



Boomerang Executives: Why They Leave, Why They Return, And How They Manage It

The revolving door to many Fortune 100 executive suites has been turning 360 degrees in recent years as employees who leave to broaden their experience, increasingly find themselves returning to the fold.

The “boomerang employee”, someone who leaves a workplace only to return later in their career, is a growing phenomenon that can be explained in part by the number of former Fortune 100 companies actively running alumni programmes. There is no general rule as to why executives check out and then check back in to a familiar workplace but in the following two part series, we attempt to analyse some of the trends and challenges involved, via the story of six very different executives around the world.

Sometimes the decision to return can be a very simple, logical and pleasant process. It was the case for Louise, who speaks calmly and rationally about her return to a pharmaceutical giant, after a multi-year absence.

After an early start in practice as an MD, and a move from Florida to the North East, Louise decided to take on a clinical role in research and development at a large pharmaceutical company, with people and a culture she loved. After a subsequent merger, the research pipeline diminished in her area of expertise. As she wanted to continue to work in this particular area, she left, on excellent terms, having been courted by a biotech startup working on an exciting and more relevant development.

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A series of very happy biotech roles followed, over several years, though she remained in touch with her colleagues from the old company. During that period, she considered returning a number of times, changing her mind for a variety of reasons. Finally she was offered something she found too good to resist and returned to the pharmaceutical giant in an operational, rather than clinical, post.

Louise found she loved the contrast and, five years on, she has enjoyed six different roles in both operational and clinical positions.

A strong investment in relationships

Perhaps the wisest advice Louise received on her return was to “take a good look around for a few months and only then figure out what you want to do”. This gave her the chance to explore and reacquaint herself comfortably without any pressure to conform to old perceptions. She found many familiar faces, but decided to spend time getting to know people once again and finding out “how things are done round here”.

This was the best investment she could have possibly made. She is not considering a move away from where she is now, and firmly believes that “if

you have a good boss and great colleagues, with clarity and effort, whether in a big company or small, you can take an opportunity and make it work”.

Creating a contract of complicity

Louise has navigated tensions with colleagues, motherhood and oscillating economic cycles, but with her emotional intelligence and strong investment in relationships, she has made a return to a company that she now views as part of her landscape. Her colleagues and superiors have played along with her, and it now seems likely that she will continue to find challenges and interest in her work there for the foreseeable future. A tacit contract of complicity has been developed, and neither side feels compelled to deviate.

Sometimes the only way up is out

Sometimes a return can be the start of really massive change - as happened to Can, who has been linked to the BMW Corporation for all of his working life, and whose story shows how environment and challenges can catalyse transformation.

Can started his professional life in a prominent holding company in his native Turkey, as a promising young graduate trainee. He moved in and out of various specialist sales and marketing roles and built a privileged link with BMW in Germany. Becoming known for his very specific expertise, Can was relied on as a valuable asset in the company. There was one significant drawback to this situation: Can became impossible to promote or develop, as nobody wanted to lose access to their expert!

After a few years, Can realised he wanted to progress beyond what he could achieve at the company, and he left with his family to seek new opportunities in Canada. On exit, Can was careful to be clear in his dialogue, stating his frustration, but keeping things friendly and warm.

When the grass isn't greener

Several years in Toronto gave him the chance to work his way up a large group of BMW dealerships, and gain a corporate role at company's Canadian head office, yet again, as the specialist. This time, however, he recognised the problem he was creating and started to make plans to break out. He found coaches and mentors within the organisation, and took himself outside his comfort zone. Just as he felt he was on the right track, things changed again.

In 2010 Can was invited to return to his original company, with an offer to explore a new management role, bringing together Sales and Marketing. The difficult decision to leave Canada

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took six months, but eventually, the family moved back to Turkey with an optimistic outlook, hoping that time and reorganisation would have solved some of the earlier problems. Unfortunately, Turkey was still lagging far behind the best practice he had enjoyed in Canada and it was tough for him to impose or nurture change. He realised cultural resistance was slowing him down, but felt that he was on a mission.

Creating your own change from within

After being told, yet again, that he was “too valuable” in his current role, and passed over once more for promotion, Can decided that the only path to take was that of radical change, and self-motivation. As he describes it, he “grew up and changed everything”. He stopped blaming his slow progress on others, and started to take responsibility. In the process, he lost weight, gave up smoking, became a better husband, father and friend, and realised that he knew exactly what he wanted in every aspect of his life.

He also discovered that he was capable of expressing this very clearly to his management and entourage, and is now able to see when to accept the status quo and when to drive change. He has established a positive relationship with his “family” at work, after years of not really figuring out how to do this.

The increasing trend to return to familiar pastures is one that gives any boomerang employee and his or her organisation a huge opportunity to build on the past, and to create a new future, with some risks, of course, but far fewer than those involved in a brand new recruit. In the next article we look at how executives meet the challenge of returning to a workplace which itself has undergone great change.

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