

## THE NOUR GROUP, INC.

### FEBRUARY 2007 – RELATIONSHIP ECONOMICS® [NEWSLETTER](#)

#### Who Moved My Career Cheese?

By Jim Deupree

Most senior executives are part of a rapidly developing conflict. On one side is how long we intend to work, and giving meaning to our life becoming more important because we plan to work longer. On the other side are that jobs have a shorter and shorter duration for a myriad of reasons, and the persistent shift in company ownership to Private Equity Groups.

Historically we have been reactive regarding our careers – reacting to offers received, and reacting to jobs ending. We have typically had goals – but not really a proactive career management strategy. So we may intend to work longer – but will it be possible, and fulfilling, without changing one's approach? Our cheese has moved – and we need to think about it before it is too late – and decide whether to change our approach.

Our intention to work longer is typically driven by four forces:

1. *Our mind is a great asset. It is healthy to keep our mind engaged, and we want to anyway. Problem solving on meaningful issues is more fun than retirement games.*
2. *Applause. We work in part for appreciation of what we do for people, problems we solve and things we build – and we are not ready for the applause to stop.*
3. *Asset preservation. Very few of us have traditional pensions. It was fun to start a pension, but is not fun to start drawing from savings. So we want to defer that need for a while longer.*
4. *Too busy to develop other interests. The pressures of the work place over the past ten years have left precious little discretionary time. As a result fewer executives have developed engaging outside interests to replace involvement in work.*

Virtually every executive nods in agreement with at least three of these four forces. As we evolve to the idea of working longer we also begin to think more about what we are doing, and why – a natural reaction to a longer commitment. One common conclusion is to want to give our life fulfillment and meaning -- seek a better balance of life, and desire more enjoyment from the role. In fact, many executives will find that their career ultimately spans three acts:

**Act 1.** Climbing the ladder. Making many sacrifices to see how many rungs we can climb.

**Act 2.** Setting some boundaries. Realizing that some things are just too important to sacrifice (e.g. not moving my family again, personal health care, commitment to a local cause). Willing to give up the next rung, or all of the higher rungs, on principle.

**Act 3.** Giving back, legacy. A shift from attainment for self and family to a desire to give back – using skills and perhaps money to help others in appreciation for one's good fortune and to fulfill a family tradition of servant leadership, or to begin one as our legacy.

These three Acts may overlap. Some may never get to Act 3, which is fine. Experience has shown that the desire to move to the next act is likely to occur without much warning – perhaps triggered by a significant event or maybe just by a growing internal resolve.

The net is that we are going to spend more years working, and we might want to think about how we select work differently. Do we want to spend our life reacting to events beyond our control, or do we want to chart our own course?

Most successful executives excel at strategy and planning. Many feel that they have a career strategy, but is it really a strategy – or just a wish list? Seldom is there a plan of execution associated with the “strategy”, in part because it takes time to learn the nuances of how to execute. So they find themselves in react mode when things happen, and in anxiety mode when they think something may happen. More specifically, when a role ends they find themselves reaching out to their “network” and relying on their past credentials. Instead of setting a new course they get roped back into their historical course. When they find themselves moving to the next act they are unprepared to react. This approach is not usually fulfilling, and gets riskier with time and age.

The other approach is the proactive one -- fully understanding the options, ahead of time. Thinking about the full range of options – from business ownership or equity to board positions to consulting to employment. Knowing what works, and what doesn't, for the individual and their family. Choosing a course, based on individual priorities. Using each opportunity to explore or network to gain more insight about the chosen course. Building a network for the future – for the next step in the journey.

The old paradigm was that we moved around until we got into our 50's, then stayed in our job until we decided to leave, had a nice party, got a gold watch and went happily into retirement. How many people have you seen follow that pattern recently?

Our careers are as important as our 401k's and other assets. We know that we can't wait to set money aside if we want to be prepared for our own future. In the same way our career has become a journey, instead of an event. The journey lasts for 10 – 20 years, and starts now. We want more control over that journey, and more satisfaction from it. As we move through that journey ideally we want to shift from economic reward being the dominant driver to putting a premium on balance of life and having fun. We want to keep working, but not at a grueling 60 hour pace with constant travel. We want to live where we like, and choose, and have friends and family.

The ideal outcome will not occur by accident. What is your plan or strategy for setting the stage to work as long as you want? One of my favorite definitions of “strategy” is “making an informed decision from attainable options”. Are you equipped to understand the options and choose the best one for you, or will you need help? One of the biggest mistakes of your career could be to put off developing your proactive “give meaning to my life” strategy because you don't know where to start.

*Jim Deupree is Managing Director of the International Center for Executive Options. The Center works with C-suite executives in transition, or those currently employed, to understand and choose their options then proactively make their choice happen. 770-290-3936 or [jdeupree@dbm.com](mailto:jdeupree@dbm.com)*