



Paper PD02

From Senior Programmer to Head-of-Function: taking that 'leap-of-faith'

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ABSTRACT

During my career progression, I have heard the phrase 'tick a few more boxes to ensure you are ready for promotion', and I find myself asking 'Can you ever tick every single box?'.

As a Senior Programmer, I took that leap-of-faith, moved out of my comfort zone and jumped at the opportunity to work in an environment with a team of extraordinary programmers. During my time working in this unique team, I developed strengths and confidence I never knew I had. I mastered communication skills, and I absorbed every fragment of information I could devour.

Because I had the opportunity to grow, that drove me to want more, want better; not only for myself but for the people around me. This exponential growth and development helped me achieve and identify my strengths and prepared me for my next step of professional development.

INTRODUCTION

In the professional world, the pursuit of a promotion often symbolises growth, recognition, and the promise of a brighter future. Throughout my professional journey, it was the repeated pattern of working in a role, growing and developing, and then moving up to the next position. In 2022, having been in my role for 2 years, I asked 'When should I expect to be promoted?' And my reply was 'Not yet – you need to tick a few more boxes'.

Without the guidance of clear strategies to help me 'tick' those innumerable boxes, I pushed myself to take on additional initiatives and responsibilities to highlight my abilities. Another cycle of mid-year reviews came and went, and yet no mention of promotion., I decided to seek opportunities elsewhere. I had discussions, I had conversations. Finally, after a successful interview with a CRO offering me a role that seemed beyond my level of expertise. I had to make the decision, I had to take a 'leap-of-faith'.

This paper aims to explore the opportunities that opened for me, the personal and professional growth I gained, and the strategies and leadership skills that in turn helped guide my professional development.

"Never hold yourself back from trying something new just because you're afraid you won't be good enough. You'll never get the opportunity to do your best work if you're not willing to first do your worst and then let yourself learn and grow."
Lori Deschene

EXPLORING NEW HORIZONS

THE NEW ROLE

My new role was to implement a recently developed automation tool for Tabulation dataset development and lead the team responsible for its functionality and productivity. The automation tool was based on the CDISC 360 initiative and had huge potential for the programming team.

Needless-to-say, I had never heard of CDISC 360, or what was required for the implementation, but with a mix of excitement and trepidation I was about to find out! This was a role that was going to challenge me.

MEETING THE TEAM

The appeal of innovation, knowing we were advancing clinical trial reporting with the latest technologies and methodologies to enhance data accuracy, efficiency, and transparency was equally intimidating and invigorating. I was fortunately not alone with this daunting task. I had the absolute pleasure to join the Operational Excellence (OE) Team.

When I joined the OE team, I was immediately struck by the collaborative and forward-thinking culture. The team was composed of experts from diverse backgrounds, each bringing unique skills and perspectives to the table. This diversity was a key driver of our innovative approach to clinical trial reporting. Working with an experienced team that is both innovative and dynamic can be incredibly rewarding. Such an environment fosters creativity, encourages different perspectives, and drives continuous improvement. Different viewpoints help identify potential issues and develop more effective solutions.

“OE” LEADERSHIP

Within this team, I found my mentor was approachable and professional. He championed open and honest communication, ensuring all voices were heard and valued. He was willing to consider and respect different perspectives and approaches. He arranged opportunities for us to engage with one another, to share ideas and feedback.

He knew he didn't have to 'manage' us, but simply helped lead the way, guiding us down the path and direction we wanted to take. He recognised and celebrated our successes. It was then I realised the difference between a 'Manager' and a 'Leader'.

THE LEARNING CURVE

The initial phase of my journey involved a steep learning curve. Understanding the intricacies of the automation tool, ensuring its validation and quality data-driven process capabilities, required dedication and perseverance. However, the support from my colleagues and the comprehensive training programmes provided by the OE team made the transition smoother.

I learned the skills necessary to support my own team, guiding and training them, building their confidence and creating a safe environment where they could ask questions and raise concerns. I am proud of the team we built; they supported and motivated each other. During the early stages of this role, I read “Leaders Eat Last” by Simon Sinek^[1] in order to find some fool-proof, dummies-guide to leadership. I discovered there wasn't some masterplan or process chart, which if you follow, your team will be a success. It is quite simply the attitude and environment you create in your team that will determine your success. A truly human leadership, inspiring co-operation and trust to ensure we thrive, prioritising the wellbeing of people in my team to ensure they feel safe and fulfilled and valued. Making little changes everyday, dramatically changed the attitude of the team, ensuring quality of work was our guiding principle.

Working with an experienced team that is both innovative and dynamic was incredibly rewarding. The team was a success... what could possibly go wrong?

*“If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, then you are a leader.”
Simon Sinek*

EMBRACING CHANGE AND LEADING THE INNOVATION

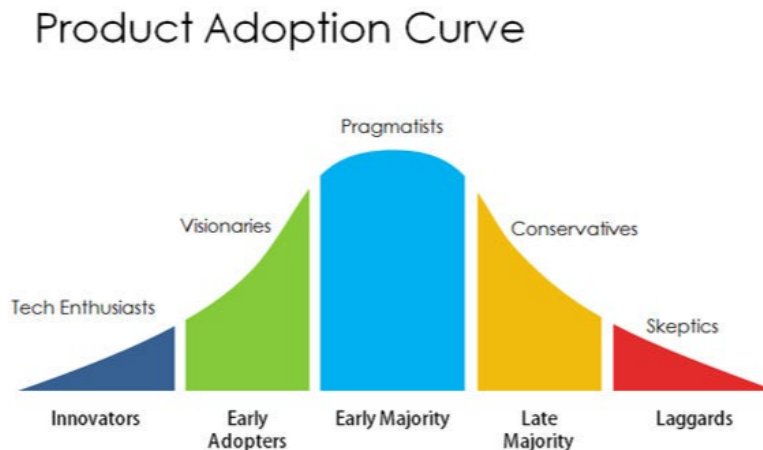
STRUGGLES – BUT SUCCESSES

The hard work had been done and the team was working on deliverables using a full SDTM eCRT package comprising an automation tool, and a second automation tool that could report outputs in a fraction of the time. We were able to reduce resourcing time by half, we were able to improve the integrity and quality of the data, had better control over the value-level-metadata, and were able to create a high-quality data-driven package and deliverables... so why did no one want to take advantage of these tools?

I learned very quickly, people are resitant to change, and they do not like being told what to do when it comes to the reporting of their study. I heard the conversations so many times 'if everything is automated, we'll soon be out of a job' or 'I've used something like it before and it didn't go well, so I don't want to test it on my study'. The simple fact, people don't trust the unknown, and people didn't trust me or my team.

When you are a lead on a study, you are (naturally) very protective of your study. It is a representation of your knowledge, your skills, your relationship and reputaion with the sponsor and your company, so you won't want to go and hand part of your study over to another team to take control using a tool that you don't really understand and just expect to have a deliverable by the end of it. It sounded too good to be true. I understood their concerns, and I knew I had to get them on my side in order for the implementation of these tools to be a success. Conflict and dissension is an inevitable part of any workplace. Understanding how to navigate these conflicts is crucial for maintaining a positive work environment and ensuring productivity.

I read an interesting article about Product Adoptive Curves^[2] describing where people sit when implementing new technology and processes. Product adoption curves illustrate how different groups of individuals adopt a new product over time. Understanding these curves helped me realise I needed to focus my efforts on certain people in the wider programming team. I needed to engage the enthusiastic and confident innovators who are excited to try new tech, but also the opinion leaders who embrace new products early but with more caution than innovators. They help in influencing others due to their social connections and credibility. They help provide the feedback to the wider team, helping build trust in the automation process and my team, and helping to develop those first steps of product uptake.



BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

You will always have people who are the last to adopt an innovation, often resisting change. Typically, they prefer traditional products and are more risk averse. I had Project Managers who would ask the question 'Can this not be done quicker doing traditional programming?', who required me to continuously emphasise the cost-effectiveness and quality features.

Due to the perpetual hurdles and resistance, I asked my manager for guidance and ideas of how to break through this barrier. If I wasn't going to get people on my side by showcasing functionality and efficiencies, then I needed to find another approach.

In Atomic Habits by James Clear^[3] he discusses that "Goals are good for setting a direction, but systems are best for making progress". I knew if I wanted to persuade the pessimists and skeptics then I would need to change the system I was using to promote the team and tool.

I started working more closely with Project Management to provide discussions and assistance for resourcing to a study. I was able to show that my resourcing time to study work was less due to these tools. We required less time for eCRT work due to meta-data-driven processes, creating higher quality outputs overall. I worked alongside my manager, learning about business development processes, the creation of business plans to show logical and methodical process plans, and assigning RACI matrices to help ensure the accountability and responsibility was considered through the entire development process.

Not only was this beneficial for the overall goal of helping to encourage the use of these tools, but it also gave me insight into the next stage of my career by gaining invaluable experience. My manager empowered me to take part in more activities and responsibilities. I attend financial audits for the automation tool performance to advocate for my team's work and capabilities and I began to produce and present team KPIs. I was solely responsible for the team's full resourcing and forecasting, and interviewing for suitable future candidates for recruitment to the team. All these newly developed skills allowed me to present along with my team to the CEO on development, implementation and maintenance processes, and gave me opportunities to attend and present at Single Day Events.

"When nothing seems to help, I go and look at a stonecutter hammering away at his rock, perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundred and first blow it will split in two, and I know it was not that last blow that did it-but all that had gone before."

James Clear

THE REWARD OF FULFILMENT

CHALLENGES AND REWARDS

Transitioning to the role and responsibilities was not without its challenges. There were moments of doubt and uncertainty, but the sense of fulfilment and education I experienced in my new role was unparalleled. I found myself surrounded by like-minded individuals who shared my passion and drive. The work was challenging, but it was also deeply rewarding. For the first time in years, I felt truly valued and appreciated.

Helping my team achieve our goals was engaging, and I enjoyed supporting others. My role as Line Manager allowed me to gain further insight into my colleagues and the stresses or difficulties they were facing. Helping to guide and mentor team members as they grow in their roles was incredibly satisfying, watching them having opportunities to thrive and shine, empower them to take initiative and make decisions, build their courage and confidence, and making sure they felt heard. There was no issue too small, there was no such thing as a stupid question, our discussions were safe spaces to discuss and grow together. In *The Diary of a CEO: The 33 Laws of Business and Life* by Steven Bartlett^[4] he talks about how every conflict – and every solution – is a direct result of communication. I wanted to ensure my team felt they had a place where they could talk and be heard.

“The art of becoming a great communicator, conversationalist or partner is first listening so that the other person feels ‘heard’, and then making sure you reply in a way that makes them feel ‘understood’.

Steven Bartlett

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The Turning Point

Although I was enjoying my role, a by-chance opportunity was presented to me. Another CRO was looking for a Head of Programming, and I was asked if the role was of any interest. Again, I was overwhelmed with the thought of ‘Impostor Syndrome’, and asked myself ‘Can I do this? Am I capable?’ Did I want to adjust to a new environment, a new team, and new responsibilities, the uncertainty of the unknown was daunting. But there is only one way you will ever truly know.

I have been in my role as Head of Programming for over 6 months, and it is challenging, and my learning curve is exponential, but I endeavour to lead a new team of extraordinary individuals. I relish the chance to grow the business opportunities of Biometrics, and I look forward to developing a career that aligns with my values and aspirations.

LESSONS LEARNED

This journey taught me several valuable lessons:

1. **Self-Worth:** Recognise your worth and do not settle for less than you deserve. I knew I was capable of more; I knew I wanted more; you don’t have to accept another’s estimation of yourself.
2. **Courage:** It takes courage to step out of your comfort zone and pursue new opportunities. Be bold, you will never know what goals you can achieve once you take that leap. “Strength is not final; failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts” – Winston Churchill.
3. **Fulfilment:** True fulfilment comes from doing work that aligns with your values and passions. Feeling fulfilled isn’t about what you get, it’s about what you give to others. “The only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven’t found it yet, keep looking. Don’t settle. As with all matters of the heart, you’ll know when you find it”^[5].
4. **Resilience:** Embrace the challenges and uncertainties that come with change; they are part of the growth process. Resilience isn’t a single skill, but a variety of skills and coping mechanism. We will always be knocked down, it’s the getting back up that counts.
5. **Clear Communication and Conflict Resolution:** Ensure there are multiple channels for communication and encourage team members to listen actively and respect each other’s viewpoints. Tackle conflicts as soon as they arise to prevent them from escalating.
6. **Encouragement and Leadership:** Create an environment where everyone feels comfortable sharing their ideas and opinions, and acknowledge and celebrate contributions from all team members. Offer strong leadership to guide the team and provide direction and have the team feel empowered. Mistakes will happen, but find the balance between drill sergeant, and empathy. There is nothing you can say that

won't be worse than what they are saying in their own head, so approach with understanding. Mistakes are the biggest tool for learning.

"Compare yourself to who you were yesterday, not to who someone else is today"
Jordan Peterson.

CONCLUSION

While the promotion I longed for never came, the decision to seek a more fulfilling career was the best choice I ever made. It reminded me that sometimes, the path to true fulfilment requires us to let go of what we know and embrace the unknown.

Joining an innovative development team was a transformative experience. It provided me with the opportunity to work at the cutting edge of clinical development, collaborate with talented professionals, and gain a courage and confidence to drive my passion and career. If you find yourself in a similar situation, remember that your career is a journey, and it's never too late to change direction and pursue what truly (and perhaps surprisingly) makes you happy. The challenges are significant, but the rewards are unparalleled.

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RECOMMENDED READING

[1] "Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't", Simon Sinek, Penguin, 2014.

[2] "Why Late Adopters are Killing Your Technology Innovation", Christopher Laine. 02 August 2019.

[3] "Atomic Habits", James Clear, Penguin, 2018.

[4] "The Diary of a CEO: The 33 Laws of Business and Life", Steven Bartlett, Penguin, 2018.

[5] "Unlimited Power", Tony Robbins, Fawcett Columbine, 1989.

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