

Navigating the Path: Exploring a Career in Your Family's Business

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Are you in the early stages of your career and considering the prospect of working for your family's business?

If so, you might have encountered phrases like, 'It must be nice to already have a job waiting for you!' or 'This will all be yours someday.' However, the reality is that deciding to work for your family business is not a straightforward decision. This article presents a roadmap to assist you in your decision-making process.

Charting Your Path Begins with Self-Reflection

Working for the family business isn't for everyone, and that's okay! It is helpful to do a little self-reflecting when thinking about your career path, whether that may include your family's business or not.

Here are some valuable questions to help you prepare for the decision to join the family business (or when contemplating any career path):

- What interests you the most? Think not just about work or your career, but what truly excited you?
- When do you feel at your best? What are you most proud of?
- When are you not at your best? Note, if your answer to this question is when you're around family for long periods of time or walking into your family's business, working there may not be for you.
- How do you define success for yourself at this stage of your life?
- If you could do literally anything in the world, what would you do?
- What are the potential consequences and costs, including the impact on your family relationships, if things don't go as planned? What does that outcome look like?



- What is your 'why?' Go deeper and really think about your reasons for wanting to join the family business.

Exploring Opportunities and Setting Expectations

A lot of successful family businesses have opportunities for internships or other business exposure opportunities that you can participate in well before you're thinking about joining as a full-time employee. These experiences provide a chance for you to dip your toes in, before plunging in all the way. If your family does offer these short-term or part-time positions, take full advantage to get a taste of your family business.

It is important to know and understand the expectations of you as early as possible. This may be laid out in a Family Employment Policy (another best practice that many family ownership groups have developed) and could include such requirements as advanced schooling, outside experience, or a promotion at a different company. You want to be sure you have a solid grasp of what these expectations are so you don't have any surprises as you get into your career plans. If your family doesn't have an Employment Policy, start asking questions of your parents,

grandparents, and possibly of other company leaders about what would be required, should you decide you'd like to join the business.

Even if it isn't a requirement to gain outside experience, it is still a best practice (and strongly advised) to do so. By choosing to take this step, you can learn and grow with another organization and gain some success on your own before bringing your skillset back to the family business. We recommend spending between two to five years working elsewhere in a similar industry or company, if possible. This may seem like a long time before joining your family business. In some situations or industries, the multiple year suggestion may not be necessary or fitting. The ultimate purpose is for you to gain meaningful experience and exposure before making a move into the family business.

You also want to make sure you're not using the family business as a backup plan if your original career path encounters difficulties. Gaining experience outside the family business provides valuable exposure to your chosen field, helping you gain a better understanding of what lies ahead.

When thinking about joining the family business, don't:

- Assume because you are family, you will have any job or position you'd like.
- Wait for family to guide you. Take some initiative and ask, without being assumptive. Ask about potential internships, a Family Employment Policy, and the hiring process.
- Assume that even if you check all the boxes, you're the best fit for the company. As you prepare to get the job, also prepare to not get the job. Plan for how you can most productively respond if this happens, like asking how you can better prepare yourself for eventual entry into the family business.

Good, open communication is critical to the success of this entire process. If considering applying to your family's business, first talk to your immediate family (whether they are in the business or not) about what effects your employment in the business could have, both the positive and the negative. What dynamics could potentially pop up?

Also, it can be helpful to speak with other family members who are current or former employees. Ask them about their overall experience, including:

- What worked well?
- What didn't work so well?
- What did their hiring process look like?

Other family employees can offer a unique perspective for working in the business. Just be careful not to judge the situation as hopeless in case their employment did not work well for them. You may be able to create a much-improved experience.

Seeking Out Employment within the Family Business

After you've reflected and completed your preparation, it's time to decide whether you'd like to work for your family's business. If the answer is yes, ensure that you have complied with all the necessary guidelines outlined in the Family Employment Policy or any other relevant document. Additionally, make sure you follow the steps outlined in such a policy, including who to contact first to express your interest. Often, this contact person is the CEO/President or a member of the company's HR team. Avoid relying on your immediate family members to bypass an established process.

Many families require prospective family employees to apply for existing open positions that align with their skill sets. These positions are legitimate openings, not roles created solely for family members. Some families also have policies allowing family members in management roles at other companies to propose positions within the family business where they can contribute value. The specific process for this is typically outlined in the Family Employment Policy.

Success Starts Here: Preparing for Your First Day

You've been hired! Now what?

Make sure you understand the relationship between employee, manager, and owner, as well as all the potential overlaps. You could very well be an employee and an owner, but not in a management position yet. Dad may be the CEO but is not your direct boss. Have conversations with other family employees about these different

dynamics. Does Mom prefer to be called by her first name when at work? What boundaries would be helpful for you to have? If you have family in senior leadership, is it appropriate to come into their office unannounced, even if just for lunch? What message could that send to other employees? Talking through these expectations ahead of time can alleviate a lot of future stress and tension.

Be sure to complete any orientation and pre-first day prep or materials. On day one and subsequent days, arrive on time and be ready to work. Know and understand who you will be reporting to, while respecting that hierarchy chain. It can be useful to view the company's whole organizational structure to make sure you are also abiding by the structure.

While you may not have a say, report to a nonfamily employee when feasible. Acknowledge the potential awkwardness this may create for the nonfamily employee in that position.

Your First 100 Days: Navigating the Early Challenges

As a family employee, co-workers may make assumptions about you and your employment. People may expect you to walk in on the first day, knowing everything about the company inside and out. Be mindful not to become entangled in this perception. Maintain an open mindset to maximize the benefits of your training and development.

It can also be easy for other employees to assume that you are a direct line of communication to company leadership, approaching you with complaints or questions about the company. It's important to clarify that even if your parent is the company leader, that is not your role. Turning them away may feel tough or even cold, or you might believe that owners or other family employees should be informed as well. It's essential to establish clear boundaries between work and family life. Allocate specific times for business discussions, separate from your family time.

Your direct supervisor or other employees might find it challenging to offer candid feedback. The ability to receive this feedback and transform it into constructive criticism is a necessary skill for a family employee. Your supervisor should feel that they can be open and honest with you without the fear of it affecting their job. Listen without interrupting, while keeping a handle on your own responses. Ask clarifying questions to demonstrate your understanding of the feedback received and take it seriously by following up on it. Once again, respect the hierarchical chain and avoid circumventing your supervisor, especially to communicate directly with a fellow family employee. This will immediately lead to them feeling undermined and unwilling to be honest with you, which can also hinder your own development.

If there isn't a plan in place for regular feedback, discuss the possibility of developing one with HR or your supervisor. Exercise caution in your approach and show respect for the existing training protocol; avoid expecting special treatment based on your family ties.

Your instinct in those first 100 days may be to try for a big splash and to suggest changes to the way things are currently being done. Your main path to success in the early part of your family business tenure will be to understand what is most important to accomplish in your present role and focus on those tasks. You should also spend time and energy building good relationships with your colleagues as well as your supervisor.

In Closing

While this may initially sound daunting and overwhelming, it's important to note that such feelings are not the intended outcome. Becoming a part of your family's business can undeniably provide a positive and meaningful experience. With adequate preparation and thoughtful planning, you can play a significant role in contributing to its overall success.

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