
Returning Home to Find Things Have Changed



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‘Boomerang’ employees, who return to a former employer later in their career, may find all is not as they left it. For some this means even greater opportunities, for others, there are new hurdles to overcome.

This is the second of a two-part series looking at the relatively recent phenomenon of “boomerangs”, people who leave a workplace only to return for a myriad of reasons. While this outside experience gives both employee and employer a huge opportunity to build on the past, sometimes returning executives find the organisation they return to is very different from the one they left.

Olivier, an engineering graduate was seeking a career in industry, and joined the French global telecommunications company, Alcatel-Lucent hoping to be offered an expatriate post. A year later he found himself working in the U.S. While the work was fascinating, and he liked the culture, after seven years he felt the “itch” to move on, and left the giant for a small internet-based start-up. Two years on, the company failed, and although Olivier had a Green

Card, he chose to return to France where he joined the French public finance institution, “Caisse des Depots”.

The work was enjoyable enough but after six years he realised he preferred industry and application over theory and advice, so when offered the chance to return to Alcatel he had no hesitation in accepting.

TIPS FOR BOOMERANGS AND THEIR COMPANIES

Boomerangs

- Keep dialogue light but clear and honest, and leave doors open on all exits
- Understand a big element of your decision is based on humans, and remember humans are fallible and not in control of all aspects of destiny
- Breaking up with your family IS hard to do, but you can manage it!
- Do not expect to find your old company unchanged when you return - seek the opportunity to step back and renew your acquaintance
- See every move to a new place as an opportunity to extend your expertise, and then, whether you go back or not, you will be more highly valued

Companies

- Make sure all exit interviews and processes make clear the possibility of a return, where this is something you might like
- Ensure your people keep an open dialogue with you about their satisfactions and frustrations, to avoid departures that might be otherwise dealt with
- Accept that a “breakup” may only

Back to the future

Olivier's decision to return to his former employer was based on three factors: his respect and liking for the person who offered him the opportunity to get back "in"; the return to "application"; and the chance to move back into a global environment and culture. However he soon found the company to which he returned had changed beyond recognition.

There had been a big merger, many of his colleagues had left, and he was now in a different department. This was emphatically not a return to the family he had envisaged. But nor was it a negative experience.

Olivier says he simply felt as though he had joined a new company, with helpful people to show him the ropes. He found his own sense of value has remained intact and his years working outside the company have given him a fresh and useful perspective.

While Olivier says he feels a certain loyalty to Alcatel-Lucent, he is also itching for another expatriation. And when it comes to future career decisions, his desire to travel will undoubtedly be the main driver, above and beyond the strong link he has with his company now.

Bouncing back from a mistake

Like Olivier, David joined Coca-Cola in the hope of working overseas. After an initial period in France, he was thrilled to be sent to the U.S.A., where he worked as an expert on an SAP project. Despite voicing his preference for operational roles he was not granted the opportunity so, not surprisingly, when a headhunter called on him about the position of HR Director for Starbucks, which was setting up in France, he seized the opportunity.

It was not an easy choice as David was close to all his Coca-Cola colleagues, and he still describes the day he told his boss that he would be leaving as "the most difficult moment in all my professional life".

During his five years at Starbucks, David learnt a lot, but the company's growth was slower than expected. When he was offered a role at Christian Dior he was seduced by the brand, and accepted. The move, he soon realised was a huge mistake! He had been brought in to engineer and implement massive layoffs, and less than six months later, he was again putting out feelers with friends and headhunters. Despite feeling that "going back would be failure", when the Coca-Cola HR Director, with whom

he had remained in contact, used a mix of guilt and friendship to attract him back, he accepted.

Contrary to his assumptions that little would have changed he found there had been a substantial corporate transformation, from country-centric to European, and from a linear to matrix organisation. It was a totally different entity from what he had known. He felt powerless to achieve his objectives and horribly frustrated. But he sensed a need to stick it out and make things work.

Three years later he was offered a position in London, where he could take on a leadership role, use his outside experience and knowledge and be seen as a reference, someone who understood the market and its benchmarks. While he's happier now, David admits he prefers to work in companies that are growing and recognises that if he wants to find this environment he will have to once again look outside Coca-Cola.

To err is human

As a contrast, we have the story of Jonatan a talented ballet dancer from Spain. When he finished ballet school, he won a place in the corps de ballet in the Regional Theatre at Linz, in Austria. He was treated extremely well and offered a promotion to "Principal" in his second year. Despite the promise of dancing Romeo in a new production planned for five years down the track Jonatan accepted a role in a German company. Soon the Director at Linz was on the phone, begging him to return. He went back, not least because his wife was from Linz, and would be happy to live back in her home town. The decision was a mix of very practical questions and a pinch of emotional reaction. The Romeo rehearsals began with excitement and anticipation, but quickly turned to despair when the director died.

A new director came in, and fired all but two of the existing members, Jonatan being one of the survivors. A few months later he suffered another loss with an unexpected divorce. He had returned to Linz for his family and for his director, and now he had neither!

This is a good example of how decisions to return based on human factors have the capacity to go disastrously wrong on the turn of a dime.

These stories clearly show the pitfalls in returning to past employers, but far more so the opportunities the boomerang approach offers for both sides.

They show that stepping back and taking time to assess all options, and looking at the offer as though the company was a completely new entity, is important in making a boomerang work effectively for both the returning employee and the firm. We encourage organisations to explore this area more deeply, and to create an environment that actively encourages their alumni to return.

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