

## Achieving that Promotion: career progression in the creative sector

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Wednesday, March 19, 2008

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Progressing your career in the creative sector is not necessarily easy. Traditionally, achieving promotion was all about moving up through one company, gathering skills, experience and expertise along the way. But while this scenario is becoming less common in industry as a whole, in the creative industries, a sector where 94% of all businesses employ less than 11 people, the challenges of career progression are even greater.

That's the bad news. However, the good news is that, whether you're looking inside your own organisation or thinking about moving on, there are a number of crucial steps you can take. What's more, recent research has flagged up current and future skill needs for the sector, skills such as management, business and IT expertise. Skill gaps such as these provide an excellent opportunity for people with the right training to progress their career. But first of all, you need to ask yourself:

Is a promotion what you really want?

There are a lot of benefits to achieving a promotion, but there are also consequences. Only you can decide whether the gains outweigh any potential drawbacks.

- You may spend less time doing the job you were trained for (as opposed to administration or management)
- You may end up working longer hours, or facing greater pressure (particularly in management or business orientated roles)
- A leadership role brings its own challenges, such as people management and the potential difficulties of supervising those who were once colleagues
- A more senior position may require different personal qualities to those required in your current job: if you have a quirky, creative, individualistic style, for example, this might not work so well in some management roles

Being able to be authentic in your working environment is crucial and it's important that you find the opportunity that fits your personality, not just your career. Here, self-knowledge is the key. As Liz Pepper, of Pepper Stark Ltd, recruiters for the global stock photography, creative and media industries says, 'Having a good understanding of yourself and where you want to go is important.'

But more broadly, achieving career success is about a long-term process of professional development, asking yourself where you want to be and identifying the steps you need to take. Barbara Brunson, Director of CreativePeople, comments: 'It's important to nurture your career, to undertake professional development planning, to pay attention to, and invest in, your professional development. Having a long term approach is key.'

Having examined the issues, you may not feel you're ready for promotion just yet. But by putting career development processes in place now, when the time is right, you'll be prepared and ready to go. A written plan is a good place to start. Ask yourself, where do you want to be, career-wise, in six months', a year, five years' from now – and how you intend to get there. It doesn't matter if things change in the interim – the crucial point is the self-awareness and preparation that comes from the process.

So assuming you've decided promotion is for you – what then?

Make sure you understand your organisation and how it works. This is vital if you're seeking promotion internally. As well as the obvious and visible procedures for applying for promotion, an organisation may have unwritten or less visible criteria which affect how you get on. You should:

- Look at other people in the company and identify why they have been promoted: ask yourself whether they have any particular knowledge or expertise that helped them progress
- Find out how long it took other people in similar positions to you to get promoted: did they have to apply more than once, for example

But whether you're seeking a step up the ladder internally or looking elsewhere, certain qualities will help you on your way to the top, ie, being someone who is:

- Professionally competent (able to achieve their objectives)
- Good at developing and maintaining relationships, at all levels, and with a variety of people – a team player and a team builder
- Business focused – someone who is enthusiastic about the business, and takes the time to see and understand the bigger picture of the organisation (and even the industry or sector)
- Proactive – shows initiative and looks for ways to improve their work
- Positive – works at bringing out the best in circumstances, even challenging ones (without being unrealistic or naive)
- Able to deal appropriately with change (and not be resistant to it)
- Creative – able to suggest new (and appropriate) ideas. Being solution orientated – thinking about how issues can be resolved and putting forward suggestions

The significance of each of these factors will vary depending on your role or ambitions – what's important is to know your sector and yourself, and to seek out appropriate opportunities. And, as you progress in your career, your ability to build effective relationships becomes more important and you will also need to have more 'political' awareness, because you'll be dealing with issues that are wider than your day to day role.

So, what specific steps can you take to assist you in getting promotion?

- Think about which of your qualities and skills are particularly relevant to your desired career path and focus

on these. You may find your fresh outlook and particular skills are just what another company needs. As Liz Pepper says, 'We help to draw people into the industry from related media industries and are looking to bring in people with fresh talent and skills and new ideas'

- If there's a skills gap in your CV, or an area where you would benefit from extra expertise, see if you can undertake some training or a course
- Ensure you keep up to date professionally through relevant reading, training and networking. As Barbara Brunson notes, the value of belonging to the relevant professional organisation is two-fold, it can prevent you from being isolated, professionally, and also gives you a focus for your networking
- Compile and maintain a list of your achievements – these might be targets or objectives you have completed, a commission or piece of work you've finished or a key contribution you made to the company. The list should be brief but updated regularly, and relevant to your career objectives
- Develop your role within your present organisation by building additional responsibilities into your job. If you participate in a formal appraisal and development system, this could be something you could discuss at this point (providing, of course, that your present performance is satisfactory!)
- Raise your profile through additional activities such as volunteering for special projects, sitting on in-house or professional committees and writing articles for trade or professional magazines
- Develop your team building and leadership skills: assist and support colleagues and members of your team, encourage sharing of successes
- Establish a network of supportive relationships (in and outside your company) and market yourself. There are a number of places where you can network, such as professional organisations, community and voluntary groups, special interest groups and committees. Focus on building the relationship, which should benefit all those concerned
- Think about acquiring a mentor. You need to be receptive to feedback and advice for this type of relationship to work well, so ask yourself first whether a mentor is appropriate for you. If so, identify people at work or elsewhere who could become your mentor/s. He/she should be someone you can trust, and who, because of their expertise, can advise and support you in developing your career. A boss or someone who works in your department is not recommended because of the potential for a conflict of interest. Some organisations have formal mentoring schemes, but mentors can also come from outside the workplace, such as from a professional body or a community group. The crucial point is that both parties are clear about what is to be achieved – and are working together to achieve those objectives
- Let your manager or senior colleagues know you're interested in promotion. This can be a sensitive issue and needs careful judgement as to the appropriate time to raise this topic. It's also important to be independent and not reliant on one particular mentor or manager for their support
- Make sure you create the right impression – is your behaviour and appearance consistent with the role you are going for and the company profile?
- You can even go that bit further and think of yourself as a brand or 'package'. Identify your 'customers' and your USP (unique selling point). Keep your USP brief and to the point, eg, 'I'm creative, focused and deliver solutions on time'

A key point about achieving promotion is persistence. You may not be successful straight away. But putting at least some of these steps in place will increase your self-awareness, raise your visibility and put you on the right path. Combine this with a strong network of contacts and you're on your way. As Barbara Brunson comments, 'Networks are incredibly important in this sector, a lot of it is about making connections and nurturing relationships, keeping those networks alive.' All of which makes working in the creative industries a particularly unique and interesting experience.

**Sources:** Creative & Cultural Skills, The Creative Blueprint, Skills Needs Assessment, Executive Summary, p.2

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