Purposeful Transition

by Alison Stidworthy

Transitioning laterally, and not so laterally, to a more desirable career opportunity can be both challenging and rewarding.

Over the past five years, I have made the move from math teacher to air inspector, with many transitions along the way. My unique journey has taught me many things, including goal-setting, flexibility, persistence, and confidence. Each transition brought its own challenges, and the path was not always clear, but I was determined. After all, if you don’t try, you automatically lose! And finally, two months ago, I began my desired job in air quality. I could not have been happier.

My first transition was from teacher to student when I went to graduate school. This required developing a good deal of confidence, which did not come naturally to me. I went from being the ruler of my classroom castle to an amateur apprentice, with a lot of catching up to do. My second transition was from student to employee, when I got a job in site remediation at the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP). This required flexibility, as it was not in line with my area of study. My most recent transition was from ground to air when I attained my current position as an air inspector. This was achieved through persistence. At each turn, I experienced many layers of purpose and function. These layers included learning the overall objective of the position, the procedures of job tasks, and developing relationships with coworkers.

I began my job at the NJDEP two years ago in the area of publicly funded site remediation. I describe it as Superfund at the state level. My role was that of site manager for cases like dry cleaners and gas stations with soil and groundwater
A recent meteorology graduate, I knew nothing about the ground, so I had a lot to learn about geology, soil content, groundwater flow, and ground contaminants. I first focused on the overall purpose and procedure of the work: protecting people and the environment from contamination by doing X, Y, and Z. It was meaningful work, but I found myself impatient with the process, wanting to skip ahead to the cleanup.

I found that learning the rules and regulations that we implement was a bit like reading a dictionary, only everything is in acronyms, which also go by any number of nifty names, and to add to the fun, half my coworkers used different terms that allude to the old rules from 20 years ago. However, I learned the method and importance of these rules and regulations, a skill and perspective I have carried with me to my current position. My former life as a teacher gave me the confidence to join the DEP’s Training Committee, which enabled me to learn so much more about site remediation, and gave me the opportunity to develop many relationships.

When I left teaching five years ago, I set a goal to pursue a career in atmospheric science. Now that I was through graduate school and working at the NJDEP, that goal remained. I continued to network (including through A&WMA), ask questions, and seek out opportunities, even though I was working in another position. And you know what? It worked! Along came an opening, and I transferred from site remediation to air compliance and enforcement. Networking does not equate to job seeking. Rather, it is about meeting people. You never know when networking will lead you to something you need or want, or how you can be helpful to someone else. In my case, meeting some inspectors on a volunteer cleanup day ultimately led to the job I now have.

My transition to my current position has been going very well. I brought all that I learned from my other transitions and immediately applied it here. I get to inspect many different types of facilities, while learning the air regulations that we enforce. I’m meeting and getting to know people. I’m laughing at their jokes and noticing how they approach their jobs. I ask a lot of questions. My regrets of questions not asked at grad school and in my first job have led me to be bold in asking questions now. I’m embracing the lengthy and confusing rules and regulations, because in my previous job I learned how they are the backbone of all that we do. I take notes, try things on my own, and am willing to be corrected.

If you find yourself in a transition, or seeking one, I would encourage you find ways to use your skill set from other areas of your life and apply it in new ways on the job. Utilize the A&WMA community to talk with people who work in other areas, whether or not they do what you think you want to do. Finally, be persistent, yet flexible, in your goals, and be confident in your abilities. As my favorite band sings: “I hope you won’t give up what’s moving you inside” (Sunny Days, Jars of Clay).

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