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Benefits outweigh risks of late-career move

One might think that stability would be a top priority for someone who considers himself at the tail end of a successful 30-year career. But Dennis Fortner went the opposite route, pulling up stakes after 15 years at Northrop Grumman to begin a new role as director of business engagement for Carnegie Mellon University (CMU).

The move was influenced by Fortner's relationship with Mark Nolan, who worked at the University of Illinois Urbana-

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Champaign and collaborated with him on Northrop-Illinois research partnerships. After Nolan took a position as CMU's associate vice president in business engagement and strategy, Northrop Grumman stepped up research activities with the university and the partnership deepened. About six months into his tenure, Nolan wanted to recruit new staff from industry, and he invited Fortner to apply to join the CMU team.

The offer resonated. Fortner originally began his career as an engineer in R&D. He earned a master's degree in technology management and progressively moved to roles in market and business development, intellectual property, and sponsored research. “Having the background of working with universities and extensive experience in corporate R&D and business development laid a good foundation for a position in corporate relations at CMU.”

Fortner considered the potential risks of making a late-career move to academia. First and foremost, he had to move from his New York home of 27 years to Pittsburgh and convince his wife that starting a new career in a different sector with a different culture would ultimately be a good move. He would leave a formal, structured work environment and enter an informal, unstructured environment, led by a vice president of advancement.

He notes that university research vice presidents are more influencers than managers. The principal investigators hold much power at the university to decide the direction and development of their research.

“In the corporate R&D world, as long as the boss and the boss's boss are happy, things are good,” he says. “But in the university world, you've got to please and build rapport with each PI individually. You try to work with a lot of different people who have different focuses in different fields.”

The move to CMU also held financial implications. He would lose his annual bonus, but the lower income tax in Pennsylvania resulted in unrealized gains to his retained income. And the university offered attractive benefits, such as generous paid

time off and a shorter work week. His retirement plan at the university was even more generous than his corporate plan.

Fortner says the benefits of working in higher education outweighed his initial concerns. A natural networker, his active membership in UIDP and other organizations proved professionally valuable. And on campus, networking also proved key to a smooth transition.

“When I joined CMU, I realized that not only my position coming from a company standpoint was helpful, but it helped me to enable, engage, and develop a mentor network within the university. The mentoring network helped because I had people to go to and contribute to their tasks, and many were quite willing to help me acclimate to this new university environment.”

“I found a lot of people at CMU who also came out of the corporate world,” adds Fortner. “To me, that was monumental because I was able to liaise with people who understood that world. Once I figured out who they were and what their backgrounds were, we became our own little network.” His mentors served him well: he faced no challenge too great for his network to help resolve.

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To gain the trust of PIs, Fortner had to prove his past business experience and acumen. He often participates in discussions between CMU and the aerospace and defense industry. He has also connected the university with associations to help his colleagues better understand industry. “This has led to opening up new doors, connections, and avenues to work with CMU across multiple industry sectors,” he says.

Fortner's advice for professionals considering a job transition:

- **Join professional organizations and strive to be recognized.** Within professional organizations, he welcomes the opportunity to speak when these arise, and he actively engages in many. “The goal is to meet more people and to get different their perspectives on a continual basis,” he says.
- **Seek mentors.** That should include people you can rely on for advice about potential career moves as well as cultivating new mentors within your own organization.
- **Maintain a great network.** “If the move (to CMU) didn't work out, I felt I could always have gone back,” says Fortner, whose network still includes colleagues at Northrop Grumman, Lockheed Martin, and Raytheon.
- **Take calculated risks.** He further advises that one should have clarity about the benefit of any job change. “Each step has to make logical sense,” he says. “Think it through, talk to a lot of people, and make sure it makes sense from a career standpoint.”

Fortner's final two words of advice are “call me.” He assured the interviewer that he would be happy to speak with anyone contemplating a similar move from industry to academia.

If Fortner could go back and redo his decision to leave industry, he would still make the move as he now knows that higher education values his skill set. If he were to change anything in doing so, he noted it would only be to have considered such a move a bit earlier in his career. ☺

