

Big firm or small, what's the best fit for your career?

By **Kate M. Jackson, Globe Correspondent** | October 14, 2007

Whether just starting a career or having reached a crossroads within it, job seekers will often contemplate the age-old question: Is it better to be a big fish in a small pond or a small fish in a big pond?

While anyone with initiative and ability could thrive in either environment, the answer to the question often has little to do with the pond and everything to do with the fish, according to Dennis Hanno, dean of the undergraduate school at Babson College.

"There is certainly not a one-size-fits-all answer. It really depends upon someone's individual personality and goals," he said. "Some students may be more entrepreneurial and adventurous and thrive on the responsibility and visibility they'd have at a small company. Others prefer the security, training, and organization a large company can offer."

When Jennifer Kushell graduated from Boston University, she knew her free-thinking spirit wouldn't fly in a large company. Instead, she decided to start up her own business to help other people like her establish their ideal career paths. She founded YSN.com (your success network), an online professional network geared toward 18- to 34-year-olds and travels the country speaking to students and business owners about becoming an entrepreneur.


"Many young people out of top schools, in Boston particularly, feel a lot of pressure to start their careers with big name companies for the prestige, security, and perks," she said. "Parents, peers, and campus career centers really encourage this 'go get experience at a big firm, then do something more independent, or strike out on your own once you've gotten some experience.'"

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Job seekers who crave structure, a clear career path, and mentoring are hard-wired for big companies. On the other hand, small companies are often the better choice for people who are looking for a real baptism by fire, Kushell said.

"At small companies, there are more opportunities to gain a bunch of experience right away. There isn't much structure, there's more engagement with senior management, and a more flexible and casual environment. The smaller company is a place where they can make a real difference from day one," she said.

But making a difference on the road less traveled can often be a dissimilar experience for women than it is for men, according to Vicki Donlan of Hingham, author of the new book "Her Turn: Why It's Time for Women to Lead America."

"The line goes that as women become more productive, they also become more reproductive," she said. "Therefore, larger companies may be a better choice for women who have or are planning on having a family one day for several reasons."

For instance, once you've proven that you're a valuable worker, larger companies are more likely to offer you resources and incentives for staying with the company, she said.

"The larger company can offer flex time, telecommuting, job sharing, and other programs that are supportive of one's career path and life outside the office whereas smaller companies could never pull it off," she said.

As a small business owner and a recruiter for construction companies, Colm Allen sees the large company vs. small company issue from both sides.

"As recruiters, we tend to get wind of what's happening in the job market before it is actually proven or played out," he said. "So a lot of people often ask us the question, 'Is it better to work at a large or small company right now?' And we always tell them it's really about working some place where you fit in."

At a large company, for instance, you can gain insight into a variety of management styles. At a small company, you can gain more hands-on experience, he said.

"All of my employees, because we are so small, have a say in how the company is run because they have access to me all the time. At larger companies, you can hide. I have nowhere to hide. But that's what makes it work and the reason for our high retention rate. Everyone fits in."

Rick St. Jean said he's found the best of both worlds in his role as a general agent at the Commonwealth Financial Group, a franchise of Mass Mutual.

"I'm essentially running my own small business but I enjoy the resources and benefits of a Fortune 50 company," he said. "I liken it to people who own Dunkin' Donuts franchises. They're small business owners but are able to plug in the systems, operations, and procedures of the larger company. You're independent yet you enjoy the structure without the bureaucracy."

And enjoyment is the most important thing, said Dora Vell, founder of the Waltham headhunting firm Vell & Associates. "At the end of the day you need to be passionate about what you do regardless of the size of the organization or what anyone else says. You have to trust your own gut feeling." ■