

Surviving the Mid-Career Crisis

Author: Anthony R. Reed, CPA, PMP

Originally published in *ComputerWorld* as a Special Report

Many IT veterans – whose skills were learned in a different era – are finding it difficult to reach the next step on the corporate ladder. Some try changing companies, only to find themselves in their old position, with their old responsibilities, but going to a new building, dealing with a new manager, playing new politics, and competing against new pers who have more company seniority.

Still others become frustrated and find themselves unemployed because they blew up at their manager after being passed over again or they allowed their job performance to deteriorate while they were licking their wounds. However, if these professionals examine the factors affecting their career progress, they can take control of the future.

Crowded Field

First, the baby boom and the X generations are now firmly in entrenched in the work force. There are more people competing for the same jobs than there were 15 years ago. Thus, promotions are coming slower. Especially, when you consider, we have a more global work force, outsourcing, and deciding to delay retirement.

The skill requirements are also changing. For example, my first computer programming job required only two years of college and no programming experience. Later, that same job required a four year degree in IT and one or two years of programming experience. Today, it requires a masters degree, a professional certification, and your first-born child.

Because of changes in the international and national economies, the way companies conduct business is changing. Competition is more global than local, competing companies are merging together to fight hostile takeover battles, and once profitable companies are filing for reorganization under bankruptcy laws.

Goaltending

Veteran professionals may not be able to control the influx of new professionals or change the world economy, but they can control their personal career development. To compete in today's tough employment job market, job seekers must treat their career as a business. The goals of a business are to

- Attract customers (managers or potential employers),
- Present a high quality product (the professional),
- Stay competitive (knowledgeable of the latest techniques), and
- Get the best price (salary offer) for the product

The professional must be proactive when it comes to handling their career. A reactive person watches a situation as it develops around him – such as new technology creeping into his department – and takes action AFTER the process is completed. If he disapproves of the resulting technology, it's too late to change it. Similarly, if someone gets a promotion, that you felt you deserved, your company will not demote the other person and promote you instead. It's too late.

On the other hand, a proactive person tries to anticipate possible problem situations and correct or plan for them before they develop into problems. A proactive person plans her career, while a reactive person just lets it happen.

The Five-Year Plan

The first step toward proactive career development is to establish a five-year plan. The plan's objective may be to become IT director, project manager, or lead technical analyst. Regardless of the goal, the career-minded professional should collect want ads that relate to her objective. Most of the positions may

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require the same number of years of experience, similar technical skills, proof of leadership or management experience, good writing and verbal communications skills, and an academic degree. If the ad states that a skill is “preferred but not required,” consider it to be a requirement because other potential job applicants will possess the skill.

Next, the professional should conduct a thorough self-evaluation of his current skills. Throw your ego out the window and be very realistic. List the skills that relate to the future position and include your level of expertise. Review your old performance evaluations and note any deficiencies.

Now, the professional should write down a plan to the necessary skills to prepare for that future position. For each deficiency, he should write down a list of goals that will help her achieve the objective. For example, if the position requires an MBA and you don’t have one, the goal might be to take 15 credit hours for the next three years to earn the degree. If the position requires good speaking skills, the professional should seriously consider joining the Toastmasters or the National Speakers Association, begin speaking at their church, volunteer for speaking engagements at work or professional meetings, or enroll in a public speaking class at a nearby college.

When you begin executing your plans, you may find yourself too busy to get frustrated over short-term problems because your long term goal will overshadow them. Use your frustration to drive your desire to reach your goals.

Next, the professional must make herself stand out from the many people seeking the same position. Most people will join professional organizations and include them on their resumes. They’ll attend national conferences and workshops to establish a good network. A proactive professional will take the extra step and become a speaker at the conferences and workshops. Most conference agendas are set six months before the meeting. The speakers are usually solicited about nine months before the conference.

The goal would be to visit the conference website to learn more about their timeline and other qualifications. Be prepared to write a one-page abstract of your presentation. It should contain a problem statement, problem causes, and solutions. Look at a copy of the previous year’s agenda to get a feel for the topics that interest the conference attendees. If the topic proposal is accepted, obtain permission from your manager and be sure you’re not revealing company secrets.

This speaking engagement will let your current and future employer know that you’re capable of public speaking and considered an “expert” in your field. You’ll also find it easier to establish professional contacts because the attendees want to talk to the speaker to get additional information. You might also be extended other speaking engagements and obtain consulting assignments.

Take Pen to Paper

This same logic can be applied to becoming an author. The next time you obtain a professional journal, read the author’s biographical information. You may have the same qualifications. The only difference is that they’re published. A potential employer will see this person as possessing excellent writing and analytical skills and as a leader in her field. An unpublished person’s writing skills are always questionable.

Professionals, who find it difficult to put their thoughts on paper, should consider enrolling in a writing course or seminar. Reading professional journals will help develop a flavor for the type of writing style editors like. Also, visit the journal’s website to obtain information about submitting articles.

Every three or four months, evaluate your progress and establish new short-term goals. And every year, establish a new five-year plan. If you find yourself failing to meet your goals, just remember that you were at happy hour last week, your company considered a takeover offer and your job-hunting competitor just earned her MBA, got an article published, and was invited to speak at that international conference that your boss, who’s looking to fill a new position, will be attending next week.