to identify the opportunities, and ultimately to adjust to the world outside.

I have talked with many colleagues who have left Dell, and we joke about the "Dell Detox" period. Although lighthearted, there is truth in the statement. Leaving behind any company that has had an impact on your life, be it for a month or years, requires going through a decompression period to help you move on. Here are my tips on making a successful transition into a new company.

1) *Maintain a network outside of your company.*

Oh how I wish I had understood this a long time ago! I never understood the real value in maintaining relationships with past colleagues to share professional experiences. I lost out on great mentors, and my link to the outside world.

When I was ready to make a move, no one outside of my colleagues at Dell was in a position to help me. (*Awkward...how do you ask for help from coworkers to find a new job at a new company?*) Having a network beyond your day-to-day colleagues provides not only a great network when you are ready to leave, but balances your perspective on the job market at large.

2) Set your expectations based on where you are going vs. where you have been.

I know you know these people. They walk into a new job and talk about how much better their old company did things. You may be one of these people...I know I was. It's easy to fall into this trap, because if it worked well at your last company it will surely work well here. Well, that's not always the case, and can often backfire on your efforts to integrate into your new work environment.

There's nothing wrong with offering up your ideas on how to make things work better. Hopefully, that's why they hired you in the first place. But take some time to understand your new work culture, and adjust your style to match. You may find that their systems work perfectly with the pace and style of their culture...you may even find you like it better.

3) Be realistic about salary.

Ideally, we all want our next job to be a step up from where we are, especially when it comes to salaries. When it doesn't happen, though, be careful not to fall into the category of feeling "entitled". When you sign on with a new company at a specified salary...that's what you get. Don't expect that your salary is going to be adjusted readily at every opportunity. This goes along with #2 and setting your expectations.

One more note on this topic: the economy and job market are extremely challenging and competitive for job seekers. Many candidates are finding that to get the job requires sacrificing salary. Take time for some introspection on this. Take stock of the full opportunity of where you are working, and if there are other aspects of your work that compensate for the reduced salary.

4) No matter where you go, you still have to prove yourself.

Don't expect that because you were a rock star at your last company that all of those qualities will be valued the same way at your new company. Some organizations need to have "checks and balances" to make decisions, others succeed with a more entrepreneurial spirit and a "just get it done" attitude. In any case, you still need to excel in your performance and accept the new company's standards.

5) Give yourself time to adjust to your new role.

When I made my career transition, I changed my industry and job function, and went from an organization of 80,000 people to a company with 4. Yep...4 people. I was a deer caught in the headlights not knowing what to do. I began questioning my decision to leave Dell, my ability to perform, and whether this was really the right choice.

Ultimately, as I sit here writing this today, I am undeniably confident that I made the right decision. My point is, every company is different. The size of a change you make and your ability (and willingness) to adjust will determine the length of time for you to fit into the new culture. It may take 30 days or 6 months. Trust your instincts and give yourself time to adapt.

Enjoy the adventure and learn from your experience. I'd love to hear from anyone that has a similar story and is willing to share their tips on a successful transition. Welcome to the big wide world of opportunity! I hope you find that pulling back the curtains on your own career brings in the light to let you grow.

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