

Personnel File

Redefining What Matters in a Career, in a Life

by Matt Slepín

I am on a plane at the moment to Boston for the fall ULI conference along with 20 or so real estate colleagues and several hundred strangers. My wife, who is also en route to ULI, is on a separate plane, something we have never done before. By the time you read this column, I should be back home with my family and full of everyone's best guesses about real estate markets in these uncertain and transitional times. You can be sure, however, that every conversation will start with a very personal discussion relating to September 11 and its aftermath.

My column generally deals with careers in real estate and executive leadership issues affecting our industry. Over the past several months, this column has explored issues relating to compensation and, importantly, building future leadership depth in our increasingly institutional industry. The events of September 11 have caused us all to pause and think more personally about our lives, our careers and what we want for the future. Since I am in the career-change business, these have always been themes in my work, but they are more meaningful today.

Currently, I am recruiting someone for a dream job—to run one of the country's largest REITs. I recently spoke with someone who is an excellent candidate for this position, someone both with the right skill set and for whom this would be one of those once-every-five-year, next-step career opportunities. Also, he is in one of the sectors hardest hit by the crisis so I am assuming that much of his significant option-based portfolio is under water.

His response to my call? Friendly and helpful advice with the conclusion that “my company is in a crisis mode and I owe a lot to my CEO; I couldn't consider this opportunity right now.”

I have pursued several other potential candidates for the same job who also would not consider the opportunity. For each, it would have entailed a move, in one case away from an ailing elderly father and in the other case away from years of building a social network for his family, including kids in high school. The *Wall Street Journal* ran a column recently on the risks of relocating for a new job. I may be a softie on this subject; I try not to sell a move too hard, knowing that the situation has to work for my client, the candidate and his or her family.

As a recruiter, I like to work for winner companies and present winner candidates. But I also try to look beyond the more obvious track record of business success. When it comes to evidence of leadership, I am drawn to executives who post good numbers but who also talk naturally about their teams, their career mentors and their families and who show some semblance of balance and intellectual interest in their lives.

I like to talk to people whose broader experience provides them with some intellectual framework and perspective on both their personal career growth and strategy for understanding the business they are in. Ego is okay, but I see danger signs in people who talk down about their people, don't ask hard questions about the culture of my client company, or who can't engage thoughtfully in a conversation with this recruiter.

This dream-job I am recruiting for demands someone who has both an unquestionable business record and the people skills to lead and build upon an already great platform.

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These times heighten the importance of the whole person. When the bad guys can cut us down on our next flight, we have to lead our lives, including the work-side, in a different way. I sell new opportunities every day, but balancing career and economic opportunity and its inherent risks with current colleagues, loyalty, family and social networks matters as well.

Some of this boils down to life's too short, and I respect and encourage the thoughtfulness and sense of community that the September 11 tragedy has brought. Last weekend, my wife and I went to Yosemite for our anniversary. I packed one of those special bottles of wine that we had been saving for a special occasion and we climbed Half Dome together. These are all the things that matter.

(Author Credit: Matt Slepik is an executive recruiter based in the San Francisco Bay area.)