

Hiring a Former Colleague: Nepotism or Best Practice?

By Antoine Tirard and Claire Harbour

According to a LinkedIn study, around 60% of vacant executive roles are filled by connections made outside the traditional method of placing and responding to ads. In view of the increasing role played by connections and networks in how professionals find new opportunities, we wanted to explore one particular dimension of this phenomenon. Throughout our 30-year long careers, both of us have been fascinated by how some leaders follow one another from one company to another, sometimes synchronously, sometimes in a more staggered timing. As we started digging deeper into the subject, we discovered this to be a common, though not-much-discussed phenomenon and we felt there was much to learn about it. Here we recount three stories, told from six points of view – each side of the mirror – of leaders and followers who moved around in tandem across the globe. These stories reveal the

importance of trust, collaboration, reputation and long-term value and bring out unexpected lessons in terms of talent and career management.

David

After 14 years in logistics and supply chain in France, Latin America and the US, David was moved to France with Ferrero. The position was supposed to develop him within a larger platform, in preparation for even greater things. In reality, it was perhaps slightly more of a convenient move for the company as they wanted and needed him on his home territory of France.

Before David had joined the French team, a young man named Maël had gained first work experience in the company as part of his business school program, including assisting a member of David's team by tackling a series of supply-chain-specific projects. Maël possessed specialized knowledge from his studies as well as the wisdom

he had been building at Ferrero. So when he was offered a long-term position, David was delighted to welcome him into the team.

The trust the pair of them built over the next few months and years was unusual, and based on several aspects. These included an admiration for Maël's intelligence, both intellectual and emotional, which led to his collaborative and inspirational approach. What's more he was particularly open to and fond of obtaining feedback and advice. Maël was inclusive with David and his own peers, creating goodwill wherever he went. The two of them confided on a personal basis as they built up trust, and shared advice, information and consolation around various more personal issues where one had experience that was useful to the other.

David was still happy at Ferrero, despite its organizational imperfections. But when a former colleague from his expatriate time in Brazil gave him a call and asked if he would like to join the company where he was now working, David was tempted. He was attracted by the level of the position offered – Supply Chain Director –, the Paris location, and the opportunity to go back to the dermocosmetic industry where he had started his career.

On David's departure, Maël had been left adrift but the two of them kept in touch. Maël was instrumental in keeping up that momentum. Gently and discreetly, David realized that Maël was seeking a move towards Paris, so he told him that if something came up he would offer him the position.

Sure enough a few months later this happened and the two colleagues were once again working in the same company. However the relationship was complicated in that there was a manager between the two of them. She felt on the one hand imposed upon, and on the other a need to be extra careful with her relationship with "David's guy". She even openly expressed her concern that Maël might have been sent with a plan to replace her, whereas this was far from the case. As a result, David felt obliged to put some distance between himself and them, and this left Maël feeling abandoned, and missing their previous complicity.

Some while later, the manager between them

DAVID

MAËL



left of her own accord, which left the two back in a simpler hierarchical relationship. They were able to slip easily back into their old trusting and open ways, though David felt a tinge of regret at having not made it work better sooner. However he then added insult to injury by deciding to leave what was an increasingly challenging organization, once again leaving Maël behind. Indeed a few months further on neither of them is working in that company but their paths have diverged.

Would David seek to work with Maël again? "Absolutely if it brought value to both him and the organization, but not at all because I like having 'my man'". It is not about power but utility and value. In the current situation Maël is happily working in a company where he met his fiancé and they've just had a baby, and the two continue their close personal relationship outside the boundaries of the office.

Given a second chance then David would make sure to set up the relationship differently, only bringing in a direct report, with nobody else involved and thus less confusion. He also states that he is more comfortable not mixing too much the personal with the professional. David confesses that a postmortem has never been done on the relationship so far in all its vicissitudes. He believes that this article can serve as the catalyst for such a conversation to happen. Let's see what Maël has to say.

Maël

A self-described 'Ferrero baby', Maël was already working at the company's Normandy operations

as a student, through an apprenticeship program. He was attracted towards supply chain because of its range and human aspect and also because it was “like a giant game of Lego!” When the company invited him to join full-time, his first role was as a junior project manager, and this began while David was still working for the company in the US.

However soon David returned and was assigned to office space that was shared with Maël. Thus they created their first connection. Maël describes David as easy to get to know, mentioning his smile, his friendliness and his strong ability to share fascinating stories. He had a different view of the company, having seen a faraway subsidiary, and their peer to peer exchange was very rich.

Two years later, at the age of 25, Maël was promoted and put in charge of three warehouses. This was a huge jump, but with some training and some coaching, he was able to tackle it, albeit slightly nervously. This was the period in which David became his boss. The pair built on their existing relationship, sharing both professional and personal ideas, stories and wisdom.

When David left Ferrero just under a year later, Maël was definitely disappointed and sad. But as someone who doesn't dwell on negatives, he quickly shifted to a focus on getting on with his job, in the knowledge that he would stay in touch with David anyway. This did indeed happen and whenever there were challenges with people or situations, the two would meet and Maël would leave these encounters with a refreshingly new perspective on things.

Meanwhile the situation at Ferrero deteriorated somewhat and Maël started to think about leaving. When he mentioned this to David, soon enough, the opportunity arose for a move to David's new company. As previously related, the relationship with Maël's new boss was not easy. This prompted a recognition that not only was the context difficult but also that he himself may not be that easy to manage, as he is fast and challenging and asks numerous questions. This was exacerbated by the fact that Maël built trust with the commercial side of the business, which she had never managed and found

extremely difficult to accept.

When David took over as Maël's direct manager, it was clear that they had grown apart during the time they'd been together in the company. This was because firstly Maël respected his previous boss and their own hierarchy, and secondly because they each had their own separate challenges to tackle. Maël explains that this distance was a conscious move on his part, which was “logical, if sad”.

The relationship never became quite as close again though it may still have been too close for the comfort for others in the company, and he worked hard on being diplomatic. Not only was he close to David, but also to the general manager of the company, whom he had also known for some time. This did not exactly make his social life in the company a walk in the park!

After three years of good learning, Maël left mainly because his drive did not fit the organizational culture, and was offered a very attractive position at PepsiCo. Of course during that transition he sought David's advice, and reveals relief that now David, himself and the general manager are all out of the same company, things have become much more relaxed.

Maël explains that David has consistently been very encouraging and describes him as his second most important advisor after his wife. “He's my little calm voice, the devil's advocate.” Their relationship is one Maël is sure will last for life, observing that it has already been ten years, and how lucky he is. He also is clearly a fan of the “follow-the-leader” approach, and is just about to bring a former colleague into his team, this time as the leader.

George

George, the son of a shepherd, grew up in the remote islands of Scotland, and studied veterinary sciences. While in his early years of farm practice, he got infected and developed Brucellosis. He opted to join government service to rest and recover away from field practice. Once his several years of recovery were over, he chose to take an attractive offer to join Wellcome in a technical service, and later the Animal Health division of Johnson and Johnson.

However the job at J&J initially brought him into commercial work rather than technical, and this was his first big stretch. During those years, he was fortunate that a senior HR person noticed his potential, and pushed him through 11 different jobs in 15 years, including managing businesses in the UK, Ireland, Belgium and ultimately across Europe. George understood that he would be rescued if he failed, and he trusted his guardian angel, developing fast into senior roles.

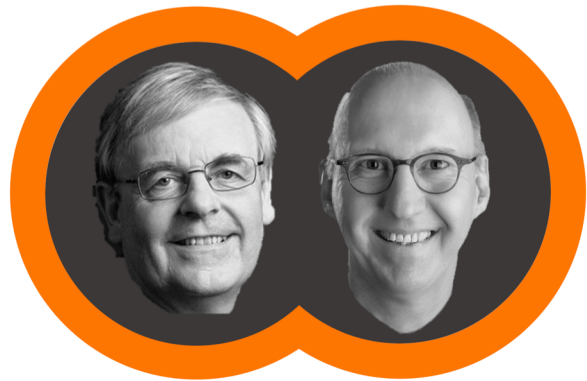
Inspired by this model, George himself started to spot talent, moving people in his own teams around, taking them out of their old roles, creating new ones, more suited to each one's talents and potential. Having left J&J to become President of Pharmacia Animal Health, George kept using his talent spotting strategy and met Fabian whom he identified as one of the young future stars of the company. George observed that Fabian's boss was too protective, and felt that the young man had a presence and a capability for common sense, and so liberated him by dropping him into various project groups and stretch roles.

By the time the merger with Pfizer came up, Fabian had developed a strong reputation and George continued to nurture their relationship, in respectful collaboration. They would drop in and chat with each other, spontaneously sharing knowledge and ideas. The trust between the pair built over time, George confidently giving a task, and counting on Fabian to deliver. He encouraged Fabian to take on roles beyond the Midwestern headquarters of the company, sending him outside his comfort zone and into accelerated development.

After the merger with Pfizer George decided he did not want to be in either the new organization or New York, so he chose to move to Novartis where he could get back to the basics of rebuilding a struggling business in North America. Despite George's departure, the pair continued to converse every couple of weeks. As George learnt that Fabian was increasingly unhappy at Pfizer, he created a vacancy that suited Fabian. He came, but by that time, George had been promoted to global

GEORGE

FABIAN



CEO of the animal health business in Basel, Switzerland.

Fabian excelled in a series of leadership roles, including more risky ones in commercial areas where he had no previous experience, but where he could leverage his leadership abilities. As Fabian grew, George felt that he was no longer really mentoring the younger man, but simply counting on him to deliver as a key player wherever he put him. He realized he had “unleashed the beast within” and could see that his protégé was becoming more confident and even tougher than he had ever himself been.

When Fabian left to join Merial as Global Head of R&D, he set his own course. George always made it clear to him that, when the time came, there would be a place for him at his side. In the meantime, Fabian continued to progress in his career and attained levels of influence and impact that match George's. Following divergent paths during the ensuing ten years, the two now partner in a consulting company that George created, after his retirement from Novartis.

George muses that it's “the people stuff” he is most proud of. Upon his retirement, one of his tribe gave him an album full of photographs of doors, explaining, simply: “Opening doors, that's what you do!”. George built a unique ability to spot and accelerate the development of talent, always making a point of “going beyond formal talent assessments, looking for the people that are most talked about!”. He knows this changed peoples' lives even though it was sometimes painful and he takes pride in having created a large group of leaders across the world. Many

from this group of people are known as FROGs, or “Friends of George”. We understand there are also FOFs, or “Friends of Fabian”.

Fabian

Born in Germany, Fabian was a junior of George’s and also a vet by background. They first bumped into each other while at Pharmacia when they were both lost in a massive open-space office. Then ensued a number of conversations and eventually a dinner which Fabian remembers “lasting for hours”, as the two of them “got down into deep subjects and exchange of ideas”.

Fabian was subsequently invited by George to get involved in projects, which took him out of his everyday comfort zone, and he enjoyed the stimulation. He was more than grateful for the attention and the learning, and forged a rapid ascent in the organization thanks to his stretched and reinforced talents and flexibility. He was struck by George’s “unique ability to detect and drive talent moves far beyond what most would consider ‘reasonable’”. He could see the benefits in terms of not only personal growth for him and the others chosen, but also organizational growth and value. So Fabian swore he would try to use the same approach with his own teams in the future.

While George was never directly responsible for Fabian, he did ensure that his protégé was challenged at all times, and watched over him, giving the younger man the sense that George “had his back”. Indeed, when it came to the moment of the reorganization of the company, during the merger with Pfizer, Fabian was relieved and admiring of the fact that George stuck his neck out further than many, to ensure the future of his tribe, especially so since George himself was not aiming to stay.

Fabian developed in the new structure created by Pfizer and his skills served him well, even without the network and protection previously afforded by George. However, after some time, he became less enamored of the new culture, and was vocal about this with George, during their regular conversations and meetups. George promised him that he would find a legitimate way to identify or create an opportu-

Benefits and Drawbacks of Following Your Boss to a New Company

Benefits

1. Eliminating the need to prove yourself from the bottom of the pile to a new boss
2. Possibly enhancing other aspects of your hiring, including negotiating a better pay package and having access to resources that affect your productivity
3. Entering the role feeling secure – perhaps indispensable
4. Increasing your chances of success knowing your boss’s expectations and his or her mode of functioning
5. Having a built-in advocate in the new organization to overcome day-to-day challenges and politics
6. Getting support for your development and career progression

Drawbacks

1. Foregoing a good job and other relationships that you have developed in your present role
2. Exposing yourself to changes – a different company culture or other aspects of the job may not end up sitting well with you
3. Being perceived as the boss’s “lap dog” or “favorite”, risking being rejected by other colleagues
4. Deteriorating relationships – your boss’s attitude, management style or outlook might change once he or she is in a new environment
5. If a former boss – your only sponsor in a new company – leaves shortly after you arrive, your career is placed in jeopardy
6. Hiring executives may perceive your passive job changes as a lack of self-confidence, indicating poor career planning

nity for him at his new organization. True to his word, this was done soon after.

When Fabian’s time came, he did indeed follow George into Novartis, but by that time, George was promoted to CEO of the global animal health business and moved to the other side of the ocean. From there, Fabian continued to expand his career, taking on roles of increasing responsibilities, fully sponsored and sanctioned by George, initially as co-head of global R&D, then moving on to a regional sales

role and later back to the full leadership of the R&D function. This was where Fabian began to fly with his own wings, though his collaboration and symbiosis with George continued under his direct leadership.

Recognized for his strategic capabilities and excellent people development skills, Fabian then got promoted to Global Head of R&D of the larger Over-The-Counter division, a role where he demonstrated his ability to quickly lead a transformation and increase the value of the R&D pipeline. While he enjoyed the ongoing collaboration and complicity with George, Fabian also discovered that it might be time to disentangle himself from the clan of FROG's and FOF's.

When Fabian decided to leave Novartis, he was less excited by the direction of the company and wanted to prove that he could create his own path and successes. Moving to industry leader Merial to lead their global R&D organization, Fabian once again drove change and results – this time in a self-reliant way – while honing his skills as talent champion, notably by mentoring and sponsoring several female and minority candidates.

His move to Merial was a step up, and was then further reinforced by the merger of Merial and Boehringer Ingelheim, as Fabian was selected to integrate and manage the combined R&D organizations of the two legacy companies. Fabian experienced a deep shift in his professional identity on leaving George's eco-system behind, realizing that he no longer needed a sponsor, and could now rely on his own experience and leadership capabilities to succeed in a new environment; he also noted that all his previous experience and learning under George's leadership came into fruition.

The relationship between the two changed after Fabian's departure to Merial: they shifted from reporting to friendship. For a while they did not meet face to face, due to busy calendars, but they mailed and called occasionally, and when they did meet up again, it felt like picking up where they left off, except the roles had evolved: they were now "two industry veterans, comparing notes and experiences".

At this point in his career, Fabian had created

his own leadership brand, recognized as a highly experienced healthcare executive. He transitioned into an advisory role and joined the UK-based animal health startup PetMedix as non-executive Chairman of the Board. And indeed, only a few weeks after he left BI, George called him "to ensure he got to me before anybody else" and invited him to join his consulting company as an advisor and an associated incubator as Chairman. It is in these roles that the two have reached true parity, with George reaching out for Fabian's expertise as much as vice versa. The symbiosis is now perfect!

Julian

Julian, a British executive who has a long and impressive career in high-level global sales in the online learning sector, first met Paula, an American colleague, in the late 90's, when they were both working at CBT Systems, a company which later became known as Smartforce and then Skillsoft. First impressions were not favorable. Julian has strong memories of finding her too bouncy and energetic, but recognizes that some of his best friends are those that he didn't first take a liking to. Over the ensuing period the two worked collaboratively on global accounts across the Atlantic. They met at company functions, however the friendship really blossomed during the time when Paula's husband was suffering from cancer and subsequently passed away. Julian had kindly sent her some information he felt might be relevant to her husband's case and also extended an invitation to come and stay in his home should she ever feel the need. Sure enough a few weeks later, the widow and her son showed up on the front doorstep and stayed for a few days.

In 2003, Julian left Skillsoft to join GlobalEnglish, following the lead of Tom, an esteemed colleague. Tom supported Julian's unsolicited application and he was in. Four years later, Paula followed Julian, having heard him enthuse the previous summer about his new organization. Paula was not the only one to follow Julian, in this "positively incestuous sort of environment". He believes that GlobalEnglish was ahead of the curve "and so the smart people were moving there in droves".

More than 10 years later, not so long after the company had been acquired by Pearson, Julian was unimpressed by the new management. He found his next opportunity at another online learning company and once again approached the CEO directly to secure his role, this time spearheading his tribe's move into this new company. Shortly after arriving he attempted to get a job for Paula, but she didn't fit the profile the company was looking for. Although he knew there was really an opportunity, he would never have risked his reputation by pushing, and so he backed off. Paula was in no hurry at that stage, and eventually followed another former colleague, to yet another online learning firm.

Julian reflects on this close eco-system that exists in his industry. He expresses his love of going beyond the simple status of being colleagues, creating a bond and a friendship. "We live the highs and lows together, both work and personal, and we've all been joining companies that were on the rise – an incredible ride."

Julian, Paula and a handful of others from their tribe meet every summer in New York. The most recent development for each of them has created an extraordinarily catalytic shift. Paula joined Linux Academy in 2018 and this company has recently been bought by ACloudGuru (ACG). Julian had been independently following ACG, and tracking its growth, and offered his services to the CEO. Literally within hours of this initiative, Paula was meeting her future ACG management team over dinner, and asked what they were planning to do in EMEA. The unlikely answer was that they had just posted a job earlier that day. Both Paula and yet another former colleague answered simultaneously "you need to contact Julian". Around the dinner table, mobiles were pulled out, LinkedIn profiles were checked, even the geography fitted, as their office in Europe was less than 15 minutes drive from Julian's home. The serendipity of the situation was lost on no one and very shortly after, Julian had his next gig.

So once again Julian and Paula are working together and creating opportunities for others in their tribe. Upcoming announcements will

JULIAN

PAULA



include the names of several former colleagues from several former companies. Julian speculates that this tribal migration will go on and on. The virtuous circle of constantly seeking out opportunities to rise together functions well, and jungle drums are beaten very efficiently. Whether the closeness of this particular eco-system is influenced by the nature of Sales work and the characters it attracts is a matter for reflection. Whether cause or effect may still be unclear, but the tribal pull is enduring.

Paula

Paula started out as a programmer at an insurance company in her native Midwest. She felt that this was a profession ideally suited to her detail-focused OCD personality, and did extremely well. IBM had turned her down for a job, because her double major degree in Information Technology and Psychology suggested to them a less than total focus on the world of IT.

IBM's loss however turned out to be the online learning industry's gain. Through Paula's involvement in training projects, she got very excited about talents and leveraging them, and this led to her next move to an IT training company. Despite her resistance, she was persuaded by her manager's observation that "you're not doing 'Sales' if you believe in the product: you're helping people". From here on, her career in consultative technical sales took off.

As Paula describes it, when she met Julian in the late 90s, she was a culturally naïve Midwesterner and he appeared "British aloof" to her,

8 Tips for Being a Great Leader Who Inspires Many to Follow and Grow

1. Identify high potential talent using informal, intuitive and observant methods, and constantly curate
2. Attract and retain by supporting the development of your followers
3. Have their backs at all times, good and bad
4. Make recommendations and introductions that are logical and valuable
5. Have the humility to step away when a move will not be valuable for either party
6. Have the grace to recognize when your follower may need space and pastures new
7. Remember to see others outside your immediate eco-system, not getting tunnel vision
8. Keep up the dialog and communication, whether you are currently working together or not

as she was going by his accent and other cultural clichés. At this stage she had little experience with or exposure to people from far away, and limited resources in developing cultural awareness.

The two of them were frequently involved in collaboration on global accounts, and their role in the sales function meant that they met at various events across the globe. Paula is known as someone who plays as hard as she works, and as someone who is always working. She found Julian to be similar, and the ice was broken once and for all when the two of them bonded over a cultural misunderstanding over the use of the word “pants”. Fortunately all involved were able to laugh and see humor in the situation. From then on their relationship was sealed.

The pair continued to work together across the various iterations of the company they joined and then Julian left to join rising star, GlobalEnglish. On hearing Julian’s comment that this was a fabulous place to work, Paula proceeded to move across, noting that 1994 was the last time she had had to seek employment outside her own circle! She says that “Julian is my reference: if ever I didn’t understand something or someone, especially from a non-US perspective, I’d lean on him and I have learnt a great deal from him over the years. I know I can rely on him for both knowledge and insight, and count on him through collaboration”.

On her husband’s passing in 2004, Paula’s “shelter” at Julian’s place contributed significantly to the beginning of her healing. She reflects that there are a few people in life

that one can both like and love as a friend, but that Julian falls into that category!

After many years at GlobalEnglish, Julian left first, and the pair were “apart” for a few years, while navigating through the only two or three degrees of separation that their industry tribe enjoys. They have continued to meet socially, and sought each other’s advice wherever necessary or appropriate. The final denouement is fascinating. Paula had joined the Linux Academy during 2018, and A Cloud Guru acquired them in December 2019. This brought a breath of fresh air and the opportunity to introduce Julian, as he had previously described. This is doubtless not the last time they will have converging paths.

Reflecting on what they have taught one another over the years, Paula observes that she has helped Julian to let down his British guard, bringing more levity to his behavior, and teaching him not to judge a book by its cover, while he has given her insight, cultural awareness and deep care. She told us several stories of how they have bonded over both dangerous and hilarious situations through the years, and looks forward to many more.

Maximizing on a Phenomenon

What can we learn from all these stories? Firstly, quite simply, that those who follow each other and collaborate have developed rich ties and a strong mutual appreciation. They appear to share similar values and see things in a pretty similar way, even if they are not clones of each other.

While mutual appreciation goes a long way,

and comes through tight work connections – including some ‘bonding moments’ – there is a strong focus on value behind the relationship. The symbiosis is beneficial for both parties: they work together in an efficient way that is made possible by trusting and knowing each other well. At the same time, we notice that the subjects in our stories were leveraging their relationship in a smart way, recommending and putting forward their connections if and only if there was a value in doing so.

It would be wrong however to see this relationship as merely one sided, utilitarian and transactional. All the stories we shared illustrate the sustainable extent of “having the other person’s back”. Stretching and protection are key. It is wonderful to observe how much concern there is for the wellbeing as well as the professional development of the other – and these are expressed by both parties at different stages of their careers.

One other aspect that transpires in these stories is the need for independence, beyond

the symbiosis. All six of our subjects were both followers and leaders over time, and the need to carve out one’s own path emerged in every story, at some stage or other. We probably all need to learn how to be a good follower and a good leader if we want to maximize on this phenomenon.

As we all know, the cost of hiring a brand-new outside candidate into a role, and onboarding her or him is tremendous: SHRM estimates this to be the equivalent of 6-9 months’ salary. So the wisdom of creating and maintaining eco-systems or tribes like these is not just cozy. It makes sense economically and benefits organizations.

Thus we leave you with this crucial question as leaders: What are you doing to identify, attract, develop and maintain your own followers?

Antoine Tirard is a talent management advisor and the founder of NexTalent. He is the former head of talent management of Novartis and LVMH. **Claire Harbour** is a global talent expert, focused on coaching and consulting across borders, and stirring up disruption!