

Pinch-Hitting is a key to success at small firms

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Early in her career, job coach Sherri Thomas worked at an ad agency with fewer than 10 employees. Her title was copywriter, but she found that her job often spanned stints as a media buyer, event promoter and research analyst. This kind of pinch-hitting is often par for the course at small firms, says Ms. Thomas, author of "Career Smart: 5 Steps to a Powerful Personal Brand." Here are some tips to ease the move from a large firm to a small one.

- Flexibility is key. Like large companies, smaller companies often have lofty objectives, goals and expectations. But, they usually have fewer employees to accomplish them. "You should expect to wear many hats and be ready to pitch in and support tasks outside of your job," says Ms. Thomas. At a smaller company, "changes are able to happen much faster," says Doug Ducey the former CEO of Cold Stone Creamery who left to become chairman of a 30-person company, iMemories, based in Scottsdale, Ariz. "You can really move at an incredible speed."
- Learn the culture. Small companies have their own, sometimes complicated, politics. "With most larger organizations, the bigger your title, the more influence you have with senior managers," says Ms. Thomas. That isn't necessarily the case in smaller companies where the president could be best friends with the HR manager or golf partners with a sales associate. "Learn the way the company operates from a people perspective," says Ms. Thomas. "Identify those who have influence with senior leaders."
- Learn the business -- fast. There is usually very little time for you to get up to speed at a small firm. Training resources are often nonexistent, says Ms. Thomas who recommends setting up meetings with managers, team members, colleagues, and, if feasible, the person who held your job before you. "Find out about lessons learned, key challenges and best practices to help you be more successful in your role," she says.
- Go for easy wins. Give high priority to tasks that will make the biggest impact but require the least effort. "Look for ways to help the company generate revenue, save costs or be more competitive in the marketplace," says Ms. Thomas. By giving the most bang for your buck early on, you can show management that you are someone who is results-driven, a quick learner and able to successfully transition into your new role.
- Beware the "Sally did it differently" syndrome. At larger companies it is the norm for employees to come and go. But, at smaller companies, employees often have a difficult time adjusting to someone new. So, you may experience the "Sally did it differently" syndrome where colleagues eagerly tell you the way the person before you did your job. "Your best strategy is to understand that their intention is good," suggests Ms. Thomas. "Once you hit your stride, those nostalgic comments...will cease."
- Give yourself some time. While the company may have high expectations, allow yourself some time to adjust. Give yourself permission to ask questions, says Ms. Thomas. "You were hired because you're an expert in a specific area, but that doesn't mean that you know everything about the company or how it operates its business."