HEIDRICK & STRUGGLES

GLOBAL TECHNOLOGY & SERVICES PRACTICE

How to Leave a Job Gracefully

A Heidrick & Struggles survey collects the advice of more than 700 human resources officers and transitioning executives on how best to move into a new role. Advice about how to secure a position at a new company is plentiful, but little has been said about how to leave your current company the right way. Even less has been done in the way of research. To close that gap, we undertook a national survey of more than 600 senior executives who have voluntarily left their employers and more than 100 senior human resources officers who manage such transitions. We asked respondents about best and worst practices in voluntary resignations, the career consequences of the manner in which someone exits, and best practices in preparing for a new job. The results of this research, detailed here, can help transitioning executives make their exit with forethought and tact, enhancing their reputation and their career.

Key findings include the following:

- The overwhelming majority of respondents (84% of HR leaders, 81% of transitioning executives) agree that leaving one's job poorly will adversely affect one's future career.
- The chief adverse consequences of a clumsy departure, say HR leaders and transitioning executives alike, are a damaged reputation and strained relations with former mentors and colleagues.
- Among the worst mistakes that people make in transitions, the most frequently cited was "criticizing the company, the boss, management, or colleagues during the transition."

Study results

A great majority of respondents indicated that they believe a clumsy exit would likely damage one's career.

Figure 1: The impact of leaving poorly

Leaving one's job poorly will adversely affect one's future career.



When it comes to moving from one company to another, otherwise astute executives often make fundamental mistakes that cast a cloud over their leaving. By a wide margin, survey respondents identified criticizing one's current company, managers, or coworkers as the most common mistake made by departing executives.

Figure 2: Departing executives' most common mistakes

In your experience, what are the three most common mistakes people make when transitioning out of a job? Please select up to three of the following.



The consequences of a clumsy exit can include hurt feelings, resentment from former colleagues, blame for harming the company, a protracted and painful exit, and more.

Figure 3: The negative consequences of a poor exit

What are the adverse effects of leaving one's job poorly? Check all that apply.

Transitioning executives, n = 635Human resources executives, n = 89		
Damaged or diminished reputation	90% 94%	
Strained or damaged relationships with former colleagues	86% 93%	
Strained or damaged relationships with former mentors/advisers	85% 96%	
Strained or damaged relationships with external contacts (e.g., investors)	54% 43%	
Fewer attractive career options down the line	45% 36%	
Negative press attention	36% 24%	
Lower future pay	15% 16%	

The number one tip for transitioning out of a job gracefully, cited by 63% of senior executives and 61% of HR leaders, was first speaking with your boss or board.

Figure 4: Recommendations for leaving gracefully

Transitioning executives, n = 604 **Human resources executives**, n = 92

What tips or techniques have you observed to be most helpful for transitioning out of a job gracefully? Please select up to three of the following.

Transitioning executives , $n = 604$ Human resources exe	cutives, II – 72
Approach your boss/board first to ensure that they have a voice in your transition	63% 61%
Follow through on your promises to your team, even if that means working late nights and weekends	46% 50%
Collaborate with your successor (if known) or interim replacement to transition responsibilities	43% 55%
Think more carefully about the timing of your transition and the impact it will have on your current employer and team	41% 45%
Be prepared for a worst-case scenario (e.g., being immediately "walked out" of the building when you first communicate your intention to leave)	26% 22%
Prioritize the needs of your current employer over those of your future employer as you transition out	23% 28%
Remain committed to your decision to leave, even when given an attractive counteroffer	23% 14%
Confidentially rehearse your explanation for your departure with mentors or trusted advisers	19% 14%
Work with the search committee (if applicable) to help find a suitable replacement	6% 3%

Approaching the boss or board first with news of the departure also emerged as the top piece of advice about communicating the intention to leave.

Figure 5: Advice on how to share news of the transition

What are the most helpful tips you would give to a colleague about communicating the decision to leave? Please select up to three of the following.

Transitioning executives, n = 604Human resources executives, n = 92	
Approach your boss/board first	78% 77%
Give your employer a voice in the timing of your departure and in devising a transition plan	51% 47%
Honor the good name of your employer when communicating the decision externally	45% 42%
Communicate your decision by consistently using the same "key talking points"	41% 36%
Communicate the decision to leave to your team directly	36% 46%
Remind people why you joined the company in the first place and celebrate past accomplishments with colleagues	22% 20%
Communicate the decision to various audiences in a timely way	13% 16%
Create customized communications plans for different audiences based on their potential concerns	7% 12%
Ask colleagues for feedback on your strengths and weaknesses	1% 2%

Only 16% of executives reported that they would have done nothing differently the last time they voluntarily resigned. Figure 6 shows regrets expressed by other departing executives.

Figure 6: Lessons learned from past transitions

If you had your transition to do over, what would you do differently? Check all that apply.

Transitioning executives, n = 559



Asked to select up to three best practices in preparing for a new role at a new company, more than two-thirds of respondents advised transitioning executives to work on a "first 100 days" plan.

Figure 7: Best practices for transitioning into a new role

Reflecting on the last time you transitioned into a new job, what were the top practices you followed to prepare for the new role? Please select up to three of the following.



About the author

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