



## TenStep Supplemental Paper

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### **Consider Lateral Moves to Open New Career Opportunities**

A funny thing happens in most people's careers as they get older and more experienced. Your meteoric rise to the top appears to get stalled, and it becomes harder and harder to move ahead in the organization. If this has happened to you, you are in good company.

#### **Reality number one – the technical ladder only goes so far**

The first thing that you must realize is that in most companies, the technical career path only goes so far. You might start out as a programmer and then go through all types of progressions such as senior programmer, programmer / analyst, senior programmer / analyst, etc. However, the career path has built in limitations. If you are with a company for 30 years, you are not going to find 30 progressions on a technical career path. There are only so many titles and they become increasingly harder to achieve.

#### **Reality two – the organization structure is a pyramid**

The reason that the more senior positions are harder to reach is that at some point, the organization structure becomes a pyramid. The company needs fewer and fewer managers and senior technical specialists. For instance, each department only needs one department manager and each IT organization only needs one CIO. It doesn't matter how strong and talented you are. You are not going to move into a CIO position if there is already one there. (With the rare exception of companies that have two CIO's).

#### **Senior positions require broader and deeper skills and experiences**

A lateral move is one where you change responsibilities, and perhaps change organizations, while keeping the same job title. Keeping the same job title (or job grade in some organizations) means that your level of responsibility is similar in the new position. However, the skills used in the job may be different.

Lateral moves are important because it is very unusual for a person to continue to be promoted straight up in the organization structure. If you look at the CIO's at Fortune 500 companies, for instance, it is likely that none of them got there through a straight line directly up one organization chart. It is most likely that many of them (if not most) changed companies at least once, if not a half-dozen times. However, even those that have been with their company for a long time probably have moved laterally on a number of occasions.

#### **Why would you take a lateral move?**

There are a number of reasons to consider a lateral move.

**It may help you get promoted.** Each level up the organization hierarchy has fewer jobs than the current level. The question, then, is how these higher positions are filled when an opening occurs. Let's say, for example, that a team manager position opens up. One candidate has been in their current position as a systems analyst for the past eight years. A second candidate also has been around for eight years. However, during that time, he



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or she has been a systems analyst, a project manager on medium-sized projects, and a team leader on a support team. Assuming both are good candidates for the position, the person with the broader amount of experience will typically get the nod.

**It will keep you from being bored.** You have all gone through learning curves in new jobs. You start out not knowing what you are doing. Then you get to where you are comfortable that you can find your way around the position. At some point, you get to where you have mastered the position and you know pretty much everything there is to know. Some people like to stay at that comfort level for a long time. Others slowly get bored. In many cases, you will want to take a lateral position so that you can experience that personal and professional growth cycle again,

**You'll learn new skills.** Most lateral moves provide an opportunity to learn new technical or professional skills. It is rare that you will move to a new lateral position and have the same job responsibilities that you had before. So, in addition to escaping boredom, a lateral move allows you to add new skills and experiences. In the IT world, for instance, it is very common for people to accept lateral positions for a chance to learn new technical skills.

**You'll meet and work with new people.** Another benefit of making lateral moves is the ability to work with new people and new teams. In many jobs, a large part of the job satisfaction is related to the people that you interact with. This is one reason people are often hesitant to leave their current positions - they know all the people. It is also a reason that some people like to move to new positions – the opportunity to meet and work with new people.

### Summary

If you are interested in moving ahead, you will often find that the fastest path upward is to go sideways first. However, even if you don't care about the relentless path upward, there are still many reasons to move laterally. You get to pick up new skills, new experiences, and new business knowledge, and you get to work with new people. Lateral moves will generally lead to a continually rewarding career experience.