

The 3 Values You Need for a Successful Career Transition

Executives share what they learned from major career moves



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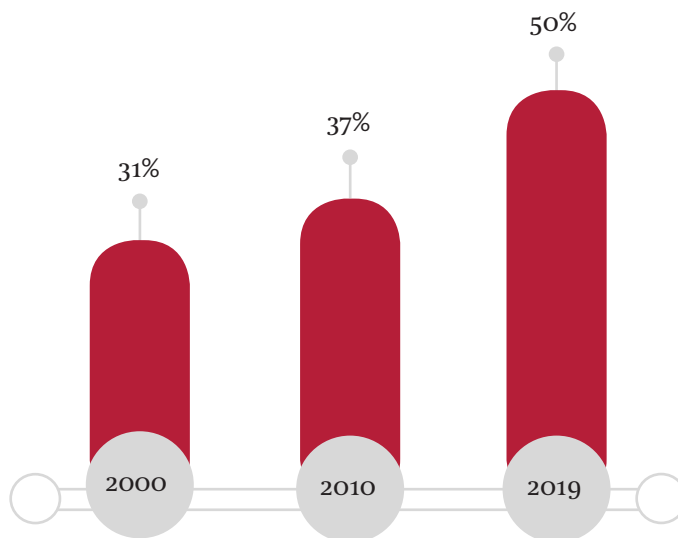


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Over the span of his career, telco industry veteran Morten Lundal has traversed across the United States, Europe and Asia. Each move he made was considered risky by many; Lundal was always taking on brand-new positions and relocating to unknown territories.

Increasingly, Lundal is not alone in these life-altering career choices. As globalization and technological advancements offer more opportunities for professionals, many executives are following in his footsteps and making transitions into the unknown. According to our own internal research, professionals between the ages of 45-60 leaving the consumer industry have surged from 30 percent between 1991-2000 to 50 percent between 2000 and 2019. This means one out of every two senior leaders in the consumer industry has undergone a career transition in the nine years.

Transitions out of consumer industry



**Based on approximately 13,000 internal records
Source Egon Zehnder*

the leadership blog

It's not just the consumer industry that is seeing these transitions. Our internal research shows that in the 1990s and 2000s the number of professionals changing industries hovered between 30-33 percent. In the 2010s, the number rose to 40 percent and it currently stands at about 55 percent.

Lundal, who was most recently heading Malaysia's top telco, Maxis, recalled the first time he stepped into a job in Asia 15 years ago. "I didn't know Asia, didn't know a Muslim country...I didn't know anything," he said. The risk paid off: the Norwegian native is now known among industry insiders as the man who reinvented Malaysia's corporate culture — a feat once deemed impossible.

Lundal, and many others who have made large-scale career transitions, suggested there are three key values to hold on to as you take on new roles in new markets: humility, resilience and courage.

Humility: Ask Questions and Be Willing to Learn

Su Lin Tan, the freshly-minted vice-president of classifieds marketplace platform Carousell, attests to the importance of humility and asking questions even when assuming a leadership position. Tan, who has spent over two decades in sales, pointed out the common fear of looking uninformed or ignorant in front of junior staff.

Refraining from asking questions prevents leaders from learning and finding new solutions to challenges. "You need to be both a mentor and intern at the same time," says Tan. "If you come in with an attitude of being a learner instead of being a knower, then it also opens up all kinds of possibilities."

Tan noted that this can be difficult, especially when joining a start-up where employees are often much younger than you. But she advises incoming leaders to "make up your mind that you are there to learn, even from young people, and be willing to roll up your sleeves."

In fact, younger employees are more likely to embrace humble leadership than older generations. A [recent study](#) of 2,500 women and men at various leadership stages by Egon Zehnder found that younger generations value humble leaders, with 48 percent of Millennials rating humility as one of the top three most important leadership characteristics.

"I'd like to err on the side of [believing] that if we are humble, people will understand that you are motivated from a good place...and this helps in assimilation," Tan explained.

Resilience: Responding to change

While humility unlocks learning and opens new doors for professional growth, senior professionals warned that humans are innately resistant to change and cautioned against complacency after transiting into a new role.

Senior media executive Saugato Bhowmik experienced this as he made the switch from the entrenched Consumer Packaged Goods (CPG) sector to the dynamic broadcast media industry in India. As the business head of consumer products and live entertainment at Viacom18 Media, Bhowmik says the continuous consolidation of the media sector kept him on his toes, as he had to regularly learn new skills in order to keep his expertise relevant.

“In this environment, one has to combine gut, science, and industry understanding with the knowledge that a lot of decisions will result in failure,” Bhowmik said.

He faced two options in his new role: to quietly adopt the practices of existing leaders or acquire new ways of doing things that could invite scrutiny and risks. Bhowmik realized that in a dynamic sector like media, which is driven by changing content needs, the best teachers are the people closest to the action -- the young consumers and managers in the company. He decided that he would learn from them and use that knowledge to inform his way forward. “In any industry shift, I would make a beeline to talk to the youngsters; they ask the most questions and challenge all status quo,” he explained. His decision to embrace change proved to be the right one. “Those who have shown boldness in thinking and creating the future are the ones who are flourishing today,” Bhowmik said.

Courage: Challenging the status quo

Eventually, the time will come for a leader to challenge existing limits and create new breakthroughs for the organization. Lundal’s approach was to imprint some elements of Scandinavian working culture onto Malaysia’s corporate scene — a style that was almost unheard of before his stint.

When Lundal took his first position in Asia at Digi in 2004, he was determined to create a unique brand identity for the company. He dug deep into his Scandinavian roots removing job titles and introducing an informal dress code to the company. The changes, however, were not fully welcomed, and many told him this was not the way things were done in Asia. Lundal recounted: “I went through self-questioning. Am I being the Norwegian ignorant person and this will be a failure as a result? Or am I doing something objectively good and just not tried?”

He decided to press on, and soon there were people all over Malaysia (including like air hostesses) that telling him that s Digi was such a “cool” company to work for. Lundal, who is currently on the move to another new position, likened this experience to the career transition process, where decisions are often made in the face of many unknowns. The only thing you can do is to trust your gut and move decisively. “At that point, I can adopt the status quo, or push ahead and follow my instincts to move to Asia” he said. “I did the latter...the decision has served a purpose [and] I think it was right.”

Like Lundal, we will find ourselves at the crossroads one day. Will we take the road less travelled or the well-trodden path? The answer lies deep within each of us and will vary according to each context. But perhaps in the seeking, we will also find the courage to take that leap of faith forward.