



# ***How Your Next Executive Role Finds You***

***With Rob Hays, Vice President and  
Chief Strategy Officer, Lenovo***

*by Gina Riley*

Have you worked for the same company for fifteen or twenty years and felt stuck or unable to advance into the next-level opportunity?

How do you signal you are ready? How do you help others understand your capabilities and look past perceptions about your readiness to move into your next executive job?

This edition of “How Your Next Executive Role Finds You” features the compelling career story of Rob Hays, Vice President and Chief Strategy Officer for Lenovo.

Technically, Hays wasn't “stuck” in his career. He spent over twenty years at Intel Corporation, advancing rapidly and finishing up as the Vice President of the Data Center Group and General Manager of strategic planning. He led the business strategy and product roadmap for Intel's industry-leading Xeon processor family and other silicon products for servers, networking, and storage infrastructure.

His experience spans strategic planning, product management, directing business growth initiatives and leading several acquisitions in the data center silicon industry. Hays also holds two U.S. Patents for inventions related to energy-efficient networking systems. That may not sound like an executive who is stuck, but it can happen to the best of us and at any level.

Hays provides ideas about how to move into your next ideal job based on his experience with career transitions inside of a large, global company where he had a long tenure and brings to life an eventual move to another global organization.

## WOULD YOU GIVE ME AN OVERVIEW OF YOUR CAREER HISTORY TO SET THE STAGE FOR OUR CONVERSATION?

Yes! I studied computer engineering at Georgia Tech and landed my first job in California with Intel. I started as an application engineer, helping

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customers design computers with Intel's processors and motherboards.

I loved working with customers and getting outside the office and didn't like the work in the lab and tedious code testing. This realization led me to a product manager role which allowed me to focus more on customers. I got to travel all over the world and work with some of the largest tech companies.

After managing a few successful products and launches, I had the opportunity to move into a management role. That was actually a challenge - to get a leader to trust me with that first manager job.

When I jumped into that role, it opened up a whole new set of opportunities to build skills I didn't have before, such as leadership, people development, strategic planning and analyzing potential acquisitions. I got to build my executive connections inside the company which was key to the future of my career.

I eventually made it to Vice President at Intel. The last seven years there, I ran all the silicon roadmaps for the data center group, which included Xeon processors along with other server storage and networking components. After 20 years of service, I left two years ago to join Lenovo as the Chief Strategy Officer for the data center group.



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**YOU SAID MAKING THE FIRST LEAP INTO MANAGEMENT WAS A CHALLENGE. COULD YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT THAT? HOW DID YOU MAKE THE LEAP?**

I'd been at Intel about 8 years as a lead individual contributor on my team. I was landing some of the best assignments and jobs. I really wanted to get a manager job to lead the team because I felt like I had a lot to offer. I wanted to amplify my abilities while growing my scope. I didn't have the management experience box ticked and it took a long time for someone to give me that opportunity.

At the end of the day, what it took was one of my former managers, who was also a mentor, busting that door down for me. They went to the hiring manager, who was the GM of the group, and said, 'Hey, this guy has done everything you've asked him to do well. He's done it for many years. I know he doesn't have management experience, but why would you think he's not going to be successful at management if he's been successful at everything else?'

After checking this box, I've been able to go back and forth between management and non-management jobs.



**IT SOUNDS LIKE THIS PERSON WAS YOUR SPONSOR AND ABLE TO SPEAK UP FOR YOU AND YOUR ABILITIES WHEN YOU WERE NOT IN THE ROOM. WHEN YOU ARE STUCK IT IS IMPORTANT TO HAVE MENTORS AND SPONSORS TO HELP YOU OUT. LOOKING BACK, DO YOU REMEMBER HAVING SPECIFIC CAREER GOALS?**

At first, I don't think I had specific goals other than get a great job, get some experience and live somewhere I wanted to live. It was just about life experiences at that point as much as anything.

It didn't take long for me to learn what I liked and didn't like.

One of the things I realized is I really wanted a seat at the table, to add value and to be part of the discussion where the decisions were being made.

**IT SOUNDS LIKE ADDING VALUE BECAME A DRIVER FOR YOU. WHEN HAVE YOU FELT STUCK IN YOUR CAREER AND WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO PUSH THROUGH TO THE NEXT LEVEL?**

Before I came over to Lenovo, I was feeling this way. I'd been in the same exact role for seven years. It was an executive role and I became quite proficient at what I was doing. Two things happened that made me feel stuck in that position.

First, I had learned a lot from the senior-most leader at my company who I reported to for five years, but she moved on just as we were starting to plan for my next leadership role. They brought in another leader and I

committed to stay in the role for a couple more years to maintain stability for the group. It was unusual for someone to be in the same job for seven years, but I thought it was best for the company and the new leader. I was having fun, but it kept me in the role longer than originally planned.

Second, at the end of two years, I was ready for a change. I was noticing new GM opportunities pop up that I could do, but everyone was convincing me to stay where I was because I was adding immediate value and impact. It became dissatisfying after a while and I realized I'd have to start looking outside the company. So, I started to reach out to my broader network because I thought if I was not going to find something new inside, maybe I could find something outside. Eventually I did.

**THIS IS A FAMILIAR STORY TO ME. I'VE BEEN ON THE PHONE WITH A FEW EXECUTIVES LATELY WHO CAN'T QUITE BREAK THROUGH TO THE NEXT LEVEL. THERE IS SOMETHING KEEPING THEM IN PLACE. MAYBE THEY ARE IMPORTANT WHERE THEY ARE BUT THEY HAVE A BURNING DESIRE TO GROW AND DO SOMETHING ELSE.**

I think that's where a sponsor and timing come in. If I had the right sponsor at the right time, it could have helped people realize that seven years is a long time and there would have been value in me moving to something else. If that had been the case, I think things would have turned out differently.

There are people I sponsor. I can see when they're getting stuck because



they're so good at what they do their manager just doesn't want to let them go. And sometimes they need a little nudging.

**IS THERE ONE MENTOR OR SPONSOR WHO REALLY STANDS OUT IN YOUR CAREER WHO WAS INSTRUMENTAL IN GETTING YOU FROM POINT A TO POINT B?**

Ironically, the general manager of the division I'd worked for who gave me a hard time about getting that first manager role was the one who ended being the person who opened up many opportunities and assignments over the years. He became my biggest sponsor.

He gave me mentorship, courage, and the skills to go find the next opportunity and he was my eyes, ears, and voice in helping me land those jobs when the time came.

**WHAT YOU ARE SAYING ABOUT COURAGE REALLY STANDS OUT TO ME. WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE FEELING STUCK? WHAT COULD ALLOW THEM TO GAIN COURAGE?**

One, have some kind of vision for where you want to go. Take some time and understand what interests you and what opportunities you might be a good fit for. Don't home in on just one thing. Keep multiple options open and try to open the aperture of your vision to see where you could go.

Two, have conversations with people who are either already there, or could influence your path to get there. Ask them questions of what it takes. What does the hiring manager or the executive team making the decision consider?

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Who gets into those roles? What are they looking for? Have you asked them? What would make you the obvious candidate?

If you understand this and you have the desire, follow through and do your best to acquire the capabilities to go do it. You get much closer to where you want to go versus sitting back and pontificating about it.



*One of the other people I interviewed for this series, Jennifer Davis, said something similar. It is like opening your aperture lens up wider and wider. I love how these stories have so much consistency to them!*

*This series is about helping jobseekers crack the code to what is known as the “hidden market” and networking strategies people use to uncover opportunities that are just percolating. There may not have been time for it to have been posted on a job board or company page. When it came down to your transition to Lenovo, it wasn't about a recruiter finding you or you applying through a job board. How did you take control of your destiny and make the transition?*

When you talk about the hidden job market, I think about supply and demand. The job postings are the demand and the people are the supply. There's probably a larger hidden job market on the supply side than the demand side.

I agree some jobs never get posted because people decide there's some need and they go pick someone to go do it. They just make it happen. I do think there are a lot of job postings and openings that are public.

**I can't overemphasize how much networking and the people you know applies here. This is how the person and the job find each other.**

In my experience as a hiring manager, I would say the vast majority of people I've hired for positions were not people I initially knew. Nor did they come from someone randomly applying for the job through a website or recruiter. Most of them came in through a personal referral from someone I knew and trusted.

I think personal networks are really important because you never know when you'll need to apply for a job. I would be thinking about what you do on a daily basis to strengthen your network. Do you have good relationships with people? Do you keep your relationships warm? When you've worked with people, have you demonstrated your skills and your experience in a way that created successful outcomes?





**FOCUS ON  
THE JOURNEY  
NOT THE  
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It's important to occasionally share your desires or your curiosity about your career. When I was in a junior role, one of my mentors, a very senior technical fellow at Intel, encouraged me to be curious and ask questions when I was in the room with senior technical leaders to learn from them. It turned out to be such wonderful advice because one person in particular went on to be an executive at three other major tech companies that I've been business partners with.

I've kept in touch and it has opened doors for me and my company because I was a curious person who expressed interest. Take advantage of the opportunities you have when you interact with people of influence.

**HOW DO YOU RECOMMEND PEOPLE SHOWCASE THEIR UNIQUE VALUE PROPOSITION? HOW DOES A PERSON NETWORK WITHOUT FEELING LIKE THEY ARE ASKING FOR A JOB? YOU'VE TALKED ABOUT RELATIONSHIP BUILDING, BEING CURIOUS, AND HAVING A LEARNER'S MENTALITY. HOW DO YOU CREATE A PULL STRATEGY RATHER THAN PUSHING YOURSELF ONTO PEOPLE?**

It's the daily work and the daily interactions that are most important because that's really where you build trust and credibility with people. This is especially true when they get to observe your skills directly.

Managing up or interacting with more senior people who might be future job role decision-makers is

important. These are people who might be in a position to help you find jobs. You need to know that audience. When you have a chance to communicate with them, whether that's a presentation, recommendation, educating them on something, or whatever that is - really thinking from their point of view. What is it that they want to get out of this interaction? Cater to that.

Can you help them see you are ready to move on to other positions? Can you empathize and understand other points of view, and then cater your subject matter expertise and comments towards those needs?

Another thing is to just keep your relationships warm. Maybe not all thousand relationships you have, but you know, 20 or 30, at least. It's people that are in places where you think you might want to be at some point in time.

You never know - they could be your customer someday. You could work for them someday. They could open up a door for you someday. You just never know. And if you let those relationships atrophy, then you miss out on opportunities you didn't even know about.

*You've seen people do really well in interviews and seen people make mistakes. What are some of the biggest mistakes you see aspiring leaders make?*

I think the biggest mistake people make is before they ever get to the

interview. They self-de-select. I think there's people that don't go after things they should go after because they feel like they're not going to be chosen. So, they don't put in the effort.

Just think about where you want to go, what you want to do, and what skills you need. I think that's where the real effort needs to come in. Whether it's through interviewing or just career planning, all this needs to happen well before you get into the interview.

I think creating as many reasonable options for yourself is the best thing to do. When you think about your career and where you want to go, think about what motivates you. Where are your interests? What are you good at today? What do you need to be good at?

Don't just think about one option - like only aspiring for your boss' job - because your boss might not move on or retire anytime soon. Even if they do retire you may not be the one to get the job. You should create other options that are adjacent to where you are.

Think about the other functions you interact with that you could do? Create multiple options.

Then, go talk to those leaders about what it takes to succeed there and start to build credibility. Again, the goal is to be the obvious candidate for multiple options. I mean, that's the best case scenario, right?



Like I mentioned, many people de-select. I talk to people all the time who stay in their swim lane and keep working and hoping something will happen. I don't think this is the most efficient way to operate. Don't just assume you're not capable of something. If it's interesting and you think you could do it, go find out what it takes to succeed and work towards it.

*It is all about creating options for yourself so the next phase of your career opens up doors and opportunities. Do well where you are and keep an eye on the landscape. Kindle relationships and show intellectual curiosity about where those paths could lead you.*

Yes! I have an example for you.

I had a mentor who's very close to me ask me in a formal career conversation about the idea of a job I had not thought of doing before.

I said, 'Well, I would never get that job.'

He challenged me on it and asked me 'why not'.

I said, 'Because I'm not the expert in that domain and there's a thousand experts around here in that domain. I would be the bottom of the list. I would never get that job.'

He said, 'The reason you would be at the top of the list to get that job

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is because we have a thousand people who know that domain and nobody that knows these other things that you would bring to the table.'

Lo and behold, I got that job two years later. It just happened to be it was the next job I ended up taking because my eyes were opened and I was encouraged by my mentor I could do that job.

I did have valuable contributions to make. So, don't assume because you're not best in one area that would be the reason that someone would select you or not select you for the role.

By the way, 12 years later, the person who gave me the advice to go after that role, working for someone else, is now my boss at Lenovo. Relationships come back around in unexpected ways.

*So, the minimum qualification is what the thousand people had and your unique value proposition was what made you stand out for the job?*

Yes, exactly.

*As a leader of strategy, what does adaptability look like for you and your organization? How are you pivoting as a leader in the wake of the pandemic? How are you tailoring and customizing where you sit as a leader today?*

That's a really good question. This has been a quadruple whammy, right?



We've had the pandemic, quarantine, recession, and racial tensions you can't just check at the door when you come to work. It has also been a very politically charged environment during the election last year.

That's a lot for employees to take in and work through and still perform.

When we look from an IT and collaboration perspective, we are running our meetings on Zoom now, right? This really helps and it isn't something we would have been doing so pervasively prior to the pandemic. We can also check in with customers frequently. We can check in with employees frequently. It's actually easier than just walking down the hall.

One of the things my eyes have been opened up to is all of these external factors. Kids schooling at home and black lives matter and all these kinds of things are coming into the workplace because we are at home and these things are happening around us and they do affect us all, emotionally.

We can't just try to minimize those things and shut them out and expect people to just perform and focus on business and not worry about that stuff. One of the challenges we face is opening up dialogue with employees and invite the conversation around how people are thinking and feeling.

Are we asking what we could do as an organization to do better for our company and do better for our communities? I've participated in conversations in the last few months at work I've never seen before and they're real. I think it's really important that you foster an open, safe environment like this.

When you ask about adaptability, it makes me think about how we are behaving and how we treat each other. What are we talking about? We can't just leave all that stuff outside of work. Don't talk about religion. Don't talk about race. Don't talk about finances. Don't talk about anything else. Just talk about work. Everything's fine. We're all the same. It's all about equality. That's not reality, right?





And it's one thing to have a diverse workplace, but it's another thing to have an inclusive workplace where all employees can thrive.

And if you're asking everybody to leave all that experience outside the workplace, you're not harnessing it. So, to me, a big adaptation is how do we invite all of this craziness in the world back in and then talk about it and then turn that around into action to make the company and the community better.

*What are the top takeaways you have for people who are in leadership level positions looking to make their next career move?*

Network. Reach out to the people you know. Keep the relationships warm. Foster your options and

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don't just get your sights set on one thing. Understand what's available out there and try to really understand what it takes to succeed.

Don't assume you're not a good candidate for a role, right? Keep those options open and work towards them. Don't self-de-select and just assume you won't get there, because if you do that, you won't get there.

## CONTRIBUTING WRITER'S PROFILE



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