

The Grass Is Not Always Greener

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM: Corporate executives can easily become consultants, and successful consultants can become corporate leaders.

NEW THINKING: Less than 20% are good cross-over candidates.

Every time the economy expands or dips, executives who are tired, bored, displaced, or in search of above-market earnings come out of the barn in droves looking for “greener pastures.” They frequently assume that their experiences running a “real” company qualify them to provide insight and expertise as a consultant to other companies or executives.

Meanwhile, consultants looking for financial stability have thoughts of going corporate. Consultants are often confident of their abilities to lead organizations. Who could be better qualified than them to run a company from the inside? After all, they have been the guiding hand for many companies’ strategic, financial, and technology directions. They have been trusted counsel for their top executives.

Unfortunately, grazing in the other “greener” pasture is more complicated than it seems on the surface.

What Life Is Like as a Consultant

The defining characteristics of the consulting environment are remarkably similar from firm to firm, regardless of whether it is a large global firm or a small local firm. First and foremost, at a senior level, success is based on the generation of sales revenue. Dollars equal power.

As a consultant, engagements are driven by thought leadership and strategy. Your clients typically have a list of problems that need to be solved—and the list changes frequently. Corporate decision-makers ensure that consultants have special access to people and resources. After all, they have already, or will shortly, write a very large check for their services.

From a delivery perspective, work is often standardized and methodology-based. Engagements have a beginning, an end, and a defined scope. Often little or no responsibility for implementation or outcomes is specified.

But, there are some exceptions. Certain contractual arrangements have shared responsibility for results, and that is reflected in the fee. Secondly, consultants handle implementation of systems or processes. However, once it is done, consultants still leave and don't have to live with the consequences. Supervision and personnel responsibility is usually limited to performance on the projects by the team members.

Should You Be a Consultant?

- ▶ Do you enjoy a continuously shifting landscape of new problems to solve?
- ▶ Is selling fun? Do you like the thrill of the chase?
- ▶ Do you enjoy socializing and building a network of contacts?
- ▶ Are you energized by smart people doing interesting work?
- ▶ Are you easily bored?
- ▶ Do you like providing “advice and counsel” with little responsibility for operational activities or outcomes?

What Life Is Like as a Corporate Executive

In corporations, whether public or private, profitability and shareholder value are the focus. For most executives, success is based on contribution to operating results.

Organizational leadership drives performance, from vision to planning through execution. Decision-making and risk taking, with accountability for choices, are fundamental. Outcomes are everything. Activities are heavily implementation and results driven. Typically projects are not intellectually stimulating.

Most of the work of the organization is continuous and predominantly operational. Much is policy and procedurally based. There is a broad distribution of people in a corporation, with a tendency to gather around the mean in intelligence, motivation, and interest in their work. Comprehensive personnel management is required by line and most staff executives to maximize the contribution of all employees in the company.

Should You Become a Corporate Executive?

- ▶ Do you like being on the front lines, directing others, making choices?
- ▶ Do you like to see things through to the end?
- ▶ Do you gain personal satisfaction from positive, measurable results that you had a significant role in delivering?
- ▶ Can you keep focus on the long-term while dealing with tactical and operational concerns?
- ▶ Are you willing to stand behind your decisions and be accountable for outcomes with continuing consequences?
- ▶ As an insider, can you gain the respect of others for your business acumen?
- ▶ Are you energized by motivating and leading groups of people to successful achievement of common goals?
- ▶ Do others follow you and support you?

Aligning Yourself with the Choice You Make

If you are a *consultant* and still think you are a candidate for a change to a corporation, consider whether you are most suited for a consulting-like role or for an operating leadership position. Your business acumen, facilitation ability, and communication skills are key skills that will be valuable in a corporate role.

If you are an *executive* and still want to try your hand at consulting, consider whether you are most suited for a partner (translate that to sales) role or for delivery management (translate that to project or multiple projects). Your experience of making things work in the real world and your ability to navigate complex organizations will be helpful in a consulting role.

Both consulting and executive roles have challenges and rewards. Neither is as easy as it seems from the outside, looking in. As long as you find the one that works for you, you will be where the grass is greenest.

Excerpted from *Be Smart: Sail Past the Hazards of Conventional Career Advice*, available on Amazon in paperback and Kindle versions. You can contact the authors at:

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