

Should You Always Strive to Work at the Most ‘Prestigious’ Places? Well ...

Small fish in a big pond? Or big fish in a small pond?



By [Adam Grant](#)

March 22, 2019

If you want to build a successful career, you have a dilemma on where to start. Should you pick the most prestigious organization, where you'll be a small fish in a big pond? Or should you take the most influential position, where you'll be a big fish in a small pond?

Kat Cole has an answer, and it's not what you'd expect. At just 32, Ms. Cole became the president of a billion-dollar brand: Cinnabon. Her meteoric rise didn't begin from a blue-chip company or a high-impact role. Her pivotal decision was to start her career as a waitress ... at Hooters.

Although people are often drawn to the workplaces with the highest status, it's not always best to be in the biggest pond. In a 2017 study of professional soccer teams, researchers examined what happened to players on teams that were just above and below the cutoff to get relegated to a lower division.

Being dropped to a lower division sent teams down to a smaller pond with weaker competition. Yet over their careers, younger players whose teams were downgraded landed in stronger leagues and earned higher wages. Why? They got more playing time because the stakes were lower and they faced less competition for key positions — and they grew more as a result.

The strongest opportunities for development aren't always in the most influential place. They're in the place where you can be the most influential, where you can accumulate skills and social capital. There's evidence that although law firms that are new, small or low-status are more likely to fail, those are the very firms at which associates have the highest odds of getting promoted.

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But if you're looking for the best career opportunities, you don't necessarily want to be a big fish in a small pond, either. There's a risk that you'll start to stagnate because a smaller pond might fail to stretch your skills or fail to send a strong signal about your abilities.

Research shows that bank executives are more successful in advancing their careers when they come from companies ranked among Fortune's most admired for operational excellence. So the big question is whether there's a way to get the best of both worlds.

Just ask Ms. Cole. From her late teens through her twenties, she got promotion after promotion at Hooters in part because she was able to prove herself as capable, helpful and committed. At 21 she was flying to Australia to open the company's first franchise in Sydney, and by 26 she was a vice president running corporate training. But she wouldn't have had the same opportunities to build her capabilities, connections and contributions if she had been working in a giant bureaucracy or for a struggling company.

Hooters was growing fast and opening restaurants all over the world. And because it wasn't exactly known as a prestigious company, it didn't have the luxury of recruiting superstars.

"There weren't Wharton M.B.A.s beating down the doors to go work at Hooters, and so they had to look within to find their talent," Ms. Cole explained on my podcast, "WorkLife." "I was receiving a disproportionate number of development and growth opportunities in that company because of the lack of influx of talent coming in from the outside."

When considering your next job, you don't have to choose between joining a big pond and being a big fish. You want to join a growing pond, because that's where you'll *become* the biggest fish.

Adam Grant, an organizational psychologist at Wharton, is the author of "Originals." For more on building your career and connections, listen to "WorkLife With Adam Grant," a TED original podcast on the science of making work not suck. You can find "WorkLife" on Apple Podcasts, or on your favorite podcast platform.