In-house vs. agency SEO work: The pros and cons

Roughly half of the Twitter DMs I receive are attempts to sell me "high-quality guest link posting."

The other half are lifelong agency SEOs looking to move in-house, asking me how to make the move and to review their resumes.

While I started my career in a link building agency (the real trenches of SEO) and have the utmost respect for agencies, I'd like to share insights into how I feel about in-house vs. agency life.

Disclaimer: This is my experience and not reflective of everyone's truth. If you've decided to make the switch in-house, I recommend speaking to those who made the move, as this article is just one data point.

The benefits of agency life

Truthfully, I wish every SEO started their career at an agency. Like a boot camp, the pace of agency life early in your career will be very formative.

Being in-house your entire life (especially at just one or two companies) can give you a tunnel-vision view of the world.

The exposure to sites of different sizes and the SEO savviness one can get inside an agency are unparalleled.

Experience is a superpower in SEO, so while now in life I (clearly) enjoy in-house life, I highly recommend SEOs work at agencies, even if just for a few years.

Here are other advantages of working in an agency:

- Exposure to many clients and verticals.
- Learning incredible project management skills.
- Many senior people mentoring you in what you do.
- Quickly learning a repeatable playbook of best practices for each vertical.
- Company incentives (i.e., sending you to SEO events or allowing you to speak).
- A more developed career ladder (i.e., an opportunity to be Director or Sr. Director).
- Fewer meetings and easier transition to consulting.

Exposure to many clients and verticals

One of the biggest shortcomings I see in SEO hires is a lack of experience working across sites of different sizes with different resources.

Even if you can spend your entire SEO career at a highly competitive SEO-driven company (e.g., Tripadvisor, Condé Nast), that won't necessarily translate well into doing SEO for a new SaaS company with limited resources and no bespoke or custom tooling.

In an agency, you get to use a variety of the clients' homegrown tools and off-the-shelf SEO tools your clients may already be bought into, so you'll know the right tool for the job.

Learning incredible project management skills

A lack of project and stakeholder management skills can often cripple your career.

I suggest SEOs focus on these soft skills if they ever want to move in-house.

It's a survival skill most agency SEOs pick up as they juggle

client work and relationships.

Early mentorship and a repeatable playbook

In an agency, assuming SEO is a commonly sold service, there might be a lot of senior SEOs with vast experience around you.

Generally speaking, every vertical has best practices that are fairly repeatable and usually work.

Having this wealth of knowledge and experience around you can quickly uplevel you and compensate for your own lack of experience.

In-house, you might be the only SEO trying to figure it out while teaching yourself.

I've often found completely self-taught SEOs to be a little undisciplined if they never received feedback early in their careers from other SEOs.

Company incentives to send you to SEO events or allow you to speak

Public speaking can be an incredible platform to build your SEO career. It's also great for networking and discussing SEO tactics privately with other SEOs.

Quite frankly, they're also quite fun if you're social like me!

But being in-house, it is rare that companies will pay for you to do public speaking or attend SEO events. There's simply little incentive to do so.

Agencies need new business, so sending employees to events and putting themselves in front of companies looking to learn

about SEO makes fiscal sense.

It's a great way to build your agency's brand and bring in inbound leads.

Within some organizations, sending SEO employees to speak is sometimes seen as a double negative. Not only is it costly, but the talent is also likely to be poached and they won't be able to easily anonymize their data.

No company wants their secrets openly shared with the world to live indefinitely on SlideShare, where competitors can easily see them.

The best companies I've been in allowed for a single conference each year. Generally, you need to speak about the work of other companies to qualify for speaking engagements.

A more developed career ladder for SEO

If you're the only SEO in your company or one of a few, and SEO is not a major lever, it is unlikely SEO will have a well-defined career ladder.

For example, you might need to champion the creation of a senior position like Director of SEO — and, likely, it might never happen.

Due to the number of SEOs and the customer-facing aspect of agencies, I feel that agency SEO roles at Director and VP levels are much more common than in-house.

The key exception I've seen is for SEO-driven companies, such as Booking, Yelp or Tripadvisor.

Most in-house SEO roles top out at "Lead" or "Head of SEO."

Some circumvent this by taking on other teams, like SEM. But more commonly, companies will give an SEO team to a paid search lead than give paid search to SEO.

When millions of dollars of budget are on the line, prudent budget spend is generally optimized for rolling search teams under a single search lead.

Fewer meetings because you're a consultant and an easier transition to consulting

I have **a lot** of meetings. In my experience with an agency and my own consulting friends, many can have just ~2 meetings maximum per day.

As an SEO lead in a multinational company, it is not unusual for the most senior SEO to be in 5-6 hours of meetings a day. This is especially common as you start taking on more projects or products within the company.

It is also much easier to transition from being an agency SEO into consulting because you:

- Have the playbook.
- Know how to pitch clients.
- Understand the nuts and bolts of running a business that sells SEO.

Consulting is an attractive proposition if you have the best clients. I know many of the best SEOs who easily generate incomes of several hundred thousand a year with just a few clients.

I've seen lifelong in-house SEOs struggle with this transition. In contrast, it seemed second nature for my agency SEO friends to begin side hustles and eventually transition into working full-time for themselves.

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The benefits of being in-house

Becoming an in-house SEO has various advantages which I really enjoy. Some of them include:

- Having a better quality of life (for me, at least).
- More opportunities for consistent, deep work.
- Not caring if clients fire you.
- Going into tech or SEO product.

Better quality of life

I know some agencies have a high quality of life. But by their nature, I have always found the work to be more reactive depending on who the client is.

I've also witnessed some clients being abusive to agencies, as they can be an easy scapegoat when things go south.

It is almost always painful for me to join a new company. There's a level of needing to "prove yourself" initially.

Yet over time, I find the familiarity and friendships I've built within a company allow me to have a high quality of life I am not confident I could find in an agency with new companies, teams and stakeholders all the time.

This level of peace and comfort usually happens at around the 1.5-year mark, when you've had some wins and finally feel "settled."

My quality of life is pretty exceptional, and I have no complaints at most of the large companies I worked for.

More opportunities for consistent, deep work

When you think about just one customer (your company) every day, getting the buy-in needed for meaty, big multi-year projects becomes much easier.

It also enables you to be a real subject matter expert on your products, allowing you to take on exciting and out-of-the-box SEO ideas and not just execute best practices.

A lot of my agency friends find this lack of variety boring, but I personally love being able to think deeply about a smaller portfolio of products.

Not having to care if your clients fire you

Oftentimes, agencies might have a big client representing a disproportionate share of revenue in the agency. Losing clients like this often can mean layoffs will quickly follow.

This is quite stressful for me because now I have to worry about doing SEO **and** keeping all of the clients.

Worrying about SEO results and impact is enough for me, and I don't like having my job security tied too heavily to a single customer.

Going into tech and/or SEO product

Tech has been a career-changer. I get to do what I love in combination with working on products I use daily and receiving some widely lauded industry perks such as:

- Stock packages.
- Generous benefits.
- World-class snacks.

- A fine education in big company vernacular (i.e., "taking a step back" to produce results that really "move the needle").

I recognize that I got incredibly lucky with my timing at Square. Most tech companies fail, and it's a highly tumultuous industry at the moment. But I am deeply satisfied and appreciative of my experience in tech, and it's an incredible way to build wealth.

Working for a tech company also means there is usually a large product management organization.

This means you might be able to join and transfer into a more traditional tech ladder and, eventually, a more well-rounded growth leader who perhaps no longer even does SEO.

If you want to go into product, working for a tech company is likely the easiest way to eventually transfer into this role style (if it doesn't exist yet).

Improving your chances of getting hired in-house

Interviewing for an in-house role?

The most common mistake I see agency SEOs make is spending too much time discussing new business when in-house companies simply don't care.

Here are my suggestions:

Change the number of clients to the number of sites you owned

In-house hiring managers don't care how much you billed or how many clients you managed. They want to know the results you produced for any particular client.

Focus on quantitative growth numbers, the size of the sites, and the tools you have familiarity with. Remove anything related to selling/closing clients.

If you were a team manager, say it!

Mention how many people you hired and/or managed. Hiring is one of your most important jobs as a leader, so if you're a great people manager, let them know.

Name drop

Big companies like knowing you worked for other big companies, especially if they're competitors or companies like them.

If you had an attractive client base, let them know, and it will help your resume stick out to the hiring manager.

Don't be nervous

Remember, the company wants to fill this role the most. It is in their best interest to like you.

If the company treats you poorly, this is not the right company for you, and you should move on.

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