



10 Tips for Successful Temporary Assignments

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Organizations use temporary assignments for a variety of reasons. These assignments are usually loosely controlled activities of convenience for the individual, the boss, the organization, the family, or all of the above. Sometimes temporary assignments are for a specific project, such as to serve on a transition or integration team during a merger or acquisition. Many of the most respected organizations use temporary assignments as a way to enhance the skills of an individual or to test the person in different ways prior to a promotion to a higher level. If a person is truly on a fast track and being seasoned by some temporary assignments, it is imperative that he or she be told this information. That will serve as a great source of motivation and fortitude to endure the hassles.

Temporary assignments can be delightful opportunities to pick up new knowledge and to shine in a different way that has more exposure than the status quo. As all businesses become more global, temporary assignments give rising executives a convenient way to become more sensitive to cultural differences. Not all temporary assignments involve relocation; they can be just a transient change in function.

In a merger or acquisition process, there are often numerous temporary assignments because, by definition, conditions are changing dramatically. It is important to have some people pulled out of the daily business decisions to focus on the integration effort. In the steady state, these design and policy-making positions will no longer exist, so during the transition there will be numerous people in temporary slots.

Note: I am not referring to "temporary" or "contract" jobs, which are often used by organizations to reduce costs due to lower benefit costs. I am focusing on permanently employed professionals who have a defined position but are given different duties for some short period of time, usually less than 2 years.

The science of making temporary assignments work well is rather eclectic, and the track record of success is spotty. This paper deals with some of the problems that can occur and several ideas that can help improve the probability of success.

1. Poorly defined position - This often occurs when the reason for the temporary assignment is done for convenience. The person needs to be moved in order to eliminate some issue or to provide a slot for another individual. The assignment is drawn up hastily, often without much documentation of what this person will actually do. The focus is on getting the person moved quickly. The cure is to take the time to consider at least a partial list of duties that will be transferred with the individual. Make the assignment one that includes a real challenge, along with the authority to make professional decisions that help the organization.

2. Inadequate facilities - Many temporary assignments require people to perform in ad hoc or formal project teams. Finding a central location with the proper facilities in which to do the work is a typical challenge. For some period of time, individuals will have to work out of hotel rooms or sparsely-equipped community gathering places. One obvious alternative is to rent fully equipped and furnished office space from a real estate vendor whose business is providing flexible and convenient housing for professionals on the move. Another potential source of facilities is the real estate listings. Often there are buildings that are being underutilized due to bankruptcies or other discontinuities. The owner may be happy to make some low cost office space available rather than have a location atrophy while waiting for a buyer.

3. Inconvenient location - In most cases, people chose their domicile location to allow a reasonable balance of work function and lost time due to the daily commute. If a temporary assignment changes the pattern significantly, it can present a real hardship. Since, by definition, a temporary assignment has an end point, it is not likely the individual will go through a change of residence, and instead will choose to endure the hassle of a much longer commute. Often the need requires an individual to live in a different city and fly home on weekends for months on end. Sometimes it is possible to arrange temporary housing for the person in a convenient location to the job that allows the entire family to move in yet still maintain the original residence for the return path. This is a typical scenario for expatriates. The downside is that the vacant home needs to be made secure while unused, which can get expensive.

4. Lack of Authority - Since the roles of a temporary assignment are transitory by definition, individuals often feel a lack of authority at a time when they are forced to assume greater responsibility. They can see all the work and the confusion of carving out a niche of credibility, but they have little formal purchasing power to make their decisions stick. If individuals do not like or are threatened by the changes represented by the person in a temporary assignment (which is often the case), then it is possible to make the assigned person miserable through any number of ploys. Some people will get cynical and drag their feet, others will take a passive aggressive attitude, still others will undermine the individual through rumor or other hostile means. All of these methods can be like a Chinese water torture for an executive who is already under

immense pressure. The antidote here is to give decision rights to the individual on the assignment and back up this person's decisions and actions publicly.

5. Bad Personal Chemistry - An individual doing a temporary assignment is often entering a society with little knowledge of the people, customs, and culture. The reason for this person coming in may not have been well explained, and the individual is forced to establish new relationships from a position of distrust. That may get things off to a rocky start and require extra effort to achieve a good social balance. The antidote here is simple. The person arranging for a temporary assignment owes the person being moved a good introduction to the new group that includes an adequate rationale and an expectation of fair play.

6. Sense of futility - A person in a temporary assignment can become depressed simply due to a lack of foundation. The work being performed is difficult and seemingly unappreciated. Not having daily interface with former peers at the central office gives one a lonely feeling of isolation. If the assignment is working on a merger transition team, there is the constant pressure of who will be the survivors on the ultimate team. Not being in close physical proximity to the top decision makers on a daily basis can lead to additional anxiety that the person might be overlooked. In this situation, top managers need to assure the individual that it is precisely due to this person's worth to the organization that he or she was picked to help design the integration process. There will be a good job at the end of the ordeal. Actually, people on the integration team have a natural advantage because they help invent the structure and rules for the merged entity. It is the people left behind to run the ongoing business who have the greater jeopardy once the musical chairs game comes to an end.

7. Burn out - When temporary assignments are for the purpose of designing details of a merger or acquisition, the technical detail and amount of work can be overwhelming. Transition teams are usually kept lean because, during the integration, both of the former businesses need to keep operating at top efficiency as well. There are just not enough resources to cover everything, so both the ongoing business resources and the integration team are forced to stretch to the limit. It is easier for the ongoing business to stretch because some people from lower levels can step up to temporary management positions to cover. For the transition team, life is more difficult. There are literally thousands of details to consider, and many mutual processes that need to be invented. The work is endless, critical, urgent, and highly emotional in nature. That, coupled with the individual living or working out of temporary housing, causes many people in these assignments to burn out, have health problems, or get fed up and leave. For this reason, senior managers need to provide some modicum of work-life balance or "R&R breaks." One observation is that people on the edge of total burn out often do not realize their peril. One must consider the ongoing health and welfare of each person serving on a transition team.

8. Guilt or sense of punishment - Some individuals will over-analyze the nature of a temporary move. They may feel a sense of failure; after all, other people were not moved out. They wonder if this is a signal from top management that there is a serious issue or some chemistry problem with the senior people. The individual may feel he or she is being punished for being too aggressive, outspoken, or some other interpersonal skill shortage. If there is a suspicion of this flavor in the body language, it will seriously undermine the motivation of the moved individual to do a good job. To prevent unwarranted worry, top managers need to be transparent and share the true reason for a temporary assignment. If there are issues, then the individual is due an explanation and a chance to mitigate the damage to his or her reputation before being moved out.

9. Squishy Return Arrangements - It is common for a person on a temporary assignment to have no visibility to his or her return path. Will there be a good job at the end of the assignment? When will the assignment end? Was this little adventure good or bad for the person's ultimate career? It can be a lonely and scary situation for a good performer to find him or herself in a remote site with little connection to the home office and no concrete way back home. A simple fix is to have frequent communications with the remote individual to assure him or her that the temporary service is appreciated and a return path is not going to be forgotten. It is easy for managers to get embroiled in the urgent matters of daily decisions and neglect individuals in remote areas who may be feeling insecure about their future.

10. The pasture - Unfortunately, some groups use a series of temporary assignments to encourage an under-performing individual to leave the organization. The jobs have marginal value, yet keeping the person on organizational life support seems kinder than pulling the plug. People who are being led out to pasture are usually well aware of the intent. Many upper managers hope it will cause the person to quit and leave, unfortunately in a lot of cases it causes the person to quit and stay. Here again, the antidote is candor and transparency. Let the individual know the truth so he or she can make appropriate choices rather than guess.

These are just 10 of the common issues with temporary assignments and how upper management can reduce the stress and pain having to do with them. Properly managed, temporary assignments can be invigorating and helpful to both the individual and the organization. If done poorly or without care for the individual, they can be a real problem.

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