Taking a Step Forward in Your Career

Facing Fears and Managing Risk

by Christopher Whitehead

Navigating the choppy waters of a career in the environmental industry. While certain aspects will be outside of your control, there are steps you can take to better manage your career.

I have been working as an environmental consultant for nearly 10 years. Sixteen months ago, I sold the President of a prominent CEMS company on the idea of starting an Air Permitting Group. From Day 1, well really Day -32, this project was my baby. I was responsible for every aspect of getting the division off the ground. This involved designing the website and writing all of the content, doing all of the business development work, developing collaborations with other firms, hunting for promising request for proposals (RFPs), cold-calling until my fingers hurt, and completing all of the technical work that came in. I accomplished quite a bit in a relatively short period of time. I am quite proud of my work during this time, but sadly, now it is over. My bosses had to make a tough call and shift funding from my project to take care of a backlog in another division. I give you this background to emphasize the fact that sometimes certain aspects are outside of your control. It’s no one’s fault; it’s business, it happens. In fact, it wasn’t the first time that I’d gone through this.

My first job in this field was with a boutique consulting firm in New Jersey. The office was myself, an eager kid who knew little about environmental regulation, a scientist working from home, and my boss, an expert with over 45 years of consulting experience. I was lucky to learn from this man for eight years. I started out with simple tasks and eventually built up to be...
point-person for a number of clients. Then came the plateau. I was hit by the vivid realization that I had reached as high as I could within that company. We all get there at some point. You want to advance, earn more, and challenge yourself, but that opportunity may not be with your current company. If you are following me so far and have felt the same sentiments, then it is likely time to move on. How do you do it?

No pressure. It's a difficult part of anyone's career, but not uncommon. As you can expect, the first emotions that run through your head at a time like this are a combination of fear and uncertainty. You know that you have strong experience and good contacts, but sometimes that just is not enough. There are times when you need to make things happen. You need to decide how much of a “reach” you’ll try for with your next position. The perfect fit job is nearly impossible to find when you need it. The company may not need new hires at that level at that time. Do some homework, and make a list of a half-dozen companies you’d love to work for, then send a resume to their head of HR. If they see talent, often they will open up a slot for you.

When looking to make a change, my philosophy has always been to try and challenge myself a bit, to grow from my comfort zone. If you are doing this properly, looking back on your career, you should be able to tell yourself that each job, each step in life, was for a purpose, and that without each step you could not have attained the end result. Perform an objective review of your skills and expertise. You should be looking to take a bit of a risk with your next move. Perhaps that means taking on more of a leadership role or a specialist in a skill that you know well. Here are a few basic guidelines to help you along the way.

First, you never want to burn bridges. Your boss will likely be a valuable resource for you going forward as a reference and potential future contact. Always give at least two weeks’ notice and finish any open work before moving on. If you are unsure of how to proceed, and are on good terms with your employer, you may want to speak with them. If you have been a good worker for them they will likely be honest with you about potential opportunities with the company and ways forward for you elsewhere. Your next job opportunity may be with a former client or through their recommendation.

It’s a bit cliché, but good help is really hard to find. If you have proven yourself to be an eager, diligent worker, looking to learn more, someone will find you. Do good work, always introduce yourself to new industry contacts, and be open to opportunities. Above all, do not be afraid to take a risk, trust yourself, and always try and push a bit out of your comfort zone. Good luck.

Editor’s Note: Since this article was written, the author has accepted a position with Trinity Consultants.