

# How to Fireproof Your Career: Five Strategies for Worklife Survival

Long-term job security is a thing of the past. The guarantee of a gold watch has been replaced by the possibility of a pink slip.

Organizational resources earmarked for the physical sciences are declining. Many industries are restructuring. Corporate giants such as AT&T, IBM and Xerox, companies that once seemed to offer life-long employment, have downsized, reorganized and, in some cases, eliminated laboratories. Many companies are taking a closer look at their research units and asking, "What are you doing to expand our share of the market? What corporate problems have you solved lately?"

As the effects of reengineering, mergers and downsizing ricochet through the hallowed hallways and lauded laboratories of the scientific community, industrial physicists must learn how to maintain career equilibrium while everything around them is in a state of flux.

Without belaboring the whys and wherefores of the massive changes affecting work-life security today, here are five strategies for developing a new kind of self-propelled, long-term career security. If you carry out these strategies, then, regardless of what happens to your job, your career will be alive and well.

## Liberate your mind

If you have worked for a large company for more than a few years, you should beware of thoughts such as, "The benefits are too good to leave." Or, "If there is a lay-off, they will take care of me." Or, "Only 14 more years to retirement!" The good old days are gone forever and your leftover

loyalty could lull you into passivity.

The truth is, no matter who signs your paycheck, you work for yourself. Decide today that you are effectively self-employed. Develop behaviors to remind yourself that your stay at any one company will probably

be temporary, and prepare yourself psychologically for the possibility of transition.

Set up an office at home for all your career-related materials—your résumé, your contact file, your activities with professional associations, your awards. Associate with people who are excited by, or at least accepting of, the workplace turbulence around them. Seek out others who encourage you to take risks and explore new applications for your talents, rather than people who focus on the possibility of

negative outcomes.

When asked, answer the question, "What do you do?" without relying on your corporate logo, your job title or off-putting jargon. Instead of answering, "I'm the principal project scientist in industrial physics at XYZ Laboratories, Eastern Regional Division," say something like, "I'm using physics and electronics to create more accurate time-keeping devices." Tell your talents, not your title. Design an answer that makes it easy for people to visualize what you're good at.

## Learn for mastery

Organizations continually assess their needs. When did you last assess what you must do to become a more valued employee? What are your skill gaps? As you look at industry and global trends, can you identify skills that will add to your future employability? Would knowing how to negotiate contracts, manage employees or speak Russ-

In the face of funding uncertainties that threaten to derail many laboratories, physicists can keep their careers on track by heeding a few simple recommendations

ian make your résumé stand out from all the rest?

Among the many possible ways to add to or update your skills there is surely at least one that fits your learning style. Would you be willing to try long distance learning through your computer? Listen to audio tapes as you commute? Enroll in weekend university programs for working adults? Earn a traditional degree? Enter a post-doctoral program? Take on a volunteer project in your local community?

## Lean out of specialization

There is a real danger in becoming wrapped up in a fascinating but esoteric field of work for which there may be no long-term demand outside your company or industry. Instead, be ready to move to a new career field or specialty whenever you want to or have to. Focus on portable skills you can take with you to other industries or settings.

As the organizational pyramid flattens into a pancake, look for other directions to go besides up. Have you considered a lateral transfer to an area with a stronger future? Could you jump the fence and work for a vendor? Should you parlay your experience into consulting or an entrepreneurial venture? Would relocation now to a slower, warmer, less expensive climate ease your transition to retirement or to the next stage in your career?

## Line up your finances

What would happen to your financial health if you were suddenly out of work for six months? A year? Now, while you are comfortably employed, make financial decisions that support you instead of trap you.

How can you earn more, manage better and spend less? To earn more, consider



teaching, writing or consulting on the side. That way you will build your fireproof fund while you beef up your résumé.

To manage your money better, work with a financial planner who can advise you on everything from investing to retirement planning. Most people simply don't have the interest or expertise to make the best financial decisions without professional help.

To spend less, take a serious look at ways in which you have been spending on autopilot; consider which purchases you can live without, and limit your discretionary spending. Could you downsize from two cars to one? Could you swap houses instead of taking an expensive hotel vacation? One of our workshop graduates wrote to tell us that his family of four was saving \$130 a month just by cutting back on movies and eating out.

## Link up with people

A recently laid-off scientist from a Fortune 500 company summed up the challenge of networking: "I knew a lot of people, but we didn't do anything for each other. It has taken me six months to develop a network of people who know my skills and care about sending resources and leads my way." Dig your well before you're thirsty, and develop your safety net(work) now, before you need it.

If you are one who says, "I hate to network," or "Networking doesn't work!" con-

sider a new way of building professional relationships. Make your contacts based on what you have to give, and in return people will naturally want to contribute to your success.

Merely joining professional groups is not sufficient for building productive relationships. Make yourself visible in the scientific societies that deal with

your specialty. Help others who are engaged in a job search. Make your character and competence known outside your company as well as inside by contributing your talent and time generously.

Support the success of others everywhere you can in your family, at your workplace, in your community, at your health club, at your children's activities. Watch the great connectors you know, and study how—with a firm handshake, warm tone of voice, spontaneous generosity and infallible reliability—they gain the esteem of others. Take networking off your to-do list, and make it a way of life to give information, access and support.

Headlines and rumors announcing more layoffs can generate enormous anxiety. Instead of worrying about how to protect your future, use these strategies to focus that fear into a well thought-out plan for fireproofing your career. n

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