**Entry-Level Positions Can Grow Into More** 

By Matthew Fox

Young adults joining the workforce often don’t realize that an entry-level position can actually be the start of a bright future. Recent college graduates with little professional experience may settle for a job to fill space on a resume or just to earn some income to become self-sufficient.

Danielle Nicholson-Smith found herself in this situation after graduating from Smith College in 1992 with an undergraduate degree in clinical psychology. Unsure of where to start, she applied to T. Rowe Price and accepted a position as a phone representative.

While she had no prior experience in the financial sector, she was interested in advertising. This led her to the legal side of the firm. Now a lead manager and lawyer in the Legal Department, Danielle’s story is just one example of how that first job that some “settle for” can actually be a valuable opportunity, serving as a foundation for independence and a springboard to the next step in a career.

When Danielle began at T. Rowe Price, she wasn’t targeting a position in the Legal Department and barely had an idea of what those positions would entail. It is not surprising because T. Rowe Price is an expansive and evolving organization that can be difficult to comprehend in full. There isn’t a computer screen big enough to display a firm-wide organizational chart.

Young, just-out-of-college associates with little experience in the financial sector may feel that staying at T. Rowe Price means being confined to a future that’s strictly financial. While T. Rowe Price is an investment management company, the immense size of the firm creates a wide variety of positions that are not related to finance or investing. Computer and telecommunications systems technicians, lawyers and project managers, and purchasing and human resource managers all contribute to the advancement of the firm. This shared goal can serve as a link for associates to explore other fields of work.

Michele Cassell, manager of three liaison teams**—**equity, global, and research, began her career at T. Rowe Price in 1996 as an associate on the Global Investment and Institutional Client Services’ (GICS) Equity Fund Accounting team. When considering her first career move within the firm, Michele started by examining herself. When considering her first career move within the firm, Michele started by examining herself. “When my career began, I was interested in getting down to the details. As I’ve progressed, I’m now more passionate about helping people reach their goals,” Michele says. She suggests to start with your dislikes to eliminate roles that likely would not be satisfying over the long run. Michele also notes that talking with her peers and understanding their preferences helped her define her own. Being aware of her evolving preferences allowed Michele’s career to grow and helped her to remain interested in the work she was doing.

Defining personal interests is an introspective process, but understanding how those interests align with job titles may require the guidance of a more senior employee. Supervisors can facilitate shadows or informational interviews that allow young associates to learn about the day-to-day responsibilities of a position. These interactions can almost be considered initial interviews. As Michele notes, “Networking is often a crucial aspect of career progression, and you never know what connection points [people] will be important.”

Supervisors are not recruiting agents, though. Elliot Shue, a credit analyst in the Fixed Income Division, credits his career succession partly to the connections he made himself. Elliot started as an associate in GICS on the Corporate Actions team in 2007. “Don’t be afraid to send someone an e-mail and ask to meet for a quick cup of coffee. Many senior associates have been promoted from within T. Rowe Price to their current positions. They may have valuable insight on internal career progression and usually enjoy discussing their experiences with someone who is where they once were.” He points out that a popular aphorism in his department is, “If you haven’t been here for 10 years, you’re still new.”

When the search has been narrowed down to a specific role or department, there may not be an opening at that time. Associates can take advantage of this and begin thinking about other opportunities that could prepare them for the position if and when one becomes available. Danielle took on special projects and reached out for informational interviews with people from the Legal Department.

She also made important connections with people at volunteer events. “I volunteered with T. Rowe Price at The [Susan G. Komen] Race for the Cure each year and was able to meet people there that I wouldn’t have come into contact with while on the phones.” Suzanne Jones from Talent Learning and Organizational Development says that these types of opportunities allow for more “organic networking” that can help associates increase their visibility while advancing their perception of the firm.

Some other examples of preparation opportunities include job shadowing, internal internships, liaising between departments, T. Rowe Price clubs (such as Toastmasters), and additional training (through Harvard ManageMentor, EDGE, cross-training, or FINRA licensing).

Associates who anticipate that they will need an advanced degree can benefit from T. Rowe Price financial assistance and program guidance. Elliot met with a research analyst for an informational interview while he was still in GICS and discussed the advantages of a CFA designation. Soon after the meeting, he began pursuing the CFA and considers it essential to his own career progression. On the topic of pursuing advanced degrees, Danielle advises, “The sooner the better.” While she completed her law degree in 2012, Danielle admits that it would have been much easier to set aside time for classes and schoolwork when she was younger.

One of the last and most important networking opportunities available to an associate is the first interview. It’s important to remember that an unsuccessful application for a position is not a failure. After just one year in GICS, Elliot applied for an equity research assistant position. While he didn’t receive an offer at the time, his ambition impressed the hiring manager. Elliot applied again in 2010, received an offer, and credits much of his success to the impression he set during the first interview.

Similarly, Tim Boia started at T. Rowe Price in 1992 as a phone representative. After a couple of years, he applied for a position as a senior writer within the Shareholder Communications Group (now called Individual Investor Communications and part of Investment Communications Management, or ICM). The first round of interviews went well, but the hiring manager told him that she really needed someone with several years of writing experience. Six months later, when a junior writing position opened, Tim applied and ultimately landed the job in late 1995.

Tim, now a lead manager on the Individual Investor Communications team, recalls initially applying for the senior writer position. “It seemed highly unlikely that I would be hired for the position when I lacked the five to seven years of writing experience the hiring manager was looking for. But I brought three years of T. Rowe Price experience and some basic writing skills with me, and I felt I had nothing to lose. In retrospect, applying for the senior writing position opened the door to a future opportunity.”

As for valuable lessons learned over the years, Tim offered the following advice: “When it comes to seeking a new job to advance your career, you want to stretch a little, if possible, rather than applying for something for which you are already capable. Don’t be afraid to go beyond your known skill set. Learning and growth take place when you’re forced to do things you didn’t think you could do.”

There isn’t a universal process that can be applied to all career progression. Preparation and training are critical elements when seeking a new position, but the passion to continue learning and the determination to remain ambitious are traits common to all successful associates. As Elliot asks rhetorically, “What’s the worst that can happen? You waste 10 minutes writing an e-mail to someone asking a few questions instead of wasting 10 minutes on the sports website Deadspin.com?”

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