



Showing Value from Day One: How Karna Nisewaner of Cadence Owns Her Career

Skills and Professional Development



Becoming an executive at a high-powered company is a major achievement requiring an “eyes wide open” approach to your career. A successful outcome depends on showing your value throughout your tenure at the company, starting from day one. Being open about your intentions and mastering executive-appropriate conversations should be central to your strategy. Karna Nisewaner, vice president and associate general counsel at Cadence Design Systems, has mastered these skills and has been continually using them to show her value every day.

Start on the right foot



Nisewaner astutely points out, “People often tell you that you own your career. But what does that really mean?” She explains that not understanding this concept can be frustrating for any professional. Nisewaner believes that ultimately, you need to actively find your own opportunities. This requires being explicit about your goals and realistically assessing your possibilities. “I joined Cadence because I wanted to manage people. I was very explicit about this in my interview. And I didn’t see a path to this goal within a reasonable timeline of about two years in my last job,” she states. Nisewaner also assessed Cadence’s goals and, at the time, Cadence needed a succession plan for her then-manager. “That is what they were seeing for me. So, it was apparent that their goals and mine aligned from day one,” Nisewaner says.

Manage transitions like a true professional

Having a supportive manager who wants you to succeed is instrumental, so you should screen for it in the interview. Soon after Nisewaner joined Cadence, she became pregnant with her second child. “I knew that you never regret time take off and was determined to take my full four months of maternity leave,” she says. Nisewaner acknowledges that because her manager was supportive and had a long-term plan for her, she was able to enjoy her time with her child. “I came back and the work was there in the holding pattern waiting for me or getting done, as necessary. The plan for me to succeed my then-manager was still in place,” she says. “The only difference is that I was able to enjoy my time with my child and it made me a better, more productive, and more eager employee.” Ultimately, Nisewaner believes that it’s important to make sure your company is accommodating of any transitions in your life. “I strongly believe that you should do what makes you feel good. And, I was grateful that my job and manager accommodated this for me,” she says.

Ask for and take advantage of visibility opportunities

Nisewaner became vice president within five years after joining Cadence. In part, this was because she successfully completed building a highly-visible patent program. She explains: "When I joined, there was a sense of frustration because we didn't know what patents we had in our patent portfolio or why we had them. We had a lot of patents and no strategy." Nisewaner knew this wasn't sustainable in the long term. "If you answer strategic questions about why and what you patent, you get better quality patents in the end," she reveals. Nisewaner and her team undertook the massive task of reviewing, categorizing, and working with various business units to understand Cadence's patent portfolio of about 1,800 patents. The process was lengthy and successful. "At the end we had a sense of what is important and what needs to change," she says.

Between the United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) fees, annuities, and prosecution fees, maintaining a patent portfolio is a giant expense. So, as Nisewaner points out, "It needs to be controlled and managed. It is also important to explain the patent program to executives to have their support." In the process of reviewing the patents, Nisewaner and her team amassed a lot of data and figured out a way to save 15 percent in costs. Then, with the support of her manager, she created a short slide deck that she presented to the executive team. She explains that it's important to up-level the conversation when you talk to executives and seek their support. "They want to know the summary and methods. I learned to tell the details of my deep dive into patents only after they ask a specific question," she says. This skill is so vital that it may be worth investing in its development. As Nisewaner explains, she and her manager both recognized that up-leveling a conversation is a skill that neither of them had, so they found several external resources to help Nisewaner master the skill.

The idea of "owning your career" may seem intimidating and unclear, but it is vital to learn so that you can demonstrate your value and, eventually, meet your executive-level goals. By assessing opportunities, being explicit about goals and expectations, seeking accommodations as needed, taking advantage of visibility opportunities, and investing in vital skills, Karna Nisewaner showed her value and took ownership of her career. This allowed her to elevate herself to the executive position of her dreams. Nisewaner's journey is a key inspiration for any professional aiming to take their career to the next level.

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Olga V. Mack is a fellow at CodeX, The Stanford Center for Legal Informatics, and a Generative AI Editor at law.MIT. Mack shares her views in her columns on ACC Docket, Newsweek, Bloomberg, VentureBeat, Above the Law, and many other publications.

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