



Boomerang Executives

Why they leave, why they return, and how they manage it

By Antoine Tirard and Claire Lyell

Over the past ten years, the number of Fortune 100 companies that actively run “alumni programs” has multiplied. One of the main results of this approach is that there are more and more people who return to their former employer at some time later. Those who are part of this growing phenomenon are known as “boomerangs”. Here we attempt to analyze some of the trends and challenges involved in the return to the fold, via the story of six very different executives around the world.

Sometimes it can just be a very simple, logical and pleasant process to go back. It was the case for Louise, who speaks calmly and rationally about her return to a pharmaceutical giant, after a multi-year absence.

After an early start in practice as an MD, and a move from Florida to the North East, Louise decided to take on a clinical role in R&D at a

large pharmaceutical company, mainly because she loved the people and the culture of the organization. After a subsequent merger, the research pipeline diminished in her area of expertise, and she wanted to continue to work in this particular area, so she left, on excellent terms, having been courted by a biotech startup working on an exciting and more relevant development.

A series of very happy biotech roles followed, over several years, though she remained in touch with her colleagues from the old company. During that time, she almost boomeranged a few times, though this did not quite work out, for a variety of reasons. However, on one occasion, she was offered something she found too good to resist, and, despite some questioning from those close to her, around the nature of the role she had been offered, Louise returned to the pharmaceutical

giant. This time she was in an operational post, rather than clinical, and found she loved the contrast. She has been back for five years, and in that time has enjoyed six different roles, in both operational and clinical positions.

A Strong Investment in Relationships

Perhaps the wisest advice Louise received on her return was to “take a good look around for a few months and only then figure out what you want to do”. This gave her the chance to explore and reacquaint herself comfortably without any pressure to conform to old perceptions, either of herself, or of the company.



She found many familiar faces, but decided to spend time getting to know people once again and finding out “how things are done round here”. And this was the best investment she could have possibly made. She is not considering a move away from where she is now, and firmly believes that “if you have a good boss and great colleagues, with clarity and effort, and whether in a big company or small, you can take an opportunity and make it work”.

Louise has navigated tensions with colleagues, motherhood and oscillating economic cycles, but with her emotional intelligence and strong investment in relationships, she has made a return to a company that she now views as part of her landscape, and which it would probably be very difficult to leave. Her colleagues and leaders in the business have played along with

her, and now it seems likely that she will continue to find challenges and interest in her work here for the foreseeable future. A tacit contract of complicity has been developed, and neither side feels compelled to deviate. We certainly wish that more boomerang experiences could be this simple and enjoyable!

Sometimes a return can be the start of really massive change - as happened to Can, who has been linked to the BMW Corporation for all of his working life, and whose story shows how environment and challenges can catalyze transformation.

Can started his professional life in a prominent holding company in his native Turkey, as a promising young graduate trainee. He moved in and out of various specialist sales and marketing roles and built a privileged link with BMW in Germany. Thus he became known for his very specific expertise, and was relied on as a valuable asset in the company. There was one significant drawback to this situation: Can became impossible to promote or develop, as nobody wanted to lose access to their expert! So, after a few years, Can realized that he wanted to progress beyond what he could achieve at the company, and he left with his family to seek new opportunities in Canada. On exit, Can was careful to be clear in his dialogue, stating his frustration, but keeping things friendly and warm.

When the Grass isn't Greener

Several years in Toronto gave Can the chance to work his way up a large group of BMW dealerships, and finally he gained a corporate role at the BMW head office for Canada, yet again, as the specialist. This time, he realized that he was creating his own problem, and started to make plans to break out. He found coaches and mentors within the organization, and took himself outside his comfort zone. Just as he felt he was on the right track, things changed again.

In 2010 Can was invited to return to his original company, with an offer to explore a new management role, bringing together Sales and Marketing. The difficult decision to leave Canada took six months, but eventually, the family moved back to Turkey with an optimistic outlook, hoping that time and reorganization would have solved some of the earlier problems. Unfortunately, Turkey was

still lagging far behind the best practice he had enjoyed in Canada and it was tough for him to impose or nurture change. He recognized that he was being slowed down by cultural resistance, but felt that he was on a mission.

After being told, yet again, that he was “too valuable” in his current role, and passed over once more for promotion, Can decided that the only path to take was that of radical change, and self-motivation. As he describes it, he “grew up and changed everything”. He stopped blaming his slow progress on others, and started to take responsibility. In the process, he lost weight, gave up smoking, became a better husband, father and friend, and realized that he knew exactly what he wanted in every aspect of his life. He also discovered that he was capable of expressing this very clearly to his management and entourage, and is now able to see when to accept the status quo and when to drive change. He has established a positive relationship with his “family” at work, after years of not really figuring out how to do this.

While the benchmarking and special expertise were an obstacle to Can’s progress, such knowledge and experience can be used as a significant boost, as Olivier discovered, in his journey in and out of French electronics giant Alcatel Lucent.

Back to the Future

As a fresh engineering graduate, with study experience in both France and Germany, Olivier was attracted by a career in industry, and joined Alcatel with the hope that he would rapidly be offered an expatriate post somewhere. Sure enough, he found himself just over a year later working in the US. While he found the work enriching and fascinating, and he liked the culture at Alcatel well enough, he found himself in a seven year “itch”, and left the giant for a small internet-based start-up. Two years in this very different environment were enjoyable, but the company failed, and he found himself obliged to change again. Although he had a Green Card, Olivier decided to return to France, with his family, feeling that if he did not move right away, he would probably never go back.

He joined the French public finance institution, Caisse des Dépôts, via a professional link, and enjoyed six years there. He noticed a very clear difference in culture and practice,

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and realized that his preference was really for industry and application, not theory and advice. It was an easy choice, when a person with high-level roles at both Caisse des Dépôts and Alcatel Lucent, offered him the chance to return. He had good memories, and despite the company’s poor reputation at the time, he had no hesitation in agreeing to the new role.

Olivier’s decision to return was very clearly based on three separate factors, two of which had applied previously: firstly, his respect and liking for the person who got him back “in”; next the fact that it was a return to “application”, and finally a welcome move back to a global environment and culture. It was fortunate that his thinking was this conscious, as the company to which he returned had changed beyond recognition. There had been a big merger, many of his colleagues had left, and he had changed departments too. This was emphatically not a return to his “family”, however it was not a negative experience either. Olivier just felt as though he had joined a new company, with helpful people who showed him the ropes. And his own sense of value remained intact also, as he realized that, having seen other businesses, he had a fresh and useful perspective to bring. He describes it as an “external training” experience, which has allowed him to grow his value.

On the subject of whether he feels he will remain, Olivier is more guarded. He feels a certain loyalty and comfort with regard to Alcatel Lucent, but he is also itching for another expatriation. This desire to travel will undoubtedly be the main driver, above and beyond the strong link he has with his company now.

David’s first stint in Coca Cola was because he, too, was keen to work overseas. After an initial period in France, he was thrilled to be sent to the USA, and spent a while working there as an expert on an SAP project. He realized fast that he preferred operational roles, but was not granted the opportunity to get back

into this area, so, not surprisingly, when a headhunter called on him to explore his interest in a role as HR Director for Starbucks, which was setting up in France, he was easily tempted by the idea. However, despite his positive convictions, he still describes as “the most difficult moment in all my professional life” the day he told his boss that he would be leaving his Coke “family”. He was very close to all his colleagues, and the company was a leader in HR practices worldwide. This was a terrible but unavoidable wrench.

Bouncing Back from a Mistake

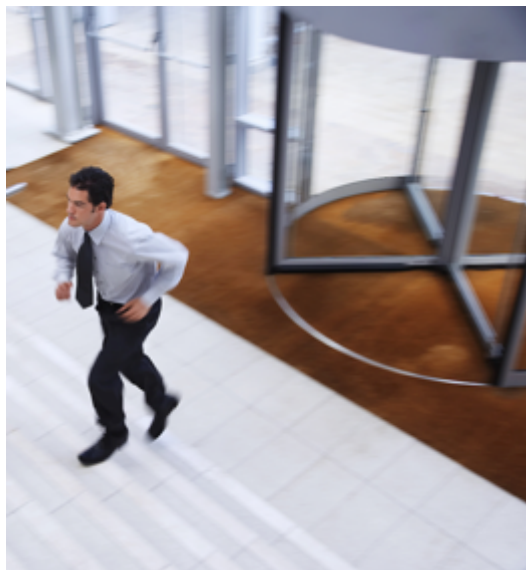
In the five years that he spent at Starbucks, David learnt and developed enjoyably and impressively, but the company experienced slower growth than hoped for. The excitement died down, and, on being offered a role at Christian Dior, he was seduced by the brand, and accepted. By the time he realized that he had been brought in to engineer and implement massive layoffs, it was too late, but he knew he had made a big mistake! Within less than six months of entering, he was putting out feelers with friends and headhunters. His overriding sentiment at the time was that “going back would be failure.” When the Coca Cola HR Director, with whom he had remained in contact, used a mix of guilt and friendship to attract him back, he could resist no more, and accepted a return.

The return was to a company he assumed would not have changed significantly, especially as he still knew most of the leaders and significant players. But there had been a substantial corporate transformation in the meantime, from country-centric to European, from linear to matrix organization, and so on. This was a totally different entity from what he had known, despite it all looking so similar. He felt powerless to achieve his objectives, and horribly frustrated. However, feeling that the sorters to Starbucks and Dior had not necessarily brought him much glory, he sensed a need to stick it out at Coke, and make things work.

After almost three years back, he was offered a European role in London, where he could lead an organization and bring his outside experience and knowledge and be seen as a reference, someone who understands the market and its benchmarks. However, David

prefers growth environments, and Coke’s business in Europe is becoming more and more about stagnation and cost-cutting: if he needs to seek that growth environment outside Coca Cola, he will find it easier this time.

As a contrast, we have the story of Jonatan a talented ballet dancer from Spain. When he finished ballet school, he won a place in the corps de ballet in the Regional Theatre at Linz, in Austria. The conditions were extraordinarily good, though early on, he realized that the company was not necessarily really suited to him - he was by far the youngest dancer, and the work was more theatrical than the work he had been used to. However, he was treated extremely well, cast a great deal, and offered a



promotion to “Principal” in his second year. At the same time, the Director of the company emotionally announced to Jonatan that, in 2013, five years into the future, he would be the one to dance Romeo in a new production of the eponymous ballet. This seemed like an extraordinary promise, but it real.

To Err is Human

However, Jonatan soon wished to find more challenges and made the decision to leave; he was offered a role in a German company, which he accepted, despite his Director’s attempts to make him stay. The new company was more familiar, and this was what Jonatan needed at the time. He was, strangely enough, cast as Romeo, and danced the role to great

acclaim, but soon enough, the Director at Linz was on the phone, begging him to return, pleading, “without you, there will be no Romeo”! Finally, he went back, not least because his wife was from Linz, and would be happy to live back in her hometown. He made the decision on a mix of very practical questions and a pinch of emotional reaction. The Romeo rehearsals began with excitement and anticipation. However, the feeling was soon to transform into despair, as Ulrich was rushed to hospital, seriously ill, and later died, leaving chaos behind him.

The Romeo ballet was unfinished, but it was in that year’s program, so the company members developed their own roles as best they could. A new director came in, and fired all but two of the existing members, and Jonatan was one of the survivors. So, in the space of a few months, he had watched his dear Director wither away, created his own ballet character, survived a massive company purge, as well as an unexpected divorce... He had



returned to Linz for his family and for his director, and now he had neither! Decisions to return based on human factors have the capacity to go disastrously wrong on the turn of a dime! However, right now, he intends to stay there, as he needs stability, time to recover, and also because the company is now housed in one of the most modern and beautiful opera houses in Europe. It might be easy to attribute the melodramatic nature of this story to its artistic sector, but it is clear that all of us are human and will base our thinking on people and relationships as much as anything else.

Greg certainly found that the personal relationships and “clan” at a well-known East Coast business school were a constant link, as he wove back and forth, in and out of this great

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school. His description of his path is quite different to that of some of the others here, as in the end, what he mentions most is how there was a lot of serendipity involved in his long career, that “just happens” to include multiple moves in and out of the school.

As a young MBA in 1975, Greg’s first job was on the MBA Admissions Committee for his university. He had chosen this role not least because he just could not see himself doing a more traditional MBA thing like consulting at McKinsey or trading options on Wall Street. After two years, he was on the cusp of being offered a promotion to head the Admissions Department, but missed out on this for reasons of perceived “difference” between him, his lifestyle choices, and the majority of the staff at the school of the time.

Get Back to Where You Once Belonged

For several years subsequent to this disappointment Greg tried out various other companies and sectors. Nothing really fitted, and he went back to the higher education field with a sense of relief, on being asked to join CCL as head of marketing. Thus ensued almost ten years of international activity, of which three were spent in Brussels. When he returned to the US offices, the sparkle had gone, and he decided to go back to a post at his alma mater, in Executive Education this time. He developed this role until 2008, when the management made a large number of generous early retirement package offers and, aged just sixty, Greg happily accepted. He spent the ensuing year playing with different options, but eventually was attracted back into active work in education in the US.

A short foray to a regional university kept him occupied for a couple of years, till he came back to his own school again, where he loves the work as Director of Executive Education, Europe, and he is inspired by the open, inclusive, and flexible environment around him. He mentions with optimism the fact that one of his colleagues is only just retiring,

despite already being 70! The atmosphere is a far cry from that of 1975, and he feels that he is really part of an important and strong clan at the school, where he hopes to stay now, as long as he possibly can.

Greg is another great product of the wisdom of those managers who invite their boomerangs to step back, take their time, and pretend that “they have never been here before”. This looks increasingly like one of the few guarantees of success in making a boomerang work effectively.

In conclusion, this increasing trend is one that gives any boomerang employee and his or her organization a huge opportunity to build on the past, and to create a new future, with some risks, of course, but far fewer than those involved in a brand new recruit. We see clearly some of the pitfalls in these stories, but far more so the possibilities for both sides that the exercise creates. We encourage organizations to explore this area more deeply, and to create an environment that actively encourages their alumni to return.

Antoine Tirard is a talent management advisor and the founder of NexTalent. He is the former head of talent management of Novartis and LVMH

Claire Lyell is the founder of Culture Pearl and an expert in written communication across borders and languages

Tips For Boomerangs and Their Companies

BOOMERANGS

- Keep dialogue light but clear and honest, and leave doors open on all exits
- Understand a big element of your decision is based on humans, and remember humans are fallible and not in control of all aspects of destiny
- Breaking up with your family IS hard to do, but you can manage it!
- Do not expect to find your old company unchanged when you return - seek the opportunity to step back and renew your acquaintance
- See every move to a new place as an opportunity to extend your expertise, and then, whether you go back or not, you will be more highly valued

COMPANIES

- Make sure all exit interviews and processes make clear the possibility of a return, where this is something you might like
- Ensure your people keep an open dialogue with you about their satisfactions and frustrations, to avoid departures that might be otherwise dealt with
- Accept that a “breakup” may only be temporary and stay civilized
- Communicate regularly and positively with each segment of your “alumni” group, and facilitate their helping you with marketing, recruitment, project work and more
- See the boomerangs as a source of renewed energy, expertise, and vision. Treat them kindly as they return, and encourage them to take a good look round before re-engaging