

HOW YOUR NEXT EXECUTIVE ROLE FINDS YOU

*John Kutac - Vice President
of Franchise Operations at
Code Ninjas*

*By Gina Riley,
Photos provided by John Kutac*



Some people feel stuck in their career coming right out of the college gate. Perhaps they chose a field of study out of a sense of obligation or think it is “what they should study.”

In this edition of “How Your Next Executive Role Finds You,” I’m featuring John Kutac, Vice President of Franchise Operations at Code Ninjas. Code Ninjas is a growing franchise with a focus on teaching kids to code through game play with an emphasis on building lifelong critical thinking skills.

Kutac’s career story is compelling for those who have not experienced a linear career journey and who are accumulating a wide range of work experiences. In his case, he went from leading franchise operations, to real estate financing, then healthcare products and service delivery.

After earning a mechanical engineering degree, Kutac’s initial launch into the workforce was in the Food and Beverage industry. He entered Brinker International’s leadership training program and then helped grow franchise operations for Romano’s Macaroni Grill. Since then, he’s been at the helm of a number of franchises, such as Growler USA and The Whimsy Cookie Company. He also did business development for a real estate financing company and served as a leader in the healthcare space for both Clear Choice Dental Implant Center and WellBiz Brands, Inc.

Important to Kutac’s career story, this article emphasizes his deeply held belief in the significance of leadership soft skills and building trusting relationships, which has been a critical element to his career transition success.

Tell me about your career journey. When you look back, did you have specific career goals?

I started my education in mechanical engineering, but I wasn’t passionate about it. I was young and thought it would be a sensible choice. I felt adrift upon graduation because I didn’t connect with the mechanical engineering base. Also, I did not have specific career goals and was simply matriculating into the workforce to earn money.



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I didn’t have a clear vision or guidance. I actually feel as though I’ve gotten my true compass in the last decade. My advice, for starters, is to not beat yourself up for not figuring things out early on. Don’t just chase income. Instead, pay attention to what you are learning.

As I look back, I’ve been lucky in that I’ve worked in many different industries across a number of disciplines like operations, finance, legal, and leadership management. Large-scale and entrepreneurial. I used to worry I was a little fragmented, but I found it to be the complete opposite. People are looking for leaders who have

broad skills, breadth of scope, and experience. I would not trade that experience for anything.

How did you find your footing?

My first real job opportunity presented itself at Romano's where I had been working for a long time as a server, and I had a real passion for the brand. I was approached by a food and beverage business developer who was a managing partner with Brinker International. He invited me to take part in a leadership program to support the company as it was expanding. It was an easy and natural transition.

That leadership program was some of the best training I've had in my entire career. I started to see I had a natural inclination to drive the financials and the ability to lead people, which I can now see has been a common thread throughout my career.

Your engineering base must have given you a foundation for critical thinking and problem solving. You take it with you and leverage it no matter the industry, right?

Yes, I feel confident going in situations, to quickly assess and understand all aspects of a company and how it operates. Over time, I've gained the confidence to be decisive and make well-informed decisions.

Let's be honest: We have to make decisions very quickly right now. Having the experience and ability to see where things are going in a company gives me more confidence to make strategic moves.

Have you ever felt stuck in your career? If so, what did you do to interrupt the pattern?

I tend to be a resilient person and don't need a lot of public recognition for my work. That said, when I think back to when I felt the most unhappy or stuck, it was when I had a lot of responsibility and was driving great results, but someone took credit for my work. It made me feel minimized, small, and underappreciated. It stole my trust.

Because of this experience, I do the opposite. I always come back to kindness and trust. It is important I show empathy, keep perspective, and always be honest, direct, and respectful.

Have you had role models, mentors, or sponsors you've leveraged who have been advisors in your career?

There have been about five people who've had a profound impact on my career. The ones who impacted me the most impressed upon me the need to work with great people, engage in trusting relationships, and work in environments with mutual respect and open communication.

One of the most important people who was a catalyst in my career was a managing partner at Brinker. He tapped me on the shoulder and opened doors for me that I would have never expected. He put me in uncomfortable situations when I thought I did not belong in the conversation, which accelerated my growth just by being in the room. It helped me gain footing and confidence. I also saw, firsthand, how they evaluated talent and how important it was to some of these key players to have an MBA.

Another mentor emphasized the importance of trusting who you work with. Don't go after salary and title as the main goal. He was dead on. Life is short. Work with common values, trust, and shared goals.

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- John Kutac -

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As you know, this series is about how leaders effectively use the power of networking and relationship building to make their career moves. What examples could you share?

I've never applied for a posted position and gotten hired. It's just never happened. On the few occasions when I was actively looking, applying to job boards was almost like a black hole. It was very frustrating and I think many others experience the same thing.

Every opportunity I've gotten has been relationship- and referral-based. I am constantly interacting with people, and I know people feel comfortable reaching out to me. My advice here is to make a healthy impact on your external connections because that is what drives the movement. People who know you. They connect you.

My number one rule in life is just don't be an A-hole, because it is a very small world and it's getting smaller by the day. We are interconnected through social media, LinkedIn, and personal referrals.

Next, don't be afraid to reach out and talk to people. I have people reach out to me all the time to ask for references and referrals, and I don't think twice about it. I am happy to do it. We want to help people we know. It is satisfying. Don't be afraid to ask for help.

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Do you have a standout transition that came about because you were in the right place at the right time?

Yes, it was when I was not actively looking and was contacted about taking over the COO role for WellBiz Brands by someone who knew me well enough to reach out early on. That offer happened very quickly – in less than a month.

It was the right place at the right time. I know that doesn't happen very often.

You must have left an impression and built a great reputation to have been reached out to like that.

You know, I think there are a lot of leaders who have similar skills and can operate a business. I like to think in this case it comes down to them additionally thinking I was a good person who was good for their people,

organization, and culture. The behavioral aspect to leading people is the differentiator, in my opinion.

What would you recommend to people to be seen and heard in a crowded market, especially during a global pandemic as they look for finite leadership level roles?

I've had some standout connection requests and have a perfect example.

There was a woman working the social channels who sent me a very bold, personal, / short video saying, "Here's who I am and what I can do for you." It was great. I don't typically respond to those kinds of unsolicited messages, but in this case, I took the time to go back and say, "Hey, you know what? That was great. And I appreciate it. The fact you did that means something to me even though we are not in a position to engage at this point in time. If you need any help, let me know." I am still in contact with her to this day.

We know we own our own careers and we can't wait to get tapped on the shoulder. Are there ways a person might signal they are ready to come off the bench?

Yes, I will say this is true from personal experience. People should not assume they are being considered for the next level role. While there might be a pathway forward for you, you simply might not be thought of at the moment.

We all assume everyone recognizes what we are doing, but people have their own worlds going on. I've had people come to me and say, "Hey, I'm getting frustrated and I want a different challenge." And I think, whoa, whoa, whoa! If a person is truly ready to take on more, then they need to bring it to someone's attention. Let people know you want it and ready for it. I always appreciate it when people let me know.

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Leaders don't always know what you are thinking. They are thinking about the business, and they might not be specifically thinking about you and your career aspirations.

When a leader has all areas covered, they focus their attention on areas of greatest concern. Unfortunately, quality people can end up feeling like they are stuck. So, go have that conversation!

What mistakes do you see people make as they navigate a job search and more specifically, when they interview?

The first thing I would advise is for people to do their homework. It seems basic, but it's not basic at all. If someone comes in and knows nothing about the company, they don't know the origin story, and they don't have an approximation of the breadth of the company, location counts, things of that nature, it shows me there's not a lot of intent there. It's an easy way for me to weed somebody out right out of the gate, for sure.

What are your top tips for leadership-level job seekers when it comes to networking and relationship building?

Leverage your relationships. Don't be afraid to ask.

Go for something you may feel might not be there. We all need our first shot at that first leadership position. Make it interesting and go

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What do you need to hear from people to consider them or give them a chance?

You know, I always give someone a second look when they personally reach out – or at least give them a harder look than I might have otherwise.

So, a recap of our conversation. Do your homework, research, customize, and personalize your approach. And, relationship building is the way to go.

I would add, bet on yourself. Don't sell yourself short.

What is next for you in your new leadership role with Code Ninjas?

It is an exciting organization! It is not just teaching kids to code; we are training the creators of the future. There is a real need for problem solving and creativity. We have several corporate locations and 320 franchises in the US, Canada, and the UK with plans to explore near-term expansion into Australia, New Zealand, Europe, and the UAE. We are a leader in this space and getting ready launch proprietary curriculum.

I have to say, I work at my best when I feel as though what I do is benefiting society. I've found a great place to do just that.

Thank you, John! What I find refreshing and helpful about your career story is the calming message that not everyone has to have all their career moves planned out. You can find your way into impactful, fulfilling leadership roles by learning from trusted mentors, taking advantage of interesting opportunities, and above all else, being kind and helpful to others.

CONTRIBUTING WRITER'S PROFILE



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