

## Choosing the right time to leave a company

**Warsaw, Poland** – “How long should I work at one company?” This is a question that I hear a lot. It’s likely that you have already asked yourself this question – and chances are you’re still at a loss.



In general, younger advisors tend to give more precise answers to this question – but not consistent ones! One says two years, another three, another four, and yet another says: “Whatever works for you...” At this point, we should take a more sceptical approach, remembering that life is not a simple question of mathematics, and that it is impossible for any of the advisors to prove that their answer is correct. These pat answers fail to take into account the fundamental issue: **who is asking the question – and why?**

I am an advisor myself, although I am no longer young. People are often confused by my response to this question, as they expected a simple numerical answer. However, most of my questioners are too shy to ask the *real* question on their minds, the one that they *actually* want answered: **“Is it time for ME to leave MY current job?”**

Although this seems like a very general question, it is in fact highly specific and context-dependent. I normally answer it with a series of counter-questions: *“What does your career mean to you, especially your current job?”* *“What is your goal for this position in this company?”* *“What are your strategic goals for your professional development?”* These are the questions that must be asked before we can determine whether we should stay in the current position, or seek a new position or entrepreneurial opportunity. Two people working at the same company, in the same position, with identical career history, could easily give very different answers! These are not universal laws of physics; there are no universal rules of the labour market and career development. The point of reference must be *your own* needs, which are very individual and will change over time. Taking the time to answer the series of questions above will make it easier for you to answer the real question: is it time for you to leave (where nothing will happen, nothing will improve, and you are just getting rustier and dustier), or should you stay (where interesting things are happening or about to happen, or you are simply satisfied and don’t need anything else).

I don’t like to leave people with nothing but questions. If I’ve forced someone to make an effort and reflect on their own situation and direction, I should give them something extra in return. I do have some general thoughts on extended periods of time spent working in a single company, and especially in a single position. So far we have only considered our personal needs, but we should also think about what these decisions will mean for our image on the labour market (i.e. what the decision-makers will think of us). One point to consider: the following advice relates to healthy situations, in which we have chosen the position consciously and out of genuine interest, rather than due to economic constraints. Again, these aren’t hard and fast rules – they’re closer to the Pirate Code than the laws of physics!

At the lower end, I’d suggest a minimum of three years. I’m not basing this on intuition, but an analysis of the behaviour of the people I work with (i.e. managers) who decide whether to employ the candidates I recommend. Statistically speaking, they tend to stop asking: *“Why did you work there so briefly?”* after a three-year period. Of course, just knowing “How” will not be sufficient for you – if you are inquisitive and curious, you will also want to understand “Why.” I can support this minimum three-year period with a simple explanation based on the development cycle in a new position.

Initially, in the first year of your new job, you must operate within the budget set by your predecessor. You act on the basis of situations that you could have had no influence on, and by acting and making decisions, you learn and recognise the specifics of the situation at hand. It’s a common excuse, and quite a good one. For example, every new Prime Minister will explain: *“Unfortunately my predecessors messed up so badly that it will take us at least a year to undo their mistakes, but you must trust us anyway, dear citizens, whatever happens...”*

In the second year, you are the author of the budget and the action plan. You made decisions and carry them out with full responsibility. You've had enough time to get to know the ins and outs of the company, the customers and the products.

By the third year, you take the consequences of the decisions that you made completely by yourself a year before. This is a very important element of the continuity of your actions! What good does it do for you to make the decision and work on your own budget if you then disappear before the effects can be seen? This why the third year and the **third budget** (which is the second budget of your own making) are so important, and this is why the decision makers often see three years as the minimum period, give or take six months. The idea is clear: demanding a three-year minimum period demonstrates a rational rather than intuitive course of thinking, and even more importantly, shows the external evaluation criteria for your career trajectory. External evidence is conclusive for employment decisions – who cares how badly you want the job, and whether you personally consider yourself to have met all the criteria? It is only through other people's evaluations and decisions that we will be accepted (or not) in the new environment. It is important to understand how we are being perceived and by what criteria. Very few people care about what keeps us going, and we cannot contemplate that for others either. Life's too short.

A quick practical comment: People who have worked with an employer for just two years love to say: *"I learned a lot when I was there – that's a great advantage."* The problem with this argument is that it's too self-centred – a potential employer or business partner wants to know **what you were responsible for, and how, and what you achieved**. This is the perspective from which they will consider you, and now you can clearly see why the third consecutive budget is so important.

Obviously, the more responsibilities your position carries, the more important the three-year period. However, a shorter period may be reasonable for case-hardened professionals in a narrow field or graduates beginning their careers. The narrow specialists are likely to be seeking intellectual challenges, while the graduates are still defining themselves and are unlikely to have a budgetary responsibility at the beginning. However, even in these cases it is still important to understand what the potential employer wants, and to be able to speak to them on their own terms. Avoid using phrases such as *"I've learned..."* or *"I want to work with you because I can learn a lot here..."* (the interviewer will immediately think *"We are a company, not a public school! We want to know what you give, not what you take!"*) and instead emphasise *"I was responsible for..."* and *"I have done..."* Be careful with your tenses – *I have done* is much stronger than *I was doing*.

Once again, I would like to reiterate that these are considerations for an optimum, healthy situation. However, if you've taken a job that turns out to have been a serious mistake, if every day is a torment, if you wake up every morning feeling like you've been gut-punched and there's nothing to keep you there, then run away, and don't look back. Life is too short and your health is too precious to worry about what looks good on your CV. Everyone can make mistakes. Just don't make the same mistake three times in a row...

Having considered the minimum working period for a specific job or company, let's look at the maximum period, starting with a quick data analysis. Recent research into the American job market shows that it is mature but dynamic – meaning open to job changes and relocation – and that on average Americans change jobs 6-7 times over a lifetime. Assuming 44 years of professional activity, this averages out at around 6-7 years per job. Although this data shows the effect rather than the cause, the hard numbers are worth thinking about. They describe a huge labour market, which is mature and mobile.

Now, let's look at the issue from a completely different perspective. We are all familiar with the concept of a politician's term of office. The period for most terms of office is from three to five years, and in some cases there is a limit of no more than two consecutive terms...giving us a maximum period of six to ten years. Don't you think this is an interesting correlation to the real-world labour market statistics that I mentioned above? And these terms of office do not appear out of thin air – they have been independently considered and incorporated into the respective constitutions of dozens of countries, with even the French shortening their presidential term of office from a lengthy seven years. It is generally accepted that public servants are ineffective when they serve more than six to ten years in key positions. There must be a reason for this.

Having considered this interesting convergence in results independently obtained from two very different sources, we can now add a little intuition and start reflecting on the effects of increased routine, decreased flexibility and openness to change, the risk of increasingly looking at the world through the perspective of a

corporate monoculture, and the danger of creating business relationships that are so strong and intimate that they become too exclusive.

For similar reasons, many companies also limit the time that expats spend in key positions. When expat executives stay in one foreign country for too long, they can lose their most important asset: the awareness that the job requires them to act as a representative of the headquarters to the local structure and market, and not the other way around. Moreover, as an expat executive learns a little of the indigenous language and starts to befriend the locals, they will tend to adopt opinions that diverge from those of the Head Office.

Some time ago, I decided to take a look at my own CV when considering a more rational, factual approach to this issue. I found that I had respectively worked for eight years, two years, two years, six years and nine months, six years and six months, and I am now on my fourth year and counting in a place where I'm happy and have no desire to move anywhere. I confess that I got goose bumps when I wrote this sequence down – there must be *something* to this six-to-ten-year average. Here I am, a free spirit, and yet some kind of determinism seems to be in effect here!

One final thought. Although the question “*How long should I work at one company?*” is striking and straightforward, it's the wrong question. It's too binaristic, too black and white. What's more, it leads us into the trap of thinking that there's a hard limit, even if it's a different limit for everyone – once you have so many years on the clock, you “have to” change jobs. Well, you do not *have* to do anything; you may do it, if you want, but let's not strip long-serving employees of their right to the joys of life and work. The correct question is, “**How often (at the earliest, and at the latest) should I consider changing jobs?**” In practice, this means analysing what you will gain and what you will lose by staying in the same place (position/company/environment), and making a **conscious** decision what to do next. I would suggest that you carry out this process of analysis and decision every **six to eight years** at the latest.



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