



Five Strategies for Accelerating Your High Tech Career By Octave V. Baker, Ph.D.

Typical Early Career Trajectory

At the start of their careers in America, most foreign-born high tech professionals adjust quickly to important elements of the American workplace.

They learn to interact with their American bosses more casually than what is expected in their native countries. They become acclimated to the fast pace and tight schedules typical of the high tech workplace. And, over time, they get used to the direct, sometimes blunt, style of communication used by their American-born co-workers.

However, this phase of rapid surface adjustment usually lasts for a relatively short period of time.

Obstacles to Mature Career Path

As their careers mature and they want to move into the management or executive ranks, foreign-born professionals often encounter new obstacles they can't easily overcome.



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2

These obstacles include three key perceptions often held by their superiors and others. One, foreign-born professionals are purely technical individuals who lack the interpersonal and communications skills essential to positions of authority. Two, they are not proactive, because they seem to prefer close supervision. Three, they are not assertive because they do not speak up enough in meetings nor try to sell their ideas to others.

To complicate matters, foreign-born professionals may, in fact, not be comfortable with being more visible. They may feel reluctant promoting themselves. They may be embarrassed by appearing to boast about competencies and accomplishments to their bosses and co-workers. They may not know how to engage in the small talk necessary to develop casual relationships with their co-workers.

One significant consequence of not being able to chitchat informally is that foreign-born professionals are often left out of informal groupings. However, these informal groupings are a key opportunity to gather information about the corporate culture, its norms, values, and subtle ways of getting things done.

When their careers stall and they observe their American-born co-workers getting choice assignments and promotions, foreign-born professionals may frequently experience frustration, confusion, and alienation.



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3

Taking Action

Fortunately, proven strategies are available to foreign-born professionals that they can use to accelerate their careers in high tech companies and propel them to management and executive positions.

But foreign-born professionals must thoroughly understand these strategies and systematically implement them to move past the obstacles in their career path.

It can be challenging to change normal behavior, especially when the new behavior goes against traditional beliefs and values. That's why we at Moving Up in America advise foreign-born professionals to make small, incremental changes in their behavior that they are comfortable with.

Equally important, we teach ways to analyze particular situations at work to discover the unwritten rules that govern expected behavior in those situations. Once these rules are understood, it's easier to determine the small, incremental changes in behavior that fall within the realm of acceptable action in the American workplace. We at Moving Up in America strongly believe that foreign-born professionals can succeed in their careers while remaining in harmony with deeply held values and beliefs.



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4

In the discussion below of five key strategies for accelerating a high tech career, we offer “**Quick Tips**” to help you rehearse new behaviors. These rehearsals enable you to confidently *and* comfortably expand your repertoire of acceptable actions in a variety of business situations.

Five Strategies for Accelerating a High Tech Career

The top five strategies for accelerating a high tech career include the following:

- 1. Develop a Career Plan**
- 2. Become Proactive**
- 3. Use Assertive Skills**
- 4. Promote Oneself**
- 5. Engage in Small Talk**

1. Develop a Career Plan

Foreign-born high tech professionals must create a career plan that corresponds to the realities of career advancement in America.

For example, being technically expert is not enough to win promotions. Loyalty to the company with the manager bearing responsibility for their direct reports’ career advancement is an



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5

obsolete notion. Relying on employer-sponsored training is inadequate to obtain essential skills and knowledge for career growth.

These assumptions and others about career paths have been shattered during the last several decades, especially for high tech professionals. In today's globalized world, high tech professionals will have many different jobs in their lifetimes. To be competitive in the face of continual changes in technology, they must constantly improve and expand their skill set. They cannot depend on employers to enhance their "people skills" or even technical skills because their relationship is likely to be short term.

It is now the employees' job to train and invest in themselves.

To help professionals succeed in this new environment, Reid Hoffman provides a blueprint for accelerating careers based on lessons learned by Silicon Valley entrepreneurs. Founder of LinkedIn and one of the premier entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley, Hoffman describes this blueprint in his new book, *The Start-up of You*.

His premise is that to be competitive in this new environment, everyone must become entrepreneurs of their own lives and act as CEOs of their own careers.

Hoffman suggests that professionals manage their careers using the same skills used by entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley to start and



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6

grow companies. Entrepreneurs develop a plan and persist in implementing the plan as they confront challenges. They act flexibly when conditions change. They take calculated risks. They build deep networks of allies and tap these networks for information about world trends that can affect them.

His book is an excellent guide for helping foreign-born professionals to develop a comprehensive plan to ensure their career success. The book is full of insights, strategies, activities, and worksheets that can be used to map out a path to the desired career.

Quick Tips

- Identify your special gifts and talents. These are your competitive advantages that can win special assignments and promotions. Use them to differentiate yourself from your co-workers.

You can casually refer to a particular gift or talent as the reason you prefer particular responsibilities. Or you can highlight your talents formally when you request an assignment.

- Make it a priority to build a strong professional network, so others are aware of your special skills and will let you know of opportunities as they arise.



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7

- Take intelligent risks in your career moves. Don't always take the safe route to a top assignment.

2. Become Proactive

Proactive people actively manage their careers, master the politics of the workplace, and take action to influence what happens around them. **Studies show that proactive people have more professional success than others in areas such as salary, promotions, job performance, and career satisfaction.**

People who are less proactive tend to be reactive and passive. They adapt to their environment rather than choosing to actively anticipate situations and influence their outcomes.

Signs that You Lack Proactivity

Unfortunately, because of cultural differences, many foreign-born professionals may be seen by their managers as lacking in proactivity. From the manager's perspective, this lack is manifested when employees:

- Rarely put their own ideas forward
- Do not volunteer to take on parts of a project where they clearly have the most expertise compared to others in the team



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8

- Do not express their concerns
- Tend to ask their manager for permission, advice, or guidance, even for trivial issues.

As a result of these behaviors, careers suffer because these employees are not seen as being able to think for themselves and to make decisions on their own. In short, they are not viewed as management material.

Relative to other cultures, American managers, especially in the high tech workplace, give their subordinates wide latitude and independence. Managers prefer to tell their employees what to do, but not *how* to do it. Their idea is to empower their employees and encourage them to take initiative in performing their job. Employees who are given the responsibility for a task are expected to fully exercise it.

Proactive professionals manage themselves and take the initiative to develop the characteristics that make success possible.

These characteristics include actively sharing both ideas and concerns, taking on extra responsibilities, and creatively trying to solve problems independent of their manager.



Additionally, proactive professionals take risks and are not afraid to make mistakes or admit mistakes. These traits are valued and rewarded in the American high tech workplace.

Quick Tips:

- Expect your manager to give only general guidance. Be prepared to do the rest.
- Keep your manager informed of the big picture, but not the details of what you do.
- Do question or disagree with your manager, one-on-one.
- Give honest feedback, so your manager knows your concerns.
- Don't be overly concerned about making mistakes. Your successes will compensate for them.

3. Develop Assertive Skills

Assertive skills are key to being effective in the American workplace and to advancing a career in high tech.

Developing these skills is perhaps one of the most difficult challenges for foreign-born professionals. The challenge stems from basic differences between their cultural background and the communication style preferred in the high tech workplace. These



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10

differences revolve around how strongly and quickly people are expected to express themselves during interactions, especially when making decisions.

The typical high tech workplace values direct, open, and even challenging communications as a way of improving the decision-making process. It also values risk-taking, such as volunteering for tough jobs, not being afraid of failure, and willingness to present unpopular views. In this environment, professionals present and sell their ideas freely and forcefully.

Assertive skills also involve the ability to disagree with and challenge one's peers and superiors, ask critical questions, manage criticism and challenges of one's ideas in public, and give and receive frank negative feedback and criticism.

It is essential to be a “quick healer,” that is, not to take criticism “personally” and to remain open to collaborating with everyone, even those one strongly disagrees with.

Many foreign-born professionals adjust to and even become skilled at candid, forceful communication. However, many others find the adjustment process exceedingly difficult and stressful because the values of the American culture contradict many of their own cultural values.



For example, in many Asian cultures, asking questions of someone in authority is considered presumptuous and disrespectful. Thus, many Asians may avoid asking questions of their managers. Further, Asians are often unwilling to provoke open disagreement by expressing contrary opinions. They prefer to express criticism and negative feedback in an indirect, non-threatening, and private manner in order to save the face or honor of the other, especially if he or she is in a position of authority. Additionally, many Asian cultures stress humility and discourage boastfulness.

As a result, selling one's ideas may be difficult to do for some Asians. Thus, they may refrain from speaking up for their ideas when these ideas are in direct competition with those of others.

Although it may be difficult to change ingrained patterns of behavior such as one's level of assertiveness, it is possible to make small, but meaningful, changes that make a difference in the workplace.

Foreign-born professionals can appear more assertive by (1) sharing more information about their concerns and perspectives, (2) expressing clearly what they want or need, (3) asking more questions to understand how to influence others, and (4) , if necessary, pointing out negative consequences as a form of persuasive argument.



Quick tips:

- Practice ways to defend your ideas and anticipate questions you might be asked before you go into a meeting.
- Try speaking a few levels louder than you normally do in situations where you want to be heard.
- Identify opportunities away from the workplace to practice speaking up and asking for what you want. For example, in a restaurant or coffee shop, ask for something different from how an item is described on the menu.

4. Learn to Promote Yourself

In the high tech American workplace, it is the high achievers who advance. But what counts is not just getting results but also communicating those results to others.

To get choice assignments and promotions, high tech professionals must engage in self-promotion by drawing attention to their accomplishments.

Calling attention to oneself can be a major challenge for foreign-born professionals, who are likely to come from cultures where modesty is valued. In these cultures, individuals are expected to minimize their successes.



However, in the high tech sector, exceeding targets *and* making sure everyone knows are part of the road to success.

While results aren't the only measure of an employee's worth in the American workplace, they are the single most important measure of an employee's value to the organization. Results carry even more weight when the employee can link them to the criteria that the company uses for promotion.

Foreign-born professionals may assume, erroneously, that their superiors will naturally recognize their achievements as is the custom in many Asian countries.

However, self-promotion or making sure others know what one has accomplished is critical in the American workplace.

To be considered for a choice assignment or for a special career development opportunity, employees are expected to be direct in expressing interest and giving reasons why they should be selected.

Foreign-born professionals lose out on these opportunities when they hold back.

Quick Tips

- Keep detailed records of your own accomplishments.
- Quantify your successes by translating them into objective metrics and cite them in progress reports and meetings.



- Mention achievements casually when relevant in conversations with your manager and co-workers.
- Develop a short personal marketing statement that highlights your competencies and accomplishments. This will help you more easily call attention to what you can offer when you want a special project or assignment.

5. Engage in Small Talk and Participate in Informal Conversations

Many foreign-born professionals often find it difficult to engage in the give-and-take of informal conversation with co-workers. They may be silent, instead of making an effort to keep the conversation going.

Consequently, others may feel uncomfortable in taking responsibility for most of the conversation and may not seek them out for informal chatter. This often means that foreign-born professionals mingle mostly with those of their own culture and have minimal contact with others during coffee breaks, lunch, and company sponsored activities.

However, it is in these informal gatherings and relationships where valuable information can be gleaned about the company, the culture, and the way things work informally.



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15

In view of this, it is important for foreign-born professionals to improve their ability to join informal groups at their workplace. They must recognize the value of informal relationships as part of performing their jobs effectively and getting ahead in their careers.

Mastering small talk is key to career success.

Quick Tips

- Join your co-workers for informal social occasions, including coffee breaks, lunch, and a happy hour at a restaurant. Notice what topics they discuss and what they say to keep the conversation going.
- Follow the news and learn more about current events, particularly sports, to be able to participate in small talk.
- Practice sharing information about your activities outside of work and about your family.
- Offer information about your cultural heritage so your co-workers get to know you better.
- Identify and use typical conversational openers, such as “How was your weekend?” or “What did you think of the game?”



Adjust Your Behavior with Confidence *and* Comfort

By now, you can see the value of these Five Strategies for Accelerating a High Tech Career. At the same time, you may feel discouraged about the effort needed to implement them.

Rest assured that the path to the career you desire is attainable by blending small changes into your behavior.

We at Moving Up in America advise foreign-born professionals to practice taking small, incremental steps that they are comfortable with.

With our training programs, you learn how to analyze puzzling work situations to discover the unwritten rules that govern expected behavior. Then we help you determine and take the small, incremental changes in behavior that fall within the realm of acceptable action in the American workplace. By getting feedback and continually re-assessing and adjusting your behavior, you will experience confidence and comfort as you navigate a variety of work situations.

We at Moving Up in America strongly believe that foreign-born professionals can succeed in their high tech careers without losing themselves in the process.