

Why are External Diagonal Moves Rare?

Tom Hannemann

An external diagonal move occurs when someone moves into a more senior or broader role in a different organisation in either the same or a different industry. For example, if a Marketing Manager in an organisation moves to become a General Manager or Chief Operating Officer or CEO in a different organisation, I call this a diagonal move. They are rare. Most of the time people move either vertically or horizontally.

A vertical move is when someone is promoted to a more senior or broader role within their own organisation because they have demonstrated that they are ready to move up, they understand the culture and they have earned the respect of their colleagues, peers and the executive team. Sometimes people move vertically because no-one else is crazy enough to take the job! Sometimes people get promoted when the organisation is reluctant to hire an outsider because they might take too long to become sufficiently familiar with the unique nature of the organisation's business, markets, operations or culture to become effective within the required time frame.



Sometimes people move diagonally internally when their organisation acquires another business, when it spins off a new subsidiary, establishes a new division or expands to a new geographic market. For example, they might become the General Manager or CEO or Divisional Manager of the new entity after having been head of Marketing or Finance or Operations or even Human Resources (!) in their original organisation. Or they move from being the 2IC of IT to become the Chief Information Officer of the new enterprise.

These kinds of internal diagonal moves occur when an organisation considers a person is capable of managing a broader level responsibilities, they have the track record to prove they can handle the job, they don't want to lose the person to a competitor or because there were the last person standing when the Chairman called for volunteers.

An internal horizontal move occurs when someone moves into a role at the same level within their organisation to benefit from gaining experience in a different function before being considered ready for elevation to a more senior level.

An external horizontal move occurs when someone moves into a role at or around the same level within a different organisation. They can then move vertically in the new organisation when they have proven their worth in the new organisation and when and if opportunities arise. This two-step approach to career advancement is much more common than external diagonal moves.

External diagonal moves are rare because a person has to convince someone they don't know in an organisation they don't know and (perhaps) in an industry they don't know that they do know how to run the place. A client who happened to be the Group General Manager of a mid-sized enterprise with three operating divisions told me she wanted to move out of Marketing into a General Management or COO or CEO role in a different company. She wanted me to make sure her résumé reflected her senior / executive management and leadership skills and attributes (strategic, visionary, communication, values, team-building, financial and so on) more than her experience in sales and marketing per se so that she could present herself as a for CEO / COO / GM roles.

My take on this is that while it's necessary, it's not sufficient to state that you have leadership, visionary, communication, financial management and other attributes and skills needed at the more senior levels: the readers of your résumé will want to see evidence that you have such attributes and skills by virtue of experience and achievements. Your boss might believe that you are capable to moving to the next level, but successfully convincing someone who doesn't know you is far more challenging.

For example, if you say that you are able to develop a vision and engage people in that vision or that you are able to set the strategic direction of a business or business unit or leap tall buildings in a single bound – challenges faced by any CEO or General Manager – the reader will look for evidence of this from amongst your experience and achievements. If you say you have executive level financial management skills, the reader will want to see evidence of this. The issue is not what you are capable but how what you have already done demonstrates you can do it.

It is uncommon for someone to move from a senior marketing role into a general management role in a different organisation (particularly if they are moving between industries or sectors) because there are likely to be other high calibre candidates who are already operating at the GM/MD/COO level. A risk averse employer (which most are) is more likely to select people who have a proven track record operating at a level rather than someone seeking to take a step up.

Employers and executive search consultants will typically focus on experience you have actually had and work you have actually done as opposed to the potential you might have. If you are to credibly promote your abilities in the strategic and visionary arenas, you need to identify specific achievements which illustrate your proven abilities, rather than your potential or capabilities. It difficult to convince an employer to hire a candidate at MD or GM level unless the person has demonstrated their achievements at that level, not matter how compellingly their experience and achievements are presented in their résumé.

Employers are also more likely to hire people with experience within their industry or sector than people from outside their industry or sector, particularly if those people don't already have experience the more senior level.

If there is a pool of talented candidates already operating at the more senior level, the question on the employer's mind might be: "I have six good candidates who have proven their worth as a GM or MD or COO and I have this other candidate who has been an outstanding senior marketing executive, but who has not actually had any experience as an MD or COO or GM: which should I choose?"The answer is obvious and there is not much we can do in or to a résumé which will change that.

When external diagonal moves occur, they often do so when someone you know who knows you very well provides you with an opportunity because they used to be your boss or because they are a close friend or your sister-in-law. For example, a client who was a senior finance executive had an opportunity to apply for a Chief Operating Officer role in a new division of a different organisation because the CEO of that company who used to be the client's boss persuaded his Board to consider him for the role. The CEO knew he would be capable of handling the job because he had seen my client in action from the position of being his boss for several years and recommended him for the COO job because he could work well with him, trusted him and could rely on him to deliver against some pretty stiff challenges without complaining too much. His lack of experience in the industry and in working at the COO level was discounted in favour of his more enduring personal attributes and capabilities only because the CEO knew him well. Had the candidate not received such strong personal endorsement from the CEO, the Board would have not considered him.



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Tom Hannemann is one of Australia's foremost Executive Resume Writers & Interview Coaches. He has been helping senior executives, managers and professionals across all industries advance their careers since 1993. Amazing Results is delighted to partner and work with Tom, who leads our Executive Resume Writing Service in Australia and across the globe. He focuses on helping our senior executive candidates develop cutting edge Executive Profiles, CV's and Director Profiles. Tom has over 20 years experience in Human Resources, senior management, business development and senior management consulting roles. He is SEEK's resume writing expert and has worked with one of the world's largest recruitment firms. Tom Hannemann is a specialist in providing career advancement services, with strong business acumen supported by an MBA from Australia's top two business schools. Having reviewed thousands of resumes & interviewed hundreds of candidates, Tom brings his unique experience to the resume writing process and works closely with our clients to develop a resume that secures interviews!

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