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Leaving your job on a good note will reflect well on you and could lead to future opportunities.

## EXITING GRACEFULLY: HOW TO LEAVE A JOB BEHIND

Although burning bridges can be tempting, a better approach is to leave goodwill and cheer in your wake. **By Bianca Nogrady**

**T**he typical movie-style job departures made popular in films such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Jerry Maguire* and *American Beauty* see the soon-to-be-ex-employee exiting spectacularly, burning every bridge on the way out, or being escorted off the premises so fast that their feet barely touch the ground.

But the reality of departing a job can be a much gentler experience. Maybe you've been head-hunted and received an offer that's too tempting to refuse, perhaps your current job has become repetitive and it's time to make a move, or your contract might simply have finished. But it's possible that you've been

miserable in your position, you've been made redundant, or you've been sacked.

For medical biologist Leigh Coultas, at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research in Melbourne, Australia, the decision to leave his position as a laboratory head was one he had contemplated for a while. Over the course of his academic research career, he says, he had gradually come to the view that he wanted the products of his science to be "useful for people – not just knowledge for the sake of knowledge, but knowledge for the sake of improving people's lives". So when an opportunity arose in the business-development section at the institute in

February 2020 – which coincided with the end of his research project and a trainee's PhD programme – he took it.

### Career changes

The pandemic seems to have changed many people's career trajectories, whether they wanted the change or not. A record number of people have quit their jobs in the United States this year, in what the world's media has dubbed 'The Great Resignation'. A survey of 30,000 people in 31 countries, commissioned by technology firm Microsoft, based in Redmond, Washington, earlier this year, found that more than 40% of respondents were

thinking of leaving their employer within the next year. Another survey, of 2,000 people in the United Kingdom and Ireland, found that 38% were looking to change their role or job in the next 12 months.

Whatever the circumstances of a departure from a position, there is generally a right way and a wrong way to leave a job (see 'How to leave a job gracefully'). The wrong way is taught by Hollywood movies. The right way ensures that you maintain goodwill with your former colleagues and managers – who might very well end up being your colleagues or managers again in the future – and delivers a smooth transition to whoever replaces you without undoing the work that you have done while in the job.

As a military spouse, clinical genomics scientist Adrienne Nugent, who now works remotely in Guilford, Connecticut, for

genetic-information company Invitae, based in San Francisco, California, has experienced more than her fair share of job departures and new beginnings, because she has moved around the country with her husband's postings. The first such move was unexpected, coming one year into what was originally supposed to be a 2.5-year position and just after Nugent had started as a postdoc with the US National Institutes of Health. "As is typical for someone a year into a postdoc, at that point in time I had multiple long-term experiments ongoing in the lab, mice breeding, collaborations forming, et cetera, and the news of our impending move was very difficult," she says.

She was fortunate to be working with a supportive mentor, who was keen to help Nugent continue her postdoc through a combination of remote and part-time work and a 180-mile, once-weekly commute. The experience – and others she's had since then – have emphasized to Nugent the importance and value of being open and transparent with employers throughout job transitions.

### Leaving in the right way

Once you decide to leave a job, the first thing you should do is check your employment contract or any agreements that you signed when you were hired, says Deniece Maston, human-resources knowledge adviser at the Society for Human Resource Management in Brandywine, Maryland.

"You want to make sure you check such [a] document when you are resigning from a job, just to make sure you're in compliance with something you signed," says Maston. For example, an employment contract might stipulate the amount of notice you must give before leaving a job.

But, particularly in senior roles, there could be clauses to ensure that departing employees maintain confidentiality around their previous role, or non-compete clauses that prohibit them, for a certain period, from working in the same industry or for a potential competitor.

This can be an issue in the sciences: researchers and investigators can take with them a wealth of knowledge when they leave, says Rosemary Guyatt, general manager of people and culture at the Australian Human Resources Institute in Melbourne.

"That definitely is a consideration when people are moving [into a] similar role, similar industry, [or] similar sector, and are potentially bringing intellectual property from one organization to another," Guyatt says.

The next step in leaving a job is telling your manager. Although a written resignation letter is standard practice, Maston says it's important to meet with your manager or supervisor first to tell them the news in person. But before doing this, you need to work out the reason you are going to give for leaving – one that you're comfortable with telling people – and

you need to stick with it. "Don't give different reasons to different people in the same organization," Maston says. "Stick to one story of why you're leaving." Gossip happens, and if you give people different reasons for your departure, word will inevitably get around. "Don't be dishonest about your next move; often, your boss and perhaps former colleagues will find out where you have landed soon enough."

This meeting is also the opportunity to work through the implications of your departure with your manager. As a lab head who was responsible for staff and PhD students, Coultas had some big loose ends to tie up. "There's the experiments that might be ongoing, which you need to wind down; there's the staff who work for you," Coultas says. "Things like your funding that you've got going at the time, the projects that you've got going on, and wanting to see that all of those things come to a positive end."

In his case, Coultas's departure was timed to take advantage of his PhD student completing their research, his funding agreements all coming to an end, and his major projects being in their final stage of completion or publication. Although some of that was serendipity, Coultas did consider the effects of his departure on other staff members as much as was practical and tried to reduce those effects – which everyone should do when leaving a job. "You work with people for years at a time, students in particular; you invest a lot in them, and they invest a lot in their project and they've got a long career and a bright future in front of them," he says. "You want to make sure that that isn't impacted by your decision."

This is also the time to set a date for your departure. Even if that date is predetermined by your contract, it might be possible to negotiate an earlier leaving date if that works for your employer.

### Potential challenges

Neuroscientist Mark Stahl's departure from a position as head of a laboratory and clinician at the Pennsylvania State University in Philadelphia took a little longer to work through. It was more than five months from the time he decided to take a position at Neurocrine Biosciences in San Diego, California, to when he actually moved into the new job.

Sorting out what to do with his grants, which he had worked hard to gain during his tenure, was the easy part. "For better or for worse, most of them were near the end of their cycle anyway," Stahl says. Of the remaining ones, Stahl was able to transfer one to a graduate student, who was continuing the research, and the other was shared with his co-investigator.

But a larger challenge was closing off the clinical side of his work, because he had patient appointments scheduled up to six months in advance. "For a specialty clinic, it's not like you can just flip a switch," Stahl says.

Another challenge in the sciences can be

## HOW TO LEAVE A JOB GRACEFULLY

**Nature** asked the US National Institutes of Health's human-resources department for advice. Here's what their spokesperson told us.

- Use your departure to build bridges, not burn them.
- Give your supervisor plenty of notice of your departure.
- Make sure your colleagues can get in touch with you after you leave.
- Ask for an exit interview if you have specific concerns to raise.
- Have a conversation about any unpublished papers with your supervisor and try to secure your authorship position.
- Try to put in place collaboration agreements if you plan to collaborate with your lab and colleagues.
- Leave your research notes but ask to take photocopies of them, and if you want to take any research materials, documents or equipment with you, make sure you get approval.
- Make sure any reagents you generated during your time in the job are catalogued and stored so they can be retrieved if needed.
- Make sure you are removed from any protocols regarding human participants or animal subjects in your research.
- Get an update on the status of any of your intellectual property (IP) that is owned by your institution, and if you want to continue to use that IP in your next or future job, get clear guidance on any restrictions or limits on you doing that.
- Do what you can to help your students or trainees find and transition into new positions.



Rosemary Guyatt (right) recommends providing constructive feedback in exit interviews.

managing research publications in the pipeline. Leaving a research project midway might mean that your name is less prominent in the author list – or it could even be left off altogether. Nugent's advice is to be clear about your expectations regarding authorship and have those conversations before leaving your position, no matter how uncomfortable that discussion might feel. "Inevitably, experiments or reviewer comments will dictate a change in course, so while these conversations can be uncomfortable and difficult at the time, laying the groundwork and summarizing the results by writing in a follow-up e-mail will save a lot of headache and heartache in the future," she says.

Maston says many companies have a resignation checklist to guide departing employees through the many steps needed to close their time as an employee. This can cover everything from working through benefits to handing over passwords, computers and e-mail accounts.

As your time draws to a close, you might be invited – or requested – to participate in an exit interview. Guyatt says not all employers do exit interviews, but they are more likely to be standard practice at larger organizations that want to better understand why employees leave. "It can be a really important, helpful source of data and insight for an employer, whether it's public or private or not-for-profit," she says.

Doing a good exit interview is a careful balance between honesty and restraint, particularly if there are questions about sensitive topics, such as interpersonal conflicts. "During such times, an employee should be calm and constructive," Maston says. "If there is going to be something that's revealed, stick to the facts while being open and direct with those responses, because you don't know where that's going to go."

But being frank can be important,

particularly if there's something that the employer can do to improve a situation, for example unpleasant or unsafe working conditions, job insecurity or low pay rates. "If the same things are repeated in negative feedback, an employer has to follow up and act upon some of that information," Maston says. Exit interviews are also often not anonymous, so what is said in them could make its way back to colleagues or managers.

### Honest feedback

Guyatt agrees that providing honest feedback during an exit interview is important, particularly if there is a sensitive or serious matter that can't necessarily be given as your public reason for departure. "People also can make the choice of whether they talk that through with the manager who they're resigning from and saying, 'I'm letting you know that this, this and this hasn't been right, but this is going to be my public reason,'" she says. However, she advises balance between positive and negative feedback, "so it does doesn't look like a massive dump of emotion at the end: 'I've saved it all up. And here it is: I hate you all'".

In the case of more serious issues in a workplace, such as bullying or harassment, Guyatt says it is important to raise them before leaving, typically with someone from human resources and preferably someone senior. She advises being factual, not just relying on hearsay, and to consider putting your perspective in writing. "Note if your concerns were raised previously and to whom, and what action was taken," she says, and, if this is your reason for leaving, tell them that.

Despite having yearned to become a professor since her teens, neuroscience doctoral student Elizabeth Aulino at Kent State University in Ohio soon discovered that academia wasn't

quite what she had expected. The long hours, weekends spent working, the teaching requirements and the isolation quickly took their toll, and in mid-2021 she came to the decision to leave academia.

"When I realized that I was not going to stay, I just spent a lot of time thinking about what my values are, and what I actually care about, and which of those things need to be part of a job," says Aulino. She has also been open and honest with her adviser about her reasons for departing. "The conversation I had with my boss was, 'Hey, I know I just got here, but I'm not really feeling it,'" she says. She decided to let her adviser know when she was looking for jobs, rather than waiting until she got one and would soon depart. "I was trying to be courteous and make it easier for my adviser to find another postdoc," she says.

Guyatt recommends timing your departure to allow for a week or two off between jobs. "Often, people sign up for a new job straight after the notice period, and then wish that they had a week off," she says. You might have been job-hunting for some time, which can often mean discreetly preparing applications, preparing for and attending interviews, and doing research, all the while doing your own job.

Taking time off between jobs is even more important now, when 'onboarding' processes for a new position can begin well before you actually start work. "With onboarding happening virtually or digitally, you're probably already reviewing policies and procedures, signing documents, reading some background – they're probably going to send you some reading material," Guyatt says. Taking a short break between jobs is the opportunity to rest and prepare for the new challenge. "You've really got to be on your game when you're starting a new job: it's going to require a lot more of you concentration-wise."

Finishing an old job and starting a new one during the COVID-19 pandemic poses its own unique challenges. For many, it rules out a farewell party because most employees are working from home and, in some places, there are public-health restrictions preventing a typical restaurant or pub gathering. It could also mean starting a new job virtually, without having the opportunity to meet your co-workers in person, have a welcome morning tea, or get a feel for your employment situation. "It requires really a lot more of the individual, in terms of their effort and concentration," Guyatt says.

And finally, Guyatt recommends resisting any temptation to bad-mouth a past employer once you've left. Criticisms of a job or an employer should be said to the appropriate people before you leave, but then "wrap it up", she says. "It's good to leave on a good note, and then to leave it behind."

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