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Career Paths - Technical vs Management

Technical vs. Management Career Path Guide

Some time in their career most engineers will be faced with a critical decision on whether to continue on a technical career path, or branch off into management. This opportunity generally comes after a few assignments when the company is beginning to attain real value for its investment in an engineer's on-the-job education. Consequently, both the engineer and the company have a real stake in this career choice.

When faced with this decision, many engineers become rightfully concerned about keeping their technical skills up to date. While the technical track involves further development skills that can be applied to research, development, technical planning etc., the management track requires the acquisition of a new set of frequently unfamiliar skills that are more business and people oriented than are the strictly analytical approaches that characterize engineering work.

The acquisition of these new skills will certainly compete with the further development of technical capabilities. The road back to a technical track is difficult if the management track does not work out. Consequently, the decision to pursue and accept a management position should be made with care. It is also an option that should be exercised sooner rather than later in one's career, if it is to be exercised at all.

The possession of a strong underpinning in technology can be an asset in some departments that an engineer might choose for the pursuit of a management position. Frequently, the input of engineers is highly valued by non-engineers in departments such as sales, marketing, operations or product management where the technical element is a crucial factor in decisions.

However, the engineer is never totally prepared for the difference between handling engineering analysis and managing people. Many engineers are used to doing things on their own and seeing a task through to its completion. In a management position, the engineer must develop an increased focus on the overall team and learn the art of delegation of tasks to others. Being accountable for a team's outcome is a completely different dynamic than being accountable for one's own outcome.

Because the required management skills are so different from technical skills, engineers should first find ways to evaluate their own interest and aptitude for them by seeking leadership roles outside of the company where the risk of failure is not so pronounced. Such roles can be found as a volunteer leader or officer in a community organization or professional society.

Before settling on one path or the other an engineer should also take inventory.

- Have all of the aspects of the technical ladder been explored and evaluated?
- Is being a manager really a desirable goal? Why?
- Am I prepared to make the necessary commitment?

One should be earnest in answering these questions. The result will be greater satisfaction with whichever career path is chosen.

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