

Not Quite as “Easy as Sunday Morning” – Preparing for a Transition from Public Service to Private Industry

In 2002, just two years from FBI retirement eligibility, and a Federal Employee Retirement System (FERS) retiree not by choice, I realized I would need to continue employment beyond retirement with two daughters' college bound. My two year path to prepare for a career in private industry was a sound plan, but as I look back I was woefully unprepared - I got lucky. Since retirement from the FBI in 2004, I have been fortunate to work for two government contractors, ManTech International and Homeland Security Solutions, Inc. - where I experienced a successful journey with each of these companies. I have learned the ins and outs of employment within private industry and government contracting.

As CEO of Eclat Transitions LLC, this article is a reflection and a guide related to the changes you will need to consider and begin your preparation as you approach your next successful career beyond your current career in public service.

Change is inevitable and controllable. The most difficult aspect of preparing for your transition is “not knowing - what you don't know”.

The first piece of advice I would give you is to start preparing NOW – long before you intend to retire. There is a great deal you will need to do to prepare to land a GREAT job in private industry. Preparing over time will reduce the stress and put you several steps ahead of those you will be competing against in the private job market. You know hard work - your public career has expected this of you. You can do this; you simply need a plan - a roadmap of what to do. To make a plan, analyze the direction of your path and make logical decisions. To guide you along your path, consider engaging in the following considerations:

Financial

Start by knowing your numbers. Determine your financial living plan. Determine how long you want/need to work. Calculate all the factors related to your income needs now and beyond the net value of your government retirement check?

Emotional

You will experience fear and anxiety of the unknown, conflict over financial considerations, and emotional ups and downs during the process of your professional reinvention. You will be leaving a profession where you have contributed and made a significant difference in the world. You will be leaving a 20+ year comfort zone where you have experienced success and have an established identity for the unknown. As you plan for this transition, you may not know what you want to do or what you are qualified to do or you may need new professional credentials/certifications beyond your current knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs). For the most part, you are going to be starting over – you will be the newbie once again. You will need to invest time, energy and finances into preparing for your next career as “Who You Are” may not be “Who You Will Be”.

Evaluating the Job Market

You will need to understand the areas of growth in the job market - by industry - by location. Learn what professional positions are in demand now and what/where are the trends. Evaluate whether you want to work for a corporation or a small business, publicly traded or privately held company. Are the companies you are interested in profitable, stable and do you believe they will survive the next economic downturn, fiscal cliff /sequestration?

Non-Profit, Public, Private or Entrepreneur?

Do you have the desire, finances and drive to start your own company, be your own boss? Do you understand marketing, customer base, and are you ready to work 24/7? Building a career path map that allows you to find a relatable position in a non-profit, other public agency, private enterprise or as an entrepreneur should focus on your interests, qualifications and financial needs. Have you conducted an assessment of your competencies? Are there gaps in your competencies and the skill set necessary to be successful in your post government/public service career? Which competencies translate well to business needs? What are you missing? How do you acquire what you need? How much time do you need and at what cost?

Business 101

Do you possess business acumen? Are you knowledgeable about business drivers, e.g., i.e. revenue growth, profitability, and program execution?

Are you familiar with corporate hierarchy, titles, roles and responsibilities? In business, you are either overhead (cost the company money) or direct labor (generate income for the company). Knowing which position to target based on your qualifications, potential to add value to a company, and your comfort zone is essential. A company's growth is dependent on business development and its pipeline of future contracts for goods and services. Learn the drivers of what enables a company to grow and succeed and how your capabilities are essential for their continued growth. Are you familiar with the world of government contracting and private industry? Do you know the Drivers and Timing for Corporate Hiring?

Professional Certifications/Additional Education

Most likely you have been involved, supervised or led projects and programs throughout your career, but do you have a Project Management Professional (PMP) certification? If you are involved in network or cyber security operations, do you have certifications in A+, Network+, Security + or are you a Computer Information Security System Professional (CISSP)? You may have the operational experience and skills but you will need a professional certification to be competitive in private industry. During your career you may have been involved in acquisitions, contract review or personnel human resources. Did you acquire any internal public sector certificates that will enable you to get to the next level of an external professional certification? Professional certifications are valued by performance based businesses that direct bill to their clients and are the backbone of private industry. Have you acquired or do you need additional education that can be leveraged to be more competitive?

Security Clearances

Do you possess a government security clearance? Your security clearance has monetary value in private industry. Maintain it. Insure your reinvestigation is complete.

Networking

It's important to maintain a network of your trusted friends within your government agency that have entered private industry as well as expand your networking beyond those trusted friends. Join professional associations, establish a LinkedIn account, attend professional networking functions/events, volunteer at non-profit associations, establish relationships with recruiters – simply make as many connections in as many industry spaces as you can. Making connections, professionally and socially, is a key discriminator in people knowing you are looking and having something to offer. You understand and know the benefits of building rapport – start now to strengthen your networking skills.

Job Boards, Job Fairs and Recruiters

Identify and attend job fairs, especially those that are searching for job candidates with security clearances. Learn from the hiring managers present what capabilities/credentials they are looking for? Review job boards, and learn how to use job board aggregators and the techniques to get job leads emailed to you directly. Establish relationships with recruiters who can contact you when opportunities arise.

Resume

Many of you may have not yet written a corporate resume and some of you may have been like me and initially tried to create a complete summary of my public career accomplishments that spanned 20 pages. Unfortunately, the people that read resumes typically get hundreds of them and on average take about 7 seconds to scan and review for key words aligned to the positional role you are applying. Determine if you have the skills for the positions they are hiring for. Writing a resume the right way and including the right information will be critically important. And write your resume to be about 2 pages max!

Interview

Congratulations! If you are going on an interview it means you are generally qualified for the job! The interview process is how companies determine which candidate is the MOST qualified for the job. They are drilling down on the depth and breadth of your experience as compared to other candidates as well as determining your personality and cultural fit within their team and the company. This is a weeding out process and there are tricks to stay on the shortlist and make it to the finish line. There are typically 3 or more interviews before a decision and there are multiple interviewers. Some companies do personality or skills assessments as well to ensure there is an organizational and cultural fit.

Negotiations

In your government/public career, your salary, vacation and benefits are predetermined. Not negotiable. However, in industry, how well you negotiate your first compensation package can be a hallmark on how you are compensated going forward. In industry there can be many variables to negotiate including title, basic salary, bonus structure, vacation, stock options – the list goes on. Employers expect to negotiate salary and other benefits. Not everything is open to negotiation. It depends on the company, their compensation policies and the level of the role you are being considered for. The reality is that a company's success is dependent on their controlling costs so they typically won't offer a penny more than they think they have to - to make a hire. The first offer will typically be fair but not the highest they can go. The candidate must make a case to negotiate a better offer. Always remember the value of a security clearance, and, should an employer refer to your retirement salary – never allow the monies you earned for your public service to be a pawn in the employers counter negotiations.

A Day In The Life

Your new career is going to be different. Different culture, mission, job responsibilities, cast of characters including boss (es) and now CLIENTS, commute, processes, etc. The leadership, teamwork and work ethic traits that you have fine-tuned in your public service career are desired, valuable and critical to private industry, especially how they affect performance within a company. Companies value good employees, especially those that contribute to either top line growth or bottom line savings.

Ask or Look for Assistance

There are others who have gone before you, some successful, some not. Seek out both and learn from their mistakes and successes. Yes, there are companies that can provide direction and assistance, but the most important step is recognizing you need to prepare and invest the time, energy and enthusiasm into your transitional career as you did when you transitioned into your public service career.

Summary

Change is hard. You need to be resilient in your efforts to transition to your next career. Expand your capabilities and your network, and remember, "It's Only the Beginning..." of your next chapter. Good Luck and God Bless.

About the Author

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