

Position Yourself for a Stretch Assignment

by Claudio Fernández-Aráoz

MARCH 27, 2012

I once hired a McKinsey consultant into a country manager role in a developing region. Two years later, despite great success, he told me he wanted to find a job at another company in his home country. I could see he was motivated, and still eager to grow, so I pushed him to instead think about what larger global roles he could perform for his current employer. He did and was soon appointed to manage the company's entire international business from headquarters. It was a stretch assignment for him, but one in which he has thrived.

Today's headlines might tell us we're suffering through a jobs crisis, at least in the developed world. But, in fact, companies everywhere, in nearly every industry, are struggling to fill their talent pipelines. In just one week this month, I heard complaints about it from oil and gas executives in Houston, a European colleague working with a global conglomerate in Asia, and a diverse group of companies I visited in Brazil.

As a result, many organizations — like the one in the story above — are willing to consider candidates — like that country manager — who aren't a perfect fit for a particular role now, but who could be soon. They're willing to give people stretch assignments, which presents a

huge opportunity for ambitious job-seekers. So how do you position yourself to take advantage of the situation? Ask yourself the following questions.

Do you really have what it takes? To win and succeed in a stretch assignment, high potentials need to have the right motive (a willingness to have an impact on others in a selfless way), the right leadership assets (including among others the ability to learn, stay resilient, and connect), and be willing to accept the costs of a senior executive position.

Is it the right opportunity? Not all stretch assignments are created equal. Here are a few things to consider:

- Moving within a company tends to work better than switching to a different one. You will fit more easily into the culture, retain part of your social capital, and have larger chances to recover if you fail.
- Short-term projects are a good way to stretch without committing to a permanent change. Consider starting small projects even without a mandate.
- Although it's important to explore the parts of the organization you know best, the most meaningful stretch assignments are the ones that push you not just into more responsibility but into more cross-cultural collaboration (whether it's working across units, functions or geographies). This is a key competence for global leaders.
- Challenge yourself just enough. The sweet spot of development or high achievers is when you have a 50-70% chance of success.
- You can't do it alone. Choose a trusted advisor to help you confirm your true strengths, decide who you want to be, what assignment to look for, and how to get it.

How can you get it? Assuming you have what it takes, and the assignment is right, here's are some tips for securing it:

- Choose the right sponsor. Identify the executive with the best mix of power and credibility to put you forward for the job, and openly share your ambitions.
- Explain very clearly why you should get the assignment. Demonstrate that you have the

competence required, even if your previous experience doesn't look too relevant. For example, a track record of effectively working across functions or units may be a relevant indicator of your ability to work in a larger global role.

- Plan and discuss your integration. Understand the key challenges and conditions for success, including internal communication and resources. Define a realistic timetable for objectives, including learning, building relationships, and scoring “early wins”.
- Be prepared to work very hard. Succeeding in a stretch assignment requires a huge commitment...only proportional to the eventual reward!

*This post is part of the special series **The New Rules for Getting a Job**.*



Claudio Fernández-Aráoz is a senior adviser at the global executive search firm Egon Zehnder, an executive fellow at Harvard Business School, and the author of *It's Not the How or the What but the Who* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2014).

This article is about CAREER PLANNING

+ FOLLOW THIS TOPIC

Related Topics: [JOB SEARCH](#) | [MANAGING YOURSELF](#)

Comments

Leave a Comment

0 COMMENTS

✓ **JOIN THE CONVERSATION**

POSTING GUIDELINES

We hope the conversations that take place on HBR.org will be energetic, constructive, and thought-provoking. To comment, readers must sign in or register. And to ensure the quality of the discussion, our moderating team will review all comments and may edit them for clarity, length, and relevance. Comments that are overly promotional, mean-spirited, or off-topic may be deleted per the moderators' judgment. All postings become the property of Harvard Business Publishing.