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# How to Build a Successful Career in High Tech

Use the advice of industry insiders to craft a road map that will take you to the top.

By Catalyst



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The high-tech industry is an exciting, evolving, and still relatively new field—one that has changed the way we look at work and careers, and indeed, our lives. In 2001, Catalyst set out to learn about advancement in this industry from high-tech employees working in ten leading companies in Silicon Valley. The resulting study, *Leadership Careers in High Tech: Wired for Success*, highlights their insight and experience, providing those interested in pursuing a career in this industry with an easy-to-use road map to success. Follow their advice, outlined below, to build your successful career in high tech.

**1. Identify an area of focus, and build your expertise.** You can choose early on to develop your success based on being a functional expert (in marketing, engineering, law, or finance). Or establish your strength as a generic manager—one able to lead a varied set of groups. According to a director of marketing for an Internet company, finding an area of business that interested her propelled her career forward:

*"I chose a career early on, not a job. Essentially, I decided to focus on building community products (message boards, chat rooms, home pages, community centers). ... This enabled me to build an expertise."*

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**2. Gain a broad base of professional experience.** Remember that lateral moves are also important. In addition to building expertise, seek profit-and-loss positions to get hands-on experience running the business. Also, look for strategic staff assignments that relate to a broad corporate objective. One woman respondent shared her story:

*"I left finance, feeling that it was not a decision-making area. ... The move to marketing in time enabled me to gain an operations job with P&L responsibility. ... Later on, I had a lot of experience troubleshooting still larger organizational problems and also worked with a number of start-ups. Together, these experiences were crucial to my being successful and to my attaining my current job as a vice president and general manager."*

**3. Develop a track record, and establish credibility.** Performance and results are paramount. Several study participants shared this approach to achieving success:

*"It's pretty simple. What worked for me was to commit and deliver. Whether it is in sales, manufacturing, or R&D."*

*"It took a long, steady, and varied set of increasingly complex achievements to get here. There's no elevator to the top; you have to take the stairs."*

**4. Find a mentor.** Catalyst knows that mentoring is critical to success, especially for women and people of color. Seek out mentors early in your career—when you are learning the technical and political ropes. One respondent explained how her mentor influenced her career:

*"Although I've never been part of a formal mentoring program, mentors have always been vital to every success I've experienced. I typically look around me for people whose behavior or expertise impresses me, then approach them and say, 'I'd really like to learn from you.' Most people actually enjoy sharing their knowledge. Technical mentors have been very important to me, but interpersonal/business mentors are also key to understanding how an organization works and how to succeed there."*

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kind of money you could make, and the kind of place you could be working.  
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**5. Participate in social and professional networking.** Building bridges both to key individuals and to the knowledge base of those working in other functional areas will enable you to identify useful lateral moves, target key strategic assignments, and find new areas of career interest. One respondent explained:

*"Half my day is spent networking with people in the company or people I worked with before. ... Touching base with people about what they are doing is important. I do a lot of one-on-one meetings with peers and upper management to find out what is going on in the company and how it might influence what we are working on."*

**6. Take risks and learn how to bounce back from failure.**

Demonstrate your willingness to take on new, different, and difficult assignments that will allow you to show off your talents and prove your potential. A group manager of a complex networking product reported:

*"When we created a new layer-3 switch, I knew people would have problems. I set out to learn everything, to prepare myself to be the SWAT person. Most people shy away from that. ... This approach has*

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*made me a critical team player. ... You have to find the fires to fight and learn how to save the day."*

kind of money you could make, and the kind of place you could be working.

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**7. Get a strong technical start (if you're technically trained).** Those respondents with an engineering background specifically emphasized the importance of taking the time early in your career to show off your engineering skills. Instead of rushing too quickly into management or away from the work of day-by-day engineering, they recommend a three- to five-year engineering apprenticeship.

*"At first, I did very low-level software engineering. I was the only woman in the whole lab, but software was the important area to be in. I proved myself as a committed and competent engineer. ... Later on, I made another critical step by moving out of 'real engineering' into interfacing and communicating and gaining visibility. My next big step was to take on an international assignment in Japan. This gave me a good view of what needs to be done from the ground up to build software that can be used globally."*

**8. Create your own business or product line.** Setting up your own company or creating a new product line within a larger company can serve as an extremely important learning experience. The vice president of a critical business for one company explained:

*"Starting the storage business was my most important step forward. I learned how to run a business and how to ask for what I wanted. I had to explain to the CEO why the market was valuing storage, and I had to get him to invest in the business. Having to convince the CEO and the COO to take money away from others and invest in storage—that was a big experience."*

To order your copy of *Leadership Careers in High Tech: Wired for Success*, go to [www.catalystwomen.org](http://www.catalystwomen.org).

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