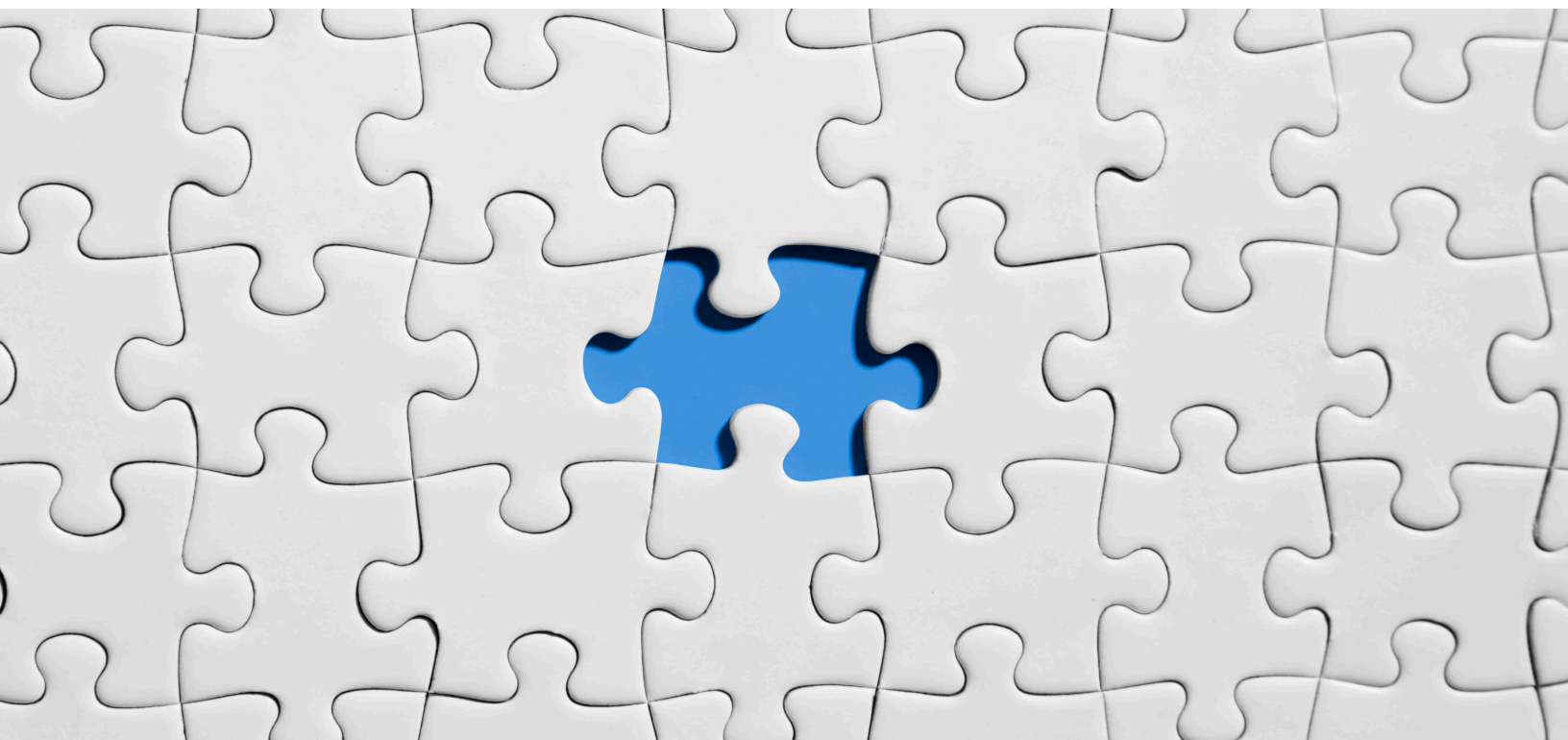


SO, YOU WANT TO BE A PRINCIPAL?



Brian Dehn

Principal Systems Engineer

Dell Technologies

Brian.dehn@emc.com



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Disclaimer: The views, processes or methodologies published in this article are those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect Dell Technologies' views, processes or methodologies.

Introduction

So, you want to be a Presales Principal? Are you considering a career change into the role of Solutions Architect (SA) or Systems Engineer (SE)? Do you want to advance in your Presales career? If you answered 'Yes' to any of these questions, this article is for you.

The role of Principal is generally the highest level in the Presales career track. Advancing to Principal requires you to perform above, beyond, and outside the bounds of a standard presales job description. A SA or SE who successfully meets the duties and responsibilities of that role, is well-recognized, and is a technical expert is not necessarily a Principal. Nor is one who is consistently successful at winning the technical sale, proven at teaming up with sales resources to close deals, or considered a 'trusted advisor' automatically a Principal. To be considered as a candidate for Principal, *you must be all this and more.*



The purpose of this article is to help you determine whether to pursue a career in Presales and how to advance to the role of Principal, with recommendations and real-life examples from the author and other Dell Technologies Principals who have already walked this path.

Why should you pay any attention to me or the thoughts in this article? As the author, I started my career in an IT position for an insurance company, changed career tracks to a post-sales technical consultant role for a technology vendor, changed again to a presales SE role, and progressed to the level of Principal at three different technology vendors (including Dell Technologies, my current employer). Mentoring and developing people is one of my passions. This article provides my advice, suggestions, and recommendations and addresses the topic of how you might achieve the same or greater success.

“My intent is to provide SE career mentoring on (virtual) paper.”
- Brian Dehn, author & Principal

What Is a Principal?

A Presales SA or SE is responsible for providing presales technical support to sales teams during the sales process, and a Principal is generally the highest level of job role attainment for a person in Presales.

Within Dell Technologies, Principal is the highest level in Presales and the highest level of recognition and reward for an SA's or SE's contributions, skills and exceptional leadership.

Principals at Dell are a small and distinguished group of some of our most influential and inspiring thought leaders. Our Principals spread unwavering enthusiasm towards opportunities to apply their elite knowledge and business experience for the betterment of others. (Matt Dunfee, Dell Technologies SVP Global Presales) (Dunfee, 2021)

Principals are at the forefront of leveraging emerging technology trends so that we can aid our customers on their transformation journey. They bring a unique ability to leverage technology to drive outcomes that is invaluable to our customers. Perhaps more importantly, Principals are continuously innovating and sharing their knowledge to enable our entire selling ecosystem to create a better customer experience. (Dan O'Brien, Dell Technologies SVP North America Presales) (O'Brien, 2021)

Dell Technologies has formalized the process for becoming a Principal and refers to that process as the Principal Program. The Principal Program provides information regarding what a Principal is:

- Principals must embody this statement: Consummate engineers who solve process and people problems with technology, not technology problems with technology. Principals are those individuals who have solved challenges for our customers. A Principal has substantial and solid achievements in his or her respective disciplines with the added dimension of taking on a leadership role to develop and mentor others throughout Presales.

- A Principal is highly regarded as a leader in his or her respective discipline. It is the highest level of individual contributor in the Presales function, and a significant accomplishment.
- A Principal is uniquely capable and positioned to solve challenges within the walls of Dell Technologies and is expected to do so.

The formal process of achieving the title of Principal in Dell Technologies Presales takes approximately four months and is conducted on an annual basis; however, years of work are generally required before a person can submit their nomination package to start the formal process. I recommend that you ask yourself the following question before pursuing the role of Principal: *Is pursuing the role of Principal the right thing for me?*

Should You Pursue the Role of Principal?

Pursuit of the role of Principal requires consistent extra effort and a substantive body of work that impacts revenue, processes, people, etc. Knowing this, you need to decide whether the pursuit is worth your time and effort.

Value of Being a Principal

If you are wondering whether becoming a Principal is something you want to take on, ask yourself: *What value does that job title have to me?* What is of value to you is completely determined by you alone based on your unique set of criteria. You are 'one of a kind' and no one else can define value to you. Every person considering the role of Principal places a different level of value on achieving that role based on many factors, such as personality, passion, strengths, weaknesses, situation in life, perceptions, and much more.

Following are a few of a long list of items you should consider when determining the level of value that the Principal role holds for you:

- *Job satisfaction* – are you satisfied and/or content with your current role, or do you want more?
- *Job title* – are specific job titles important to you?
- *Respect* – how important to you is the perceived level of respect that a job title generates?

- *Salary range* – how does the amount of money you make affect your career decisions?
- *Job security* – do you have a perception of job security being linked to job title and professional achievements?
- *Scope of impact* – does the amount of people you impact have a bearing on your level of job satisfaction?

As a personal example, one of my top criteria in determining value regarding the role of Principal is in the form of a question: *Am I the best I can be?* Achieving Principal provided formal evidence to me that I am now and am continuing to be the best I can be. In fact, I have pursued and achieved the level of Principal in my last three jobs working for various vendors in the IT industry.

Whatever criteria you use to determine value, understand that there are no right or wrong answers, only that which is best for you. In addition, your determination of value will probably change over time as you progress through whatever life brings your way.

“I see achieving Principal as evidence of personal growth, advancement, what it takes to succeed.”

- Jodey Hogeland, Principal

The bottom line is that you must determine whether the value of being a Principal is significant enough for you to embark on that journey.

Evaluate the Effort

One method for determining the personal value of your being a Principal is to evaluate the costs and benefits. Several of the potential benefits have already been mentioned in the section entitled *Value of Being a Principal* – job satisfaction, salary, respect, etc.; however, many people tend to neglect considering the costs.

One of the primary questions you should ask yourself is: *Am I willing and able to put forth the extra effort required to advance to Principal?* You should mentally picture the

path to Principal as a marathon – the title is not achieved by winning a sprint or given as a participation award. Substantive investment of time and effort above and beyond basic Presales job responsibilities is required for any Principal candidate. You may need to make professional and personal changes to position yourself more

10+ years of relevant experience are recommended and expected for anyone wanting to be considered for the role of Principal
- Dell Technologies Principal Program

advantageously. For example, you may need to make job role changes to grow your experience. You may need to establish a different balance between personal time and time spent on job advancement-related activities. Adjustments of priorities may need to be made, and you should factor this into your determination of whether you want to take on the challenge of this marathon.

Ask yourself the following questions as you are considering this journey:

- *Am I in a situation in life that will allow me to invest the time?*
- *Are there other responsibilities and activities in my life that have a higher priority?*
- *Am I satisfied with my current position or do I want more?*

Earlier in my career, there was a period of time when I was investing too many hours in my career and sacrificing time with my family. I made the choice to change jobs to a management position which allowed me to spend more time in my roles of husband and father of two young children, but also required relocation to another state and putting my career advancement on hold. The best choice for me at that time was to invest more time at home and wait until my children had grown up into young adults before I started investing more time in my career again.

The question of whether you are able to take on this challenge at this time in your life may not have a hard 'Yes' or 'No' answer. You may decide, for example, that out of a 100% level of effort that you are capable of putting forth, you may only be able to put forth 20% at this time and then accelerate your effort at a later time.

Understand Yourself

Another area that I recommend understanding well is *who you are*. That may sound strange, but the first reason for understanding yourself well is to help you determine

whether you are a match for the role. Although other people can provide input, only you can make the final determination. If you determine you are a good match, the second reason for understanding yourself well is to help you develop the best plan to achieve that goal. Amongst many ways to understand yourself, I recommend focusing on knowing your strengths and weaknesses, passions and drains, motivation, and reputation.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The path to Principal is different for everyone and depends heavily on each person's strengths and weaknesses, the combination of which are unique to each person. You may consider this statement as being obvious, but you can facilitate your journey to Principal by leveraging your unique strengths and mitigating your weaknesses.

Understanding your unique mix will help you develop your plan to achieve the role of Principal and clarify areas you can improve. Several types of analyses can be performed to help you understand your strengths and weaknesses. I recommend you start by asking questions of yourself such as:

- *What skills and abilities come easy for me?*
- *What comes naturally for me?*
- *What types of tasks do I excel at?*
- *Where do I tend to shine and other people tend to notice and compliment me?*
- *What types of projects can I work on for hours without getting tired or burned out?*
- *What types of tasks take me longer than other people to complete, regardless of how hard I work to improve?*
- *In what areas do I struggle?*

Many types of self-analysis are available, and one example of a self-analysis exercise can be found [here](#). (Pillay, 2014)

Another type of analysis is to identify a small group of people whom you trust and ask them for their honest feedback. Ideally, these people would know you well and have seen your behavior in various circumstances. This group would typically include a family member, a friend, a long-time coworker, a mentor, and possibly other people whose

opinions you value. Ask them questions similar to those you would ask yourself during a self-analysis, such as the questions listed above. Compare the feedback you receive with the answers to your self-analysis questions. This exercise will help you understand whether you think about yourself the same way other people do and identify issues you are unaware of.

A third type of analysis is a more formal assessment or personality test. Several well-known personality tests are listed in *Appendix A – Personality Tests*.

You will not be strong at everything – no one is – and that’s OK. The main idea is to understand your strengths so you can leverage them and your weaknesses so you can work around or develop them as you pursue advancement in your Presales career.

Passions and Drains

Leveraging your passions and mitigating that which drains you will also facilitate your journey to Principal.

Know your passions so you can find ways to impact the organization using those passions. For example:

- Find types of work, projects, objectives, etc. that excite and energize you.
- Focus on objectives that have purpose to you – in other words, something that matters to you.
- If you are passionate about learning, find something new to you that piques your interest, expand your knowledge in that area, and use your newfound knowledge to benefit others.

Working within your passions will allow you to put forth more effort over a longer period of time while enjoying the journey.

Working outside your passions drains your motivation and energy levels, reduces your chance of success, and significantly increases the risk of burnout. Know what drains you and plan to address them.

Reputation

Do you know what your reputation is? You should, because your reputation is a critical component in the determination of whether you should be a Principal. *“Simply put, your reputation, and/or the reputation of your business, are among the most important factors in determining whether or not you are successful.”* (Bridges, Reputation lessons from Warren Buffett, 2019) Your reputation is also one of the most difficult aspects to manage, since your reputation consists of the beliefs or opinions other people have about you and none of us can control what other people think. I recommend that you learn and understand your reputation, work to change it if needed, do whatever you can do to protect it, and all the while grow it.

Everyone has a reputation. To use IT industry slang, your reputation is ‘brownfield’ – no one gets to start with a ‘greenfield’ reputation. Since you have a reputation and it’s a critical factor in determining whether you achieve Principal, I recommend that you learn what it is.

Many people are ignorant of their reputation simply because they do not pay attention to it, and not knowing your reputation can introduce challenges into your pursuit of Principal. A smart approach would be to objectively understand your reputation so you know whether you need

“What contributed most toward my becoming Principal was that my reputation was shown as being someone trusted by customers and coworkers.”

- Jackie McKay, Principal

to strengthen and/or repair it, and one of the best ways to understand it is to see it from other people’s perspectives. I recommend talking with and listening to feedback of people who are in a position to have built opinions and viewpoints about you. Find a group of people whom you trust to speak truth to you and ask them for specific feedback regarding your reputation. These people should be from different environments – cross-functional work groups, family, friends, mentors, etc. Avoid ‘traps’ such as becoming defensive, ignoring what you do not want to hear, or justifying your behavior. Accept their feedback gratefully and use it to understand and address your reputation.

Work to change it if needed. Warren Buffett once said: *“It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you’ll do things differently.”* (Bridges, Reputation lessons from Warren Buffett, 2019) A bad reputation can eliminate

you from being considered for Principal; however, it's possible for you to repair your reputation with smart, focused, and persistent effort.

Do whatever you can to protect it. A good reputation is built over the long term but can be lost quickly. In a memo to senior management in his firm Berkshire Hathaway, Warren Buffett said: *“Lose money for the firm, and I will be understanding. Lose a shred of reputation for the firm, and I will be ruthless.”* (Bridges, Reputation lessons from Warren Buffett, 2019) Similarly, you should make it a top priority to guard your reputation.

Always work on growing your reputation. Although you don't have control of what other people think about you, you do have control over the primary factors that people use to build their opinions of you – your actions and behavior. What you do and how you behave directly result in what people think and say about you. Wrapped up in your actions and behavior are components such as integrity, reliability, availability, attitude, and more. In an article published by Forbes, Darrah Brustein discusses 10 Simple Ways To Improve Your Reputation (Brustein, 2014):

1. *Do what you say you'll do.*
2. *Go out of your way to help others reach their goals.*
3. *Make other people look good.*
4. *Go a step beyond what is expected.*
5. *Look the part.*
6. *Consider your body language.*
7. *Be consistent.*
8. *Act with integrity.*
9. *Get engaged with your community.*
10. *Be likeable.*

Keep in mind that your online presence factors into your reputation. What other people can discover about you online can hurt or help in your pursuit of Principal. Many resources on the topic of managing your online reputation are available, such as an article entitled [How to improve your online reputation so that employers will hire you.](#) (Bridges, How to improve your online reputation so that employers will hire you, 2020)

Understand Why

I have a question for you: *Why* are you considering pursuing the role of Principal? Do you desire more money, a higher-level job title, more recognition, the challenge of advancement, etc.? *“Motivation is the process that initiates, guides, and maintains goal-oriented behaviors. It is what causes you to act, whether it is getting a glass of water to reduce thirst or reading a book to gain knowledge.”* (Cherry, 2020) Motivation plays a key part in the pursuit of Principal and understanding your personal motivation(s) will help you in this effort. It’s possible that pursuing Principal may not be the best way for you to achieve the goal(s) you have in mind. For example, consider a scenario where your primary motivation is to make more money. In that scenario, you may decide that taking a job at another company may allow you to achieve that goal sooner than working your way to Principal. As another example, your primary motivation may be the pursuit and achievement of being the best you can be and being approved as Principal would provide formal acknowledgement of that accomplishment. The main point is that you should understand what you want and then formulate the best plan to achieve those results.

If you are considering whether to pursue the role of Principal, my recommendation is that you figure out what value you associate with achieving Principal, evaluate the effort of working toward that goal, and understand yourself well enough to know whether that goal is appropriate for you. In addition, I recommend that you seek wise counsel by discussing your aspirations with a manager or a current Principal.

Assuming you have worked through each of these areas (and possibly others), you should have enough information to determine whether you want to pursue the role of Principal. If your answer is ‘Yes, I want to pursue Principal’, celebrate for a short time (Woo Hoo!!) and then get to work building the right mindset and developing a plan to make that happen.



Build the Right Mindset

You need to take responsibility for your own career and advancement. This is a common theme from the Principals I have worked with. Things will not come to you or be given to you just because of who you are. Based on my experience, people noticing that you are doing a good job and promoting you is more common at lower levels in the Presales

career track and in years past. Now, to advance through higher levels in the Presales career track, you need to actively manage your career and develop an attitude that will push you through the long haul.

One of my strong recommendations is that you take ownership of your own career and advancement. The more you rely on other people to notice and promote you, the greater the chance that neither will happen. Your level of dependency on other people to advance you is up to you. Take responsibility for your career as much as possible and don't depend solely on others for your success.

Attitude is another major component of a good mindset. Advancing and achieving the role of Principal requires a positive attitude that will push you through the marathon. The most successful Presales people tend to be those who have the strongest internal drive. Although advancing in your Presales career is not a competition, the number of opportunities for promotions is probably less than the number of people attempting to achieve promotion. You need to be maniacally focused on being the best you can be to set yourself apart from others in a positive way.

Passion is another component of your attitude. You need to enjoy what you're doing and not just go through the motions. People will quickly notice whether you are passionate about your work and will factor that into promotion decisions. However, be sure to temper your passion with a wise approach to interacting with people. For example, judge whether you should speak up or just listen. Speaking up too much or talking over people may result in you being perceived as annoying or obnoxious, and obnoxious people tend not to be viewed in a positive light.

Develop a Plan

Achieving the role of Principal is an admirable goal and a rare accomplishment that requires purposeful and focused effort in multiple areas over the long term. Many factors are taken into consideration when people are evaluated for Principal, and the best way to increase the probability of your achieving that role is to *develop a specific plan and execute it*. In this section, I

*Principals make up the top ~2%
of the Global Presales
organization*
- Dell Technologies, as of Jan. 2021

provide my opinions, suggestions, and recommendations for what to include in your plan. Execution of that plan is up to you.

I strongly recommend that you develop a plan for how you will work toward achieving Principal. That plan should be specific to you and designed to leverage your unique combination of strengths, passions, motivations, and experience. Becoming a Principal does not 'just happen'. A person does not 'fall into' the role of Principal. The role of Principal is not granted based on potential or simply because of who you are. Reaching the point where you are officially recognized as a candidate for

Principal can only be achieved after years of proving yourself. Advancement to this point in the process is based on the work you have *already* accomplished, not on what you are *potentially* capable of accomplishing. You need to have already built a body of work that demonstrates your technical capabilities and has wide-ranging impact. Developing and executing a plan will help keep you focused on the work and efforts required to accomplish that goal.

My recommendations in this section are based on my experience achieving the level of Principal in my last three jobs with various IT vendors. In addition, I incorporated feedback from several Dell Technologies Principals whom I interviewed as part of my research for this article. In my opinion, the most valuable help can only be provided by people who have already traveled a path and successfully achieved the desired goal, and my intention is to provide such help in this article.

Consistently Execute the Basics

Every plan has a starting point or foundation, and the foundation for any plan to achieve Principal should be to consistently and successfully execute the basic responsibilities of your current role. You must prove that you are faithful in the execution of whatever responsibilities you are given now. From a negative perspective, if you show that you are

“There are multiple paths to Principal. Make your own path with whatever works best for you.”

- Rick Scherer, Principal

“Start by doing what's necessary; then do what's possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible.”

- Widely attributed to St. Francis of Assisi; however, no proof of source exists

unable or unwilling to successfully execute basic responsibilities, people will not be willing to trust you with additional responsibilities. In addition, not executing basic responsibilities is a good way to build a bad reputation and provide reasons not to promote you.

“Never give anyone a reason not to promote you.”

- Brian Dehn, author & Principal

To execute the basic responsibilities of your current role, you must first know what they are. A good way to understand those responsibilities is to obtain a copy of your formal job description. Even better would be to set up periodic meetings with your manager to review those responsibilities, sync up on any responsibilities not included in the formal job description, and request that your manager honestly evaluate you on your achievement of those responsibilities (refer to the section entitled *Get Your Manager On Board* in this article for a discussion on this topic).

Execution of the basics may sound like an obvious requirement, but it can be one of the more difficult parts of your plan. The reason for the potential difficulty is that many of the basic required tasks are sometimes perceived as being of low value, not enjoyable, administrative ‘headaches’, a waste of time, etc. Examples of such tasks include keeping internal tracking systems up to date, providing status updates, mandatory administrative requirements, etc. However, consistent execution of these basic responsibilities over the long term will contribute to the positive growth of your reputation.

Identify the Required Advancement Path

The path to Principal has several steps. Specifically, you must advance through several levels of Presales job titles to reach the stage where you can then pursue candidacy for Principal. In Dell Technologies, the Presales career track from lowest to highest title (as of June 2021) is shown in *Figure 1 - Dell Technologies Presales Career Track*.

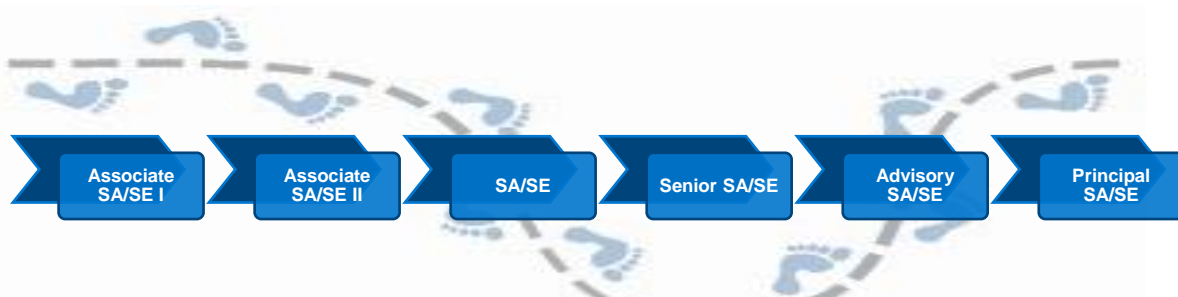


Figure 1 - Dell Technologies Presales Career Track

Your plan for advancement to Principal must include promotions to and experience in each of the job titles between your current Presales job title and Principal.

Regarding a timeline for advancement, expect to work in each job title for a minimum of two years; however, that time frame is short and it's rare for a person to be promoted every two years. A more realistic probability is that you will need to work in each job title for three to five years, assuming that you are a consistent top performer.

Do the Jobs Ahead of You

On top of successfully executing the requirements of your current job, I recommend that you make it a priority to *fulfill the requirements of the job to which you want to be promoted next*. For example, perform as if you are already an Advisory SA/SE if you are currently a Senior SA/SE. In addition, begin to fulfill some of the requirements of the job two levels ahead of you on the Presales career track. Continuing the example, start performing some of the requirements of a Principal.

Why take on more responsibility? As I mentioned, advancement is based on the work you have *already* accomplished, and this approach provides proof that you can already perform the job you want. I have followed this strategy throughout my career, and it has significantly contributed to my achieving the level of Principal three times.

The first step is to obtain job descriptions of the next two job titles ahead of your current role. Job descriptions for Dell Technologies Presales job titles can be obtained by contacting Human Resources.

During your periodic meetings with your manager (refer to the section entitled *Get Your Manager On Board* in this article), review your status of executing the job to which you want to be promoted next so that both of you are in agreement with your progress.

Get Your Manager On Board

Now, let's get your manager involved. I recommend that you develop a specific plan for advancement to the next higher-level Presales job title and collaborate with your manager so that you are both in agreement with the plan.

Work with your manager to define and agree on everything you need to accomplish to be promoted. I hold to the opinion “If it’s not written down, it doesn’t exist”, so I recommend that you document everything you discuss and send it back to your manager to ensure you are both in agreement. Be sure to include your accomplishments in your self-appraisal each review period.

I also recommend that you request and drive periodic meetings with your manager to review your status relative to accomplishment of your plan for promotion. Tactfully hold your manager accountable for pursuing a promotion on your behalf when you have successfully accomplished all the components in the plan to which you both agreed.

Build Your Own Brand

One of the strongest recommendations from the Principals referenced in this article is that you need to *build your personal career brand* to advance through the higher-level Presales job titles and particularly to the level of Principal. Your brand is what you are known for, so figure out what you want people to automatically think about you when they hear your name and then focus on building that brand.

“Your brand is what other people say about you when you’re not in the room.”

- Widely attributed to Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon

Every person’s brand is unique and generally based on their strengths, passions, and expertise. Your unique combination of these characteristics will formulate the value that you can bring to the role of Principal. Another perspective is that the things that make you stand out are what people look at when considering you for Principal, so differentiate yourself and *make yourself stand out in good ways*.

Following are examples of how various Dell Technologies Principals developed their brands:

- Wayne Abbott – going by the adage “if something’s too hard, there’s probably a better way”, Wayne developed and is known globally for an internal system called Nirvana which has provided significant value to Dell Technologies Presales across the world (Abbott, 2020)

- Rick Scherer – known for building and maintaining broad and wide knowledge across multiple silos of technology, staying on the leading edge of tech (e.g. composable computing, NVMe over fabrics, containerization with Kubernetes, etc.), figuring out how to tie all the technology to business solution outcomes and how it will help customers, and then discussing that information with customers to help them set deep strategy and business outcomes (Scherer, 2020)
- Raymond Bartley – focused on building a deep level of technical expertise on Dell primary storage, gained a broad range of experience by working across many verticals (e.g. Health Care, Aerospace/Defense, Telco, Media & Entertainment, etc.), and is known as a presales storage subject matter expert (SME) helping to design solutions and strategies for customers across many geographical areas (Bartley, 2020)
- Robert Sonders – leveraged his passion and knowledge of Microsoft solutions to establish himself and become known as a technical thought leader for Dell-Microsoft-integrated solutions across Dell Technologies globally (Sonders, 2020)
- Jodey Hogeland – built up extensive competitive knowledge on midrange storage solutions at another vendor, expanded that knowledge to include Dell Technologies midrange storage solutions, and is known as one of Dell’s premiere global experts helping customers and internal Dell resources with designing, positioning, and selling storage solutions (Hogeland, 2020)
- Jackie McKay – grew her knowledge of primary storage to a deep technical level, used that expertise to identify gaps from an education perspective, authored and delivered training to fill those gaps which led to identification of additional gaps and development of more training content, and is known as one of Dell’s top primary storage solution experts (McKay, 2021)
- Brian Dehn (author) – brought my passion for software-based IT infrastructure solutions to Dell Technologies, built a deep level of technical expertise in Dell Technologies software solutions, gained a broad range of experience by working across many verticals (e.g. Telco, Media & Entertainment, Health Care, Finance,

“Help others as much as you can. Don't say it's not your job or you can't help someone. That's what you need to be known for.”

- Raymond Bartley, Principal

etc.), and am known for: identifying gaps in my areas of specialty; developing, authoring, and publishing solutions to fill those gaps; and communicating that information with global audiences (this article being one example)

I'll expand on two of these examples to start you thinking about how you might build your own brand.

Wayne Abbott created Nirvana when he realized many SAs and SEs were experiencing difficulty and spending significant time on a commonly executed process. He created Nirvana to automate and reduce the time required to execute that series of tasks from hours down to minutes or seconds. The high value of this system resulted in global impact and the eventual establishment of Nirvana as a formally supported tool used by the global Dell Technologies Presales organization.

*“If something’s too hard,
there’s probably a better
way to do it – find that way
and make it happen.”*

- Wayne Abbott, Principal

Another approach is to recognize a topic, technology, issue, etc. about which many people have similar questions and for which little or no information is available and create a solution to plug that gap. An example of identifying and filling gaps is an article I authored (published by EMC, now Dell Technologies) on the topic of storage reclamation. I realized that many customers and internal resources were consistently asking me similar questions regarding how to identify unused capacity in their

*“Look for a topic,
technology, etc. about which
many people have similar
questions and develop a
solution to plug that gap.”*

- Brian Dehn, author & Principal

storage infrastructures and reclaim those resources to increase efficiency and reduce spending on additional storage. I developed a model for customers to use and authored a [Proven Professional Knowledge Sharing](#) article detailing that model. Customers around the world benefited from the article, and I presented and discussed the model with customers and Dell resources globally for years after the article was published. In addition, that experience led to my authoring more published articles on storage chargeback models that again resulted in global impact.

In an interview with Jodey Hogeland, he discussed the need for building your brand.

You need to build your brand. You need a brand to move up and you need to build a brand that goes global. Think about how you can affect change that's much bigger than where you're at now. Think about how you can affect change globally. Start with a local brand and take it global – it needs to be started, grown, and trusted. If you expect to build a brand overnight, you will get frustrated and your brand will reflect it. Sometimes people don't have the patience for it – it's a marathon, not a sprint. People see your brand and start seeking you out you as the expert – internal people, Product Management, customers, etc. To build a brand, find what your passion is and become the best at that thing. Realize that building your brand requires time and effort outside of your normal job role. One of my top priorities is that my brand must be trustworthy. Be aware that jumping companies for advancement can lead to lack of trust and a brand of 'jumping ship'. (Hogeland, 2020)

“Find what your passion is and become the best at that thing.”

“People will see your brand and start calling you as the expert.”

- Jodey Hogeland, Principal

Two key components of building your brand are brand awareness and networking. You need to ensure that people are aware of your brand so that you don't end up being the best resource that no one ever knew about.

Market Yourself

Developing your brand and marketing yourself are inextricably linked, in that each of these efforts depend on and can help or hurt the other. The methods you use to market yourself will become a visible component of and can enhance your brand. Another perspective is that developing a strong brand without successfully marketing yourself will weaken your case for advancement. People must know you and the value you provide. This leads to my strong recommendation that you make yourself known and the expertise, skills, etc. that you can provide by building awareness of your brand.

“Advertise yourself.

If no one knows you, you have no chance of making Principal.”

- Jackie McKay, Principal

Don't be shy on this. Get your name out there in a very broad spectrum, internally and externally. Take the initiative and tout your accomplishments. Demonstrate the value you provide. Find a technical area of interest, learn it well, and market yourself as the expert with the rest of your team, other Presales teams in your region, and teams outside of your geography. Recognize gaps or inefficiencies and help improve the situation in measurable ways. Assist teams that are outside of your official coverage area. Do all of this in a tactful yet purposeful manner.

“Build your brand internally and externally - you won't get anywhere without a brand.”

- Robert Sonders, Principal

Following are suggestions from the Principals referenced in this article that you can use to build brand awareness:

- Speak at vendor and industry conferences by responding to calls for papers
- Blog internally and externally on topics within your areas of passion
- Demonstrate technical thought leadership by organizing discussions on topics, areas of technology, etc. about which you are knowledgeable and disseminate that info to other teams, groups, customers, etc.
- Reach across organizational silos to build relationships and contribute technically
- Assist with development of [Dell Technologies Proven Professional certification](#) tests (must be a Proven Professional)
- Be active in social media and internal and public forums
- Create and publish videos of demos, technical solutions, etc. that you have developed
- Become an official presenter on topics of your passion for Dell Technologies Executive Briefings (for Dell Technologies employees)

“Identify gaps, figure out how to fill the gaps, execute on filling the gaps, and publicize yourself throughout the process.”

- Jackie McKay, Principal

The level of dependency you place on other people to advance you is up to you. You need to choose how much you rely on others to recognize you versus taking control of that yourself. If you have a manager who is actively managing your career and concerned about you, you may not have to market yourself as much or be as

aggressive. However, most people will need to take a more active role in managing their own career in order to achieve desired results.

Are you uncomfortable with marketing yourself? You may dislike it, but, understand that it needs to be done. You don't want to end up being the best candidate for Principal that no one ever knew about.

Network (That's a Verb)

One of the most important components of advancement to Principal is developing a network of connections and relationships. The stronger your network, the more opportunities you will have for building brand awareness and career advancement. You can leverage your network to build a reputation of helping other people as well as getting to know people who may be able to help you.

Your network should start within your local region or geography and expand toward a global span and across functional areas, such as corporate resources, engineering teams, specialty groups, product management and marketing, partner companies, etc. Be the person who reaches across these silos and brings the teams together.

A person whom I previously worked with in Presales and respect had a specific strategy for his career advancement, which is:

1. If you want to advance, identify the next job you would like to hold 18 months in the future.
2. Identify the people who are currently involved with that job.
3. Meet them, get to know them, build relationships with them, start helping them, and work with them.

Using this strategy, he advanced his career quickly up the ladders of several companies to the point where he now holds the role of CEO.

Sayings such as "It's all about who you know" and "It's not what you know, it's who you know" are not completely accurate but they do have some level of truth. I recommend focusing your networking efforts in two primary directions:

1. People you can help and who can help you as you build your technical body of work
2. People who are able to influence your career advancement

Strong networks in these areas will generally lead you to being considered as a highly valuable resource and increased recognition, important methods of marketing yourself.

Gain a Broad Range of Experience

The more experience you have across multiple areas, the more value you will be able to provide as a Principal, so pursue a broad range of experience in multiple technologies, verticals, specialties, roles, etc.

A common practice for gaining new experience is to work in different jobs within the Presales organization. Several categories of jobs are available in the Dell Technologies Presales organization, and various types of job experiences are available in each category. For example, as a customer-focused SA, you could gain experience supporting global, enterprise, government, or small and medium business customers. As a technology-focused SE, you could gain experience in specialties such as primary storage (SPS – Storage Platforms & Solutions), data protection (DPS – Data Protection Solutions), file and object storage (UDS – Unstructured Data Storage), and more. Broadening your range of experience will allow you to better understand customers' entire workload sets and provide strategic guidance around complete solutions.

Having a broad range of experience will position you well for one of the expectations of a Principal, which is to assume a leadership role in analyzing requirements, performing advanced systems integration, and providing technical expertise to design and implement solutions across the breadth of Dell Technologies and third-party products and services.

Do Things Outside Your Job Description

A good way to set yourself apart in the eyes of everyone around you is to *provide value above and beyond the basic responsibilities of the role of SA or SE*. Take the initiative to get involved in projects, efforts, teams, etc. that are unrelated to your job description.

“A huge component to becoming a Principal is going above and beyond.”

- Rick Scherer, Principal

For example, if you find areas for improvement in product documentation, build a relationship with the documentation team and work with them on ways to make enhancements. If you find an area of technology about which customers and coworkers are confused and ask many questions, become the expert and write a paper and/or blog on the topic. Seek out opportunities to speak at industry conferences such as Dell Technologies World.

As a personal example, while I was building my brand as an expert in storage resource management, many customers were having difficulty finding information on how they might charge back their customers for using storage. I decided to fill that gap by authoring articles on using [Dell Technologies Storage Resource Manager](#) to generate chargeback reports for block and object storage. EMC (now Dell Technologies) published my articles and I became a de facto expert on Storage Resource Manager, to the point that I was asked to develop a 40-hour class, train other SEs in the U.S. and Europe, deliver global seminars, and meet with customers around the world.

Expand Your Impact

Find ways to expand the scope of your impact.

Principals in Dell Technologies Presales are expected to deliver significant impact and be able to leave their footprints on a regional or global scale, outside of their business units, geographies, and/or customers. Ask yourself: *How do I begin to effect change that's much bigger than where I'm at now, and how do I do it globally?* You may find that you can impact

“It's not about how smart you are, it's more important how impactful you are in measurable ways.”

- Wayne Abbott, Principal

people globally within the constraints of existing programs (e.g. Dell Technologies Proven Professional program) or that you will need to make your own path.

Keep in mind that expectations for scope of impact typically increase as you move up through the Presales career track. Within Dell Technologies, expectations for impact for each of the Presales job titles are generally identified as listed in *Table 1 - Dell Technologies Presales Impact Levels*.

| Job Title | Scope of Impact |
|--------------------|--------------------------|
| Associate SA/SE I | Assigned accounts |
| Associate SA/SE II | Assigned accounts |
| SA/SE | Assigned accounts |
| Senior SA/SE | Local district level |
| Advisory SA/SE | Area or country level |
| Principal SA/SE | Regional or global level |

Table 1 - Dell Technologies Presales Impact Levels

Develop Your Leadership Skills

You may be the best technical product specialist in the company; however, technical expertise does not necessarily make a person a Principal. A person must demonstrate strong leadership experience and be highly regarded as a leader in his or her respective discipline in order to qualify as a candidate for Principal.

Work toward establishing and integrating yourself as a technical subject matter expert (SME) with your regional or country Presales leadership. One suggestion is to work within internal groups to address regional or country level challenges. Another suggestion is to actively participate within broader area programs run by field Chief Technology Office (CTO) leads. Other suggestions include:

- Present as a SME to multiple Presales teams inside and outside of your region
- Develop a new solution set that addresses a complex business process, 'go-to-market', or sales motion
- Demonstrate technical prowess by creating something that previously did not exist, addresses a gap either at the customer or internally, or can be sold or implemented across the theater

Achieve Professional Certifications

I strongly recommend that you pursue and achieve at least one (ideally more than one) expert level industry certification. Professional certifications are a formal demonstration of a person's ability to master technology and expand the scope of value that person can provide. Having a certification may be the difference in whether you are chosen for promotion over another individual if the candidates are equal in all other aspects.

Information on the Proven Professional program and certifications can be found [here](#).

Develop Others

An attractive component of a brand is showing that you make people around you better, and one approach is to take a leadership role in coaching or mentoring others. In fact, within Dell Technologies, formal participation in the mentoring program is a specific requirement to qualify as a candidate for Principal.

A candidate for Principal in Dell Technologies must have a minimum of one mentee at any point in time. Letters of recommendation from at least two mentees are required to become a candidate.

Work On Fulfilling the Principal 'Checkboxes'

The Principal Program at Dell Technologies includes a list of 'checkboxes', or fundamental requirements, that a person must fulfill in order to qualify as a candidate for Principal. You can fulfill many of these fundamental requirements regardless of the job title you currently hold, so I recommend that you begin working on these items early in your Presales career.

The list of requirements for the Dell Technologies Principal Program may change from year to year so be sure to maintain a current list. Following are examples of these requirements from past years:

- Demonstrate company-wide/cross-functional impact and influence
- Mentor at least one other person
- Proof of developing others in your sphere
- Provide external/customer references and internal letters of recommendation
- Consistently high-performance ratings

- Proven as a leader in respective disciplines
- Provide a technical body of work demonstrating the candidate's technical capabilities

For Dell Technologies employees who want to obtain the current list of requirements, contact the person responsible for managing the Principal Program.

Don'ts and Dangers

I've recommended a few things for you to do regarding advancing your Presales career; however, experience has also taught me several things to avoid.

Don't

- *Give anyone a reason to not promote you* – work diligently to eliminate all potential roadblocks to your career advancement
- *Allow yourself to get pigeon-holed in one job or role* – pursue a wide range of experience
- *Say it's not your job* – help others, point people in the directions of answers, connect people with other people who can help, etc.
- *Assume you know or should know everything* – do your best to learn everything you can and know how to find other people who know everything else
- *Hope you will be recognized, promoted, rewarded, etc.* – hope is not a plan, you need to take responsibility for your own career and advancement

One of the keys to a successful promotion is avoid anything that may harm your chances. The items listed here are common mistakes and I recommend evaluating yourself and determining whether you need to make any changes.

Dangers

From a more personal perspective, I have known coworkers who have invested so much time in their career that they have regrets over neglecting other areas of life. My desire is that you experience success in your career without regrets, so I would like to call out several common traps, or dangers, to avoid as you pursue your career:

- Losing life balance

- Abandoning other activities
- Allowing reputation ruination

A common danger is allowing your career and pursuit of advancement to take over your life. It's too easy to be consumed by the job to the point you sacrifice your marriage, kids, sanity, etc. Some sacrifices will need to be made to advance your career, but those decisions should be made with life balance in mind. If you have a significant other person in your life, consistent communication regarding choices, options, and decisions can help to keep your relationship strong. Maintaining a work-life balance is critical to enabling you to continue the marathon. Although 40 hours per week is generally not enough time to go above and beyond, you should set boundaries and establish a balance that will keep you from spending too much time on your career and losing everything else.

Another danger is allowing your career to consume your life by choosing not to be involved in other activities. Maintain your activity in outside interests to give your brain a much-needed break from work. Physical exercise and generosity with your resources are good ways to stay active outside of work. Find what fills your physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental 'tanks' and schedule time to do those things. As a personal example, I make time for bicycling (mix of roads and trails) and volunteering my time to lead the video and media production team for a large church. Many things in life drain our tanks, and you need to find ways to continue refilling your tanks.

Your reputation is critical and allowing situations or other people to ruin it is a danger to avoid. Allowing your reputation to be damaged may affect your personal life as well as limit your advancement and career options, so take responsibility for protecting it.

When you have built your mindset and developed a plan, only one more step remains to advance in your Presales career.

Make It Happen

So, you want to be a Principal. You will need to make many choices along the way.

You'll need to understand yourself and your motivation for advancing. You'll need to establish a mindset that will carry you through your career. You'll need to develop a plan for how to advance and then be flexible and adjust that plan as needed. You will also need to avoid pitfalls and traps that may hinder or prevent you from advancing.

“Hope is not a plan. You need to take responsibility for your own career and advancement.”

- Brian Dehn, author & Principal

The rest is up to you. No one will do it for you. If you want to advance, you need to make it happen. So, what are you waiting for? *Go and make it happen!*

Achieving Principal Is Just the Beginning

Before I wrap up this article, let's assume you have achieved Principal. Have you reached the end of your journey?

Actually, it's just the beginning. Expectations of a Principal can be summed up as: *Keep on doing what you're doing*. Remember that advancement to Principal is based on work you have *already* accomplished. You have already been going above and beyond, proactively identifying needs and developing solutions, impacting Dell Technologies at a global level, and providing value internally and with Dell customers. A Principal is expected to *continue* those behaviors. As an example, Wayne Abbott *continues* to maintain and enhance Nirvana with global impact. Jackie McKay *continues* to grow her expertise and help others to the point that customers, sales teams, and corporate teams (e.g. Product Management, Engineering, etc.) seek out her guidance. This article is my sixth paper published by Dell Technologies and the fifth *after* achieving the role of Principal, all of which have global impact. Keep on doing what you're doing – don't stop!

“You've just been given the keys to the car. It's incumbent upon you to drive it and do so towards a valuable destination.”

*- Jeffrey Caro, Dell Technologies
Vice President*

The role of Dell Technologies Principal is not just the 'top level' of the Presales career track, it's the bridge to the future. Continue to build that bridge and take the initiative to move Dell Technologies and its customers forward. *Keep on keeping on!*

Appendix

Appendix A – Personality Tests

Following is a list of well-known personality tests:

- The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, provided by the [The Myers and Briggs Foundation](#), which can be taken online [here](#)
- The Riso-Hudson Enneagram Type Indicator test, provided by [The Enneagram Institute](#), which can be taken online [here](#)
- The DISC personality system which defines the four quadrants of personality as Dominance, Influence, Steadiness, and Compliance. Online DISC assessments are offered by multiple organizations at various cost and service levels, and can be found by searching the web for 'DISC assessment'.
- The CliftonStrengths Assessment (previously known as StrengthsFinder), provided by Gallup, which can be taken online [here](#)
- Free versions of several of these personality tests are also available online, such as the assessments offered online by NERIS Analytics Limited at [16Personalities](#).

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