Making a Temporary Stint Stick

With Provisional Jobs on the Rise, Becoming a Full-Time Hire Takes Some Effort

By MELISSA KORN

As the economy eases into recovery mode, more companies are temporarily filling holes in their work forces before making permanent hiring decisions these days. But with the right moves, a temporary employee can make that job permanent.

Jody Miller, chief executive of Business Talent Group, a Los Angeles interim-executive placement firm, says she saw a 50% increase in requests for temporary talent in 2009 over 2008, with a significant bump in the second half of 2009. At least 19 publicly traded companies have appointed interim CEOs or CFOs since Jan. 1, more than half from within, according to recent news reports.

Interim executives are sometimes brought in from outside a company to help it through a restructuring or a scandal. But companies are also filling empty posts with internal candidates—many of whom were hoping for an actual promotion to the position—while weighing candidates. That leaves ample room for a well-positioned interim manager to impress, and potentially become a permanent fixture.

Proving Yourself

But successfully removing interim from your title isn't always easy. "If you were the primary candidate, they would have just named you to that position," says Joni Lindquist, president of KHC Executive Coaching in Overland Park, Kan. Assertive action, she says, can help move you to the top of the list.

You need to prove that the company shouldn't risk replacing you, career experts say. Companies are interested in finding a candidate to fill the spot and will usually be open to someone with new ideas who can help implement them while they're in the job, says John Beeson, a principal at Beeson Consulting Inc. in New York.

That was the case for Mark Moran, now chief executive officer and president of the MetroHealth System in Cincinnati. When the contract of the company's CEO wasn't renewed in early 2008, Mr. Moran took over as interim head of the 500-physician medical center. He had helped the hospital create a strategic plan in 2007, when he worked as a consultant. As interim CEO, Mr. Moran overhauled the reimbursement system and helped launch a new center for uninsured patients, all with the board's support.
William S. Gaskill, chairman of MetroHealth, says he was impressed with Mr. Moran's focus on improving the revenue stream, something that would be positive for the hospital beyond any interim stint. The hospital, which had reported deep losses in the first quarter of 2008, ended the year in the black. Mr. Moran moved from interim to permanent CEO in March 2009.

That idea extends to nonmanagerial positions, too. Diana Galvin moved into a full-time staff accountant position in October at Conrad & Co. in Spartanburg, S.C., by learning not just how she could do her assignments well, but also how the company wanted to improve. She joined the firm on a part-time, interim basis in August and made sure to tell a senior accountant she could do more than key in data—she could crunch the numbers. "As we talked, they learned I had more skills than what they contracted for," says Ms. Galvin, who showed she could help the company grow by supporting a high volume of clients.

The Talk

Career experts also say you should quickly express your interest in staying past the initial contract term. Have a formal conversation with supervisors within a few weeks of starting the temporary job, says Ms. Miller, whose firm places professionals at the vice president level and above. That is long enough to learn the ropes, but not so long that the search for a permanent replacement starts without you, she says.

Ms. Miller says more than a quarter of executives she places move into permanent jobs.

Even if you have got a good shot at the permanent position, Ms. Lindquist of KHC recommends asking your supervisor for specific steps to take to become the top candidate. Do your time-management skills need improvement, for example.

No matter how well you understand your job function, you can boost your odds of landing the job if you adopt the new group's practices quickly—down to learning appropriate jargon—to show the hiring committee you've easily settled in, says Brett Good, a district president at Robert Half International Inc., a temporary staffing firm in Menlo Park, Calif.

Inside Job

That can be easier if you have landed an interim role internally. Employees promoted from within can provide managers with concrete examples of attempts to grow into the role, such as offering up the results of discussions with other division heads about managing budgets or meetings with subordinates regarding your leadership style.

Margaret Dahlberg says her 13 years of institutional knowledge at Valley City State University in Valley City, N.D., helped her get promoted from interim to permanent vice president of academic affairs this winter.
Dr. Dahlberg took the interim post in April as the school recovered from massive flooding that forced students to finish the semester remotely. The former English professor and department chair wasn't initially in the running for the permanent job, and even helped interview external candidates. As interim, Dr. Dahlberg helped the school prepare its new academic catalogue and gear up for re-accreditation.

But Dr. Dahlberg impressed university President Steven Shirley enough that she was asked to stay on for the fall semester, and then for good. "There was nothing that any of these folks were bringing that she wasn't already doing," Dr. Shirley says.

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