

Stretch Assignments

Facilitated by **Luke Auburn**

Luke Auburn: You're listening to the RIT Professional Development podcast series; I'm your host Luke Auburn. When people hear the term "professional development," they often think about training courses, pursuing degrees and certificates, or other methods of formal instruction. However, if you're going to advance your career, you'll also need to develop skills on the job, sometimes by taking assignments slightly above your experience or comfort level. We call these "stretch assignments."

In conversations I've had with RIT faculty, staff and administrators, they frequently cited stretch assignments as an important part of professional development. Jeanne Casares, RIT's Chief Information Officer, had a good description of what stretch assignments entail.

Jeanne Casares: what stretch assignments are are assignments that might be a little bit outside the role or responsibility that the current employee has that more organically provide the development opportunities while they're actually doing the work. So someone is able to try something out in a supported environment where we stand on the sidelines and, kind of, coach them along, and they're actually excelling in the role while they're doing the work and receiving that development on the job; job enrichment. It's a great way to expand an employee's skill and competency while achieving this greater quality work. It's truly a win for the employee and the organization. It boils down to trusting people to be great at something they've never done up until now.

A good example would be a few years ago we wanted to put together a social media team. Students and staff that would help respond to some of the social media opportunities in front of us. And we had a manager who had some-- had done high quality work, had some bandwidth and was looking to do the next thing, and so we enriched her role. We were able to add that particular assignment on and coach her to do something broader than the aspect of her current job and it developed her further as a leader. She created a program from nothing. It was--

didn't exist. She had to work cross functioning across the institution, whereas her previous role had her a little bit more working within her department. So that's a great example of an on the job stretch assignment that allowed that person to develop a whole set of skills that they would have never had the opportunity to do.

Luke Auburn: Randy Vercauteren, RIT's Director of Parking and Transportation and Building Services, began his career at RIT as a custodian, and remembers how pursuing stretch assignments was key to moving up the ranks.

Randy Vercauteren: The way I became--when I got my next job after custodian, is that I grew up on a farm and I worked on a lot of equipment. But father was a tugboat engineer for the army core of engineers. So on the farm, we worked on a lot of equipment. And when I started working here, I noticed a lot of the vacuum cleaners and some of the floor machines did not work properly.

So, I was working on them, and there was one particular machine that was somewhere complex called the Von Schrader. And I had it all apart in the Ingle Auditorium. And our superintendent walked in and said, "What are you doing?" And I said, "Every time I get a piece of equipment, it doesn't work properly, so I'm fixing this thing once and for all, so that it will properly so I can get my job done." And she said to me, "You know how to do this?" And I said, "I do know how to do this." And she said, "Can you work on all of our equipment?" I said, "Absolutely, I can work on all of the equipment." And with that in mind, I was actually promoted to being a truck driver in shipping and receiving and I also opened a repair shop in the warehouse and repaired all of the custodial equipment all over the campus. So, that was my first move is just initiative. Do it because it was the right thing to do. You know, someone that had authority saw me doing it and then said, "Wow, I didn't know you could do these kinds of things. Let's get you in a role where you can help us out some more."

Luke Auburn: Ebony Miller, currently the program manager for the Saunders College of Business Center for Urban Entrepreneurship, began her career at RIT as a senior staff specialist

in the Kate Gleason College of Engineering's Office of Student Services. She also prepared for advancement by constantly looking for learning opportunities and stretch assignments.

Ebony Miller: I learned a lot about the student information system. I learned about RIT students that -- I had a lot of exposure to the students. I was the first point of contact when they entered the Office of Student Services with the College of Engineering, so I got -- I was able to develop relationships with the students and learn about their career aspirations, and also, a lot of the advising process, because a lot of the students that would approach me were there because they were -- they needed help with something, whether it be with getting their classes switched, whether they were having problems with their classes, or whether they wanted to change their major.

So I learned a lot about the advising process by understanding their needs and helping to triage them. Because a lot of times they would come in and they wouldn't necessarily need to see their advisor; it was something that I possibly help them with to help ease the stress that was put on the advisor because they had a lot of students that they were working with. So I was able to learn a lot about RIT, a lot about RIT systems, a lot about the students, which helped me to be able to grow into my current position.

Luke Auburn: According to Dr. Sandy Johnson, RIT's senior vice president for student affairs, stretch assignments are crucial for gaining visibility in a large organization.

Dr. Sandy Johnson: When you have an opportunity to do something different, like you know, they're asking for volunteers to be on a committee, they're asking for help to do X, Y or Z, that's maybe a little outside of your job scope, but now you've been offered this opportunity, take it. And you know, get everything you can out of that. So that's what's being kind of presented to you. It's like I've told my kids, I say, "When people ask if they can help, they're doing that because they really want to." So if people are asking you if you want to be involved, they're doing that because they think you have something to contribute, so take advantage of it. And

sometimes that might mean letting go of some other things, because you know, it's a longer term advantage to short term, you know, disadvantage, maybe time wise.

The other piece is to seek that information on your own. So, I do remember one of my first supervisors saying, "Well you should go to that faculty lecture" you know? I had no idea what they were talking about. It was a biology professor and I'm like, "Why should I be going to that?" And then I realized after, it was an opportunity for me to be seen, for me to meet people there and then eventually that strengthens your network. So sometimes it's going to different things that you may not think about, at an institution, because there's a lot going on. I mean, you know, look at what we get on Message Center. I mean, you could fill up your whole day and not do your job, but just attend everything. So be, you know, selective about, "Huh, maybe I won't go to that lecture. Maybe I will, you know, make some time for that."

Luke Auburn: Kevin McDonald, RIT's Vice President and Associate Provost for Diversity and Inclusion, believes that managers should support their employees' efforts to pursue stretch assignments and noted the long-term benefits it can have for the organization.

Kevin McDonald: I think I was fortunate to have supportive leaders who provided me with opportunities and the latitude to seek out professional development opportunities or to create some within structures that existed wherever I worked, and so I kind of have had this kind of pay it forward mentality and I think it's important to invest in your team. And invest your team members. I think gone are the days when you are trying to expect the level of loyalty no matter what type of environment you put out there for them. I think it's important to really create the opportunity for people to grow, and spread their wings, and potentially fly.

But by and large what I have found is that people are...kind of become entrenched in their commitment to the organization because of the amount of investment that you've put into them. So I just think it's important and even if the employees grow and go, I had a mentor that told me one time that, you know, one of the biggest compliments that he thinks that we could have given him was to have a little piece of him all over the nation. Right? So I've kind of taken it to heart and if we can invest in employees that stay and enhance our environment, while

they're here, great. But if they ultimately utilize investment to grow and go somewhere else, then kudos to RIT for what it's been able to do.

Luke Auburn: And research shows the benefits of setting your best employees up to succeed by allowing them to pursue stretch assignments.

In his book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't*, author Jim Collins noted that "The good-to-great companies made a habit of putting their best people on their best opportunities, not their biggest problems. The comparison companies had a penchant for doing just the opposite, failing to grasp the fact that managing your problems can only make you good, whereas building your opportunities is the only opportunity to become great." So whether you're a manager or an aspiring employee eager to climb the ranks, be on the lookout for new opportunities to take the University to the next level.

That concludes this edition of the RIT Professional Development podcast series. For more information on how you can develop your career, visit rit.edu/cpd.