Roadmaps
A Guide for Intellectual Entrepreneurs

Working for Liberty: Think Like a Start-Up and Turn Your First (or New) Job into a Rewarding Career
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Introduction

There has never been a better time than now to choose a career advancing the ideas of liberty. Atlas Network currently serves 495 organizations in more than 80 countries, and the number continues to grow both in the United States and around the world. Like any career, it is important to think and act proactively in order to do well. Doing something you love for all the right reasons will not, by itself, guarantee success. This issue of Roadmaps is designed to help you do well in your first (or new) job advancing liberty, to grow as a productive member of your organization’s team, and to achieve a sustainable and rewarding career doing what you love.

Think Like a Start-Up

If you are starting your first job, or starting a new job in a new field, you may find it useful to think of yourself as a start-up company. One of the key things you have in common with a start-up company is that your product is unproven. It means you are making your employer a new value proposition and you need to deliver. And, like a start-up company, you probably won’t be “profitable” right away.

Let me explain what I mean. A company achieves profit when its revenues exceed its costs. Typically, for a start-up company, this takes time and usually requires a sizable upfront investment. For any given set of new job responsibilities, you are paid (revenues) to perform your job in a certain amount of time (costs). Since you have more immediate influence on lowering your costs, this is the variable you should focus your energy on first. How do you lower your costs (time)? Well, do what start-ups do: make a sizable investment upfront with the goal of achieving lower costs later. This means working longer hours than required at first with the goal of mastering your job quickly so you can do your job in less time.

Let’s say your organization operates within a 40-hour workweek. If you use 40 hours each week to do your job and you do that for an entire year, you have earned your annual compensation, but your revenues still equal your costs and you have not profited. If, however, you allow costs to exceed revenues by investing additional hours each week learning to master your job quickly, by six months you may be able to perform all of your duties in, say, 30 hours. In that scenario, you have lowered your costs and earned a “profit” of 10 hours per week.

Reinvest Your “Profits”

How should you “spend” your profits? Again, do what a good start-up might do: reinvest them. In your case, that means spending time and energy taking on new responsibilities.

The best place to start looking for new responsibilities is within your boss’s pool of responsibilities.

Doing the minimum requirements of your job (what’s in your job description) will earn you the market price, but will not lead to future profitability.
Create a Venn diagram looking at the sphere of things your boss can do and the things you can do (or think you can learn to do) and see where they cross over. Your goal is then to take those things that cross over off your boss’s plate.

The reason it is good to start here is because your boss presumably has a high opportunity cost. Her highest value is spending more time on the things that only she can do. So if you can succeed in taking those things that you can do or you think you can learn to do off your boss’s plate, you are not only adding value to the organization, you are also responsible for the higher value of the other things your boss can now do more of. You have given your boss more time; you have lowered her costs and made the organization more “profitable.” This is the real power and marvel of comparative advantage.

“Audition” for New Responsibilities

Now you have to be careful. Don’t just start doing your boss’s work. That could be misinterpreted. The approach that I have found useful you might call “auditioning.” Basically it’s doing the work (in your extra “profit” time so you aren’t neglecting core duties) and presenting your boss with the opportunity to accept the completed work in a low stakes way.

For example, if your boss is involved in writing and placing op-eds in the media and ghostwriting op-eds is not yet part of your core duties, you might try drafting an op-ed on a topic you know is important to your organization. You can offer the completed draft to your boss for her to polish and finalize for publication with her byline. If you do this, I recommend you communicate two things to your boss when you present the draft:

1. You worked on this draft on your own time or, at least, using “extra” time that did not interfere with your core duties.

2. You have no expectations your boss will use the draft in any way but that it was something you wanted to try and, if it’s not useful, you’d love some feedback on how to improve it whenever convenient.

If you work hard and thoughtfully on this task making sure, after doing your homework on what makes a successful op-ed, that you are offering the best quality product you are capable of producing, you might become a go-to person for ghostwriting op-eds.

Notice that this approach is the opposite approach many take when hoping to grow in their responsibilities. Many will perform their core duties and then, at some point, solicit their boss for more responsibilities. This is fine, but I think you will see better results if you follow an approach that keeps the burden on you.

The other approach requires the boss, who is, no doubt, a very busy person, to a) think about and identify other tasks you might perform, and b) create time and devise an opportunity for you to perform them. It shifts the burden from you to your boss for figuring out and achieving your own advancement. It’s like the used car salesperson who asks, “What do I have to do to get you into a car today?” Isn’t that their job to figure out? Not
only that, it’s also a gamble for the boss since she doesn’t know how you will do. The exercise could be a waste of her time.

Contrast this with the approach I’m proposing. The first and only time your boss is involved with your growth process is when presented with the evidence of your capacity to grow. You’ve made it easy, almost costless, to help you contribute more to the organization.

Remember, success here is not defined only as full acceptance of your work product. Don’t expect to be great at everything you try the first time. The key measure is whether you are, as a result of the exercise, better positioned and more likely to contribute to your organization’s success in those new areas in the future. Your work may not be used right away, but your investment will pay off as you develop new skills and demonstrate that you are willing to shoulder new responsibilities, not just ask for them.

Also, your boss is not the only person you should approach in this way. You can approach coworkers as well. Just be sure to think carefully about how you communicate your intentions. Be sensitive to the fact that others may not have time to give you feedback and may not be receptive to you learning how to do aspects of their jobs. Be clear, and sincere, about your desire to help them, not the other way around.

Create Demand for Your Labor

If you do this right, pretty soon people from all over your organization will start coming to you for help. This is a good thing. This means your product is in high demand and you are a valued member of the team.

Those people coming to you are your customers. In some way, each represents your employer, the source of your revenues. You should never turn away a customer.

You may be thinking, I don’t want to do everyone else’s job! Don’t worry, that’s not what I’m proposing. I am proposing, however, that after you’ve ensured your core duties are taken care of, you should resist the temptation to retreat to the familiarity of your job description. Job descriptions are important; it’s good to have order and clear expectations, but if you use your job description as a shield from extra work, what you are really doing is artificially limiting the marketplace for your start-up.

Spend Your Time Wisely

However, you should be judicious about how you spend your time. Let me make a suggestion about how to go about doing that: do not distinguish between menial and glamorous work to guide your decisions about what’s worth your time. Rather, distinguish between valuable and not valuable work.

There’s a tendency for people to worry about getting stuck doing something boring or “beneath” them. This is not a smart way to think. Some menial tasks can be tremendously valuable.

Let me give you an example. I was in a new job once and I was tasked with doing a historical reconciliation for several years of donations. This required many days of carefully comparing paper files to database records and making adjustments. It was tedious, and a little boring. But something really valuable came out of that experience. Not only did our database get corrected, but also I became very familiar with our donors’ giving histories.

Because of that experience, I was able to provide continuous value in meetings and at events because I had this information in my head. It may have seemed like a long and tedious way to correct the database, but it turned out to be an incredibly fast and efficient way to get up to speed on all of our donors.

So, when contemplating a task you must do, ask yourself: How can I get
the most value out of this necessary experience? When contemplating a task you can elect to do, ask yourself: How valuable to the organization and to me as a start-up is this task? If it’s valuable, do it. You’ll build a lot of valuable knowledge and intuitions through those so-called menial tasks.

Focus on Solutions

Here’s a secret: every organization has problems that aren’t evident from the outside. Some of the problems you will see are real problems but some of the problems you will see will be mirages – things that seem like problems to you because you don’t know any better or you don’t have enough experience with other organizations to understand them in context.

Of course, some problems will be real and you may be right to be concerned. But your energy should be focused on solutions you are in the position to advance and implement. If the problem is outside of your authority, don’t waste a lot of energy on it. It’s a distraction and it will only weigh you down.

Some “venting” about your work may seem harmless and natural, but be careful about developing a habit of complaining about office problems. If it’s worthy of discussion then it’s worthy of you bringing it up in a professional way with your supervisor. If your office culture is negative and you join the crowd, you will soon be miserable. And your melodrama will probably turn into a waste of time and a serious demotivator.

Don’t forget that no matter where you work there will be challenges, disappointments, inefficiencies, etc. That’s no surprise. If you want to succeed you need to be one of the few that takes those in stride and stays focused on achieving big things despite those problems.

Quality Control

You want to make a good impression and complete tasks assigned to you quickly, especially in a new job, but you should get in the habit of carefully and creatively double-checking everything before you send or turn it in, even emails to coworkers. If something you pass along to your boss or your coworker requires a lot of obvious corrections, this may harm your reputation as a go-to person.

Don’t misunderstand; having your work edited or changed considerably is not necessarily a bad thing. But make sure what others are contributing is unique to them and not something you could have done had you been paying more attention. The last thing you want your boss to ever think is that it’s easier to do something herself rather than ask you to do it. That runs counter to everything else I’ve recommended.

How much should you edit yourself? My rule of thumb is anything that will be public or could become public is not finished until I’ve read it from beginning to end without making any changes. Any change I do make should trigger another read through. And make sure to second-guess yourself, a lot. Think of non-obvious ways you could be making an error. Challenge a coworker to find an error in your work and thank them when they do (and they will). In practice, there may be times when this isn’t practical, but it’s the right mindset to have. Again, this even applies to emails since you never know when an email you write will be forwarded and to whom. That one email could be the only thing someone else has seen from you. You don’t want to make a bad impression.
Be Independent

At the same time, don’t overburden others, especially your boss. How do you strike the right balance? Ask others for help only when there is no other way.

Most people like to be asked for help. But it’s a good habit to ask yourself, before involving someone else: Is there another way I can get an answer or solve a problem?

Don’t ask others unless there is no other way to know.

We may say to ourselves, ‘well, it’s faster to just ask so-and-so because they’ve worked here longer and know the answer and that’s good for the organization because it’s more efficient.’ Maybe, but when you are new in a job (and maybe even when you aren’t) you could say that about 100 different things you do every day. Instead, get creative and figure things out as much as you can on your own.

Of course, there are lots of scenarios where you need to ask for help. You may need to clarify something important, obtain a piece of key information, or an important judgment call needs to be made. In those cases, it may be wrong not to ask, but if you frequently ask for things that you just haven’t bothered to figure out on your own, you’re like that used car salesperson again, making your customers do all the work.

Focus on Others and You Will Succeed

Your boss is just like you, a human, trying to do a great job and succeed. While your boss has some measure of responsibility for your work experience, don’t expect her to help you realize all your professional goals.

Don’t burden your boss with satisfying all of your professional hopes and dreams.

If you focus, instead, on helping your boss succeed (recall the strategy of lightening your boss's load), that may be the best way to ensure your boss will be attentive to your advancement as well. Not in a quid pro quo sort of way, but as a natural consequence of the value you represent.

Prepare to Lead

All of this sums up to one final recommendation: Learn everything you can about how your organization works and, without neglecting your core duties, develop experience and proficiency in as many aspects of the organization as possible.

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