

TAKING THE PLUNGE: FROM BIG TECH TO EARLY-STAGE STARTUPS

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STEVEN TAMM
CHIEF TECHNOLOGY OFFICER,
SCRATCH FINANCIAL

Steven Tamm, formerly CTO at Salesforce, recently sat down with Sam Wilkins, Partner at Erevena to discuss his decision to leave one of the world's largest SaaS brands to join an early-stage start-up. In the depths of this tech industry recession, early-stage start-ups have become a compelling alternative to globally scaled brands but they aren't the exclusive option - the choice ultimately depends on individual motivations and goals.

Steven shares his recent experiences seeking a new role after nearly 20 years in one company and reflects on the lessons he's learnt.

[Steven's Blog](#)

BACKSTORY

Steven joined Salesforce 18 years ago, when engineering was only 30 people and Marc Benioff still drove himself to work. Reflecting on the factors behind Salesforce's success, he highlights some of the fundamentals:

- Being an early adopter of cloud technology with a multi-tenant approach
- Fast execution and genuine commitment to the 'V2MOM' process (Vision, Values, Metrics, Obstacles, and Methods)
- A strong engineering team that continued to grow even during the 2008 downturn
- A single core product that experienced consistent growth for the first 10 years
- Strategic acquisitions that focused on complementary apps rather than horizontal services.

His most satisfying roles included building 'communities' for Salesforce and helping create 'external objects' - the ability to treat data in external systems as if it were native to Salesforce.

MAKING THE MOVE

After an 18 year journey with Salesforce and considering what would be next, Steven emphasizes the importance of evaluating your risk tolerance and looking for signs of success beyond just capital. He also shares some tips for approaching the interview process with regards to both practical actions and also the mindset to have:

• **Treat it like an investment** and have a clear thesis for the type of companies you want to work for. Having spent 18 years at enterprise SaaS, he'd spent far too much time looking to do something like that. He didn't want to work at a competitor, but adjacent spaces on the platform side looked like jobs that were 'easy to get.' He started with large public companies and with big company recruiters. He got a few nibbles in 2020 and spent a lot of time and effort to be CTOs of companies in spaces he was only vaguely interested in. So he didn't have a crisp answer as to 'what he was looking for' in companies.

So, like his investment thesis, he took a few months to refine what he was interested in:

1. Global compliance and management of data/metadata
2. Middlemen-ridden industries full of bias or terrible incumbents: specifically non-crypto fintech and non-insurance healthcare
3. Platform Integrations, specifically for ISVs or App Developers
4. OrgOps/DevTools. Fixing the questionable tools that engineering orgs use to manage their systems

A company may add to the thesis or refine it, but you should be clear-headed about what you want. You don't want to spend years in a space that you're not comfortable in.

• **Cast a wide net**, but within the boundaries of a trusted network. Steven started with old techniques of career forums, LinkedIn and other job postings, and a few recruiters he'd met along the way. With the exception of one early hit that almost worked, it was a bad move. The initial success was the anomaly, and executive recruiting is still about personal relations. He realized he should have immediately talked to all the old Salesforce employees who went into VC. Nearly all of the best prospects came from them.

• **Pick your boss** - know what kind of person you want to work for and the values you seek. After some late-stage interviews with questionable companies, CEOs, and sometimes both - Steven's resolve hardened that money can't buy happiness or soothe your conscience. Work-life balance and integrity aren't on the table either.

Most people leave their job because of a bad boss or bad comp: don't go forward with roles where you suspect either will manifest. Be clear up front and when you see a bad apple, call it out. Steven tells a cautionary tale: 'Near the end of a process at a public company, I was interviewed by an executive who would be a peer (known from the past to be rude and distasteful), and his behavior was abysmal and dismissive. Even though I wanted to work there and it was the right size, in my thesis, and I would have a great boss, it was a red flag for me. If a peer will prevent your success, exit the process!'

If the job is working for the wrong person in the org, say so during the interview process. It'll keep things quick.

• **Know what you want in the new job** - beyond having your thesis on selecting the next employer, have a pat answer as to why you're leaving the old job and don't dwell on it, especially if you've been there a long time. Be prepared to discuss your thesis and the reasons behind it and why their company fits into it.

• **It's not about you, but it might be** - every job interview is like a first date, or vice versa. There are plenty of fish in the sea, and the job itself might have major issues. Their rejection of you isn't always personal. Be mindful that it might not work out, even up until the last stage.

- You may be cannon fodder for an internal candidate
- The company may realize in the process of interviewing you that they don't want to fill the position at all
- The recruiter could have completely misrepresented the role
- Or you might blow the interview - it happens!

Steven's now several months into his new role, having joined a Series C Fintech and is enjoying the refresh of his skillset. It's been invigorating to escape the slower pace of corporate tech, to have no-one else to turn to for fixing issues and to experience the camaraderie of a team you can fit into a single room.

So, for those who have spent over a decade in big tech and are weighing the pros and cons of making a move, consider this: if not now, then when?

CONTACT



SAM WILKINS
PARTNER

sam.wilkins@erevena.com

[Website](#)
[LinkedIn](#)
[Twitter](#)

London +44 (0)20 3816 9340 | Paris +00 33 67 45 94 974 | Stockholm +44 (0)20 3816 9340 | Copenhagen +45 5070 0811 | New York +1 (347) 277 2931 | San Francisco +1 (415) 860 9662

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