



Hi Magazine
Published by the
US State Department
June 2006 issue

How to Succeed in the Workplace

By Kim Caviness

Gone are the days when you'd get a job straight out of college and stay at the company until they ushered you out a gold watch and a pension. Today, the average American is expected to switch jobs multiple times over the course of their life. Rather than seeing this as an indication of an undesirable worker, employers in most industries see this as a healthy sign. It shows the employee is ambitious, employable and ready to take on new challenges.

At the same time, employees are busier than ever at work and have less time to network and take on extra-curricular job-skills training. Workers face their bosses' increased expectations to keep up with today's faster workplace, reflecting the demands of a 24/7 global economy, outsourcing, budget demands, and the ubiquitous "I want it now" expectations powered by Blackberries and instant messaging. How can employees make sure their employability and career possibilities don't get left behind in the crunch of the daily workplace's demands?

We asked career specialist Heather Bradley, CPC, cofounder and principal of The Flourishing Company—which specializes in coaching services helping people and companies achieve business success—for tried-and-true advancement tips and career advice. How can today's savvy worker stay current with the market place's demands, industry expectations and ensure they keep ahead of the curve in terms of job options and salary?

First of all, how do you define a successful career?

We define this beyond secured employment. The concept we introduce is employability. How do you make yourself as employable as possible?

What do you advise a person who feels he or she is stuck in their career and has no idea how to get to the next level in terms of money or responsibility?

We would step back from the job itself and work with them to assess their employability. And then asking a secondary question: So what are you doing to maintain your employability. It used to be employment for life. We know that doesn't exist in North America anymore. It's not enough just to have a good education and a strong professional record. That does not guarantee you career success.

Employability today involves understanding the market place and being prepared to fill available opportunities. Employability also protects you from unforeseen detours. I was a fast tracker at my Fortune 500 Company. I was a VP by the time I was 40. And my company suddenly went bankrupt. What helped me bounce back was that I understood the marketplace.

How do you stay up on the marketplace?

Understand the trends. What's going on around you both at your workplace and in your industry as a whole? It's a little bit of crystal ball gazing but there's enough data out there that you can read the pundits, you can read the press, you can read the research and the journals. You can pretty well see what's going to happen. It's about what's emerging going forward in the marketplace. The second piece is the question of your personal preparedness. So we've got the clarity, we've done our research and know what's emerging. Now you look at what's within your control. You can take an inventory, you can look at your skills, and benchmark them against these emerging trends. Do I need more skills, do I need more training? For example in the legal market, there are jobs that exist today that weren't even conceived of five or 10 years ago. Those attorneys who saw the emerging trends in their industries in the legal industry could upgrade their skills.

What are the top 5 top habits to adopt and succeed in your job?

1. Take inventory. You have to know where you are before you know what changes you might need to make. This can include: What do you love doing? There are a lot of people doing what they think they should be doing, not what they really want to be doing.
2. Position yourself. Promotions don't always go to the most qualified person. Often they're awarded to the best-positioned candidate. I would ask: How visible are you and your accomplishments? Make yourself indispensable to those you work with directly and directly. Be at the right place at the right time.

3. Make the most of your support network. That also helps with positioning. I believe people generally like to help other people but they don't know how to help us if we don't specifically have a request. I get pushback from clients because they think that's using people. It's not. That's how the world goes around. We all help each other.
4. Don't forget the people who helped you. Find a way in your own style that works to acknowledge the people who have helped you along the way.
5. Be conscious and intentional in clarifying what employability means to you. Update your plan often.

Is a great resumé the key to getting your foot in the door?

It depends. It goes back to knowing what the industry is and what is the specific company. Some people say the well-written cover letter is what makes or breaks. My experience is: It's all about networking. A cover letter is like a business card. It's the price of admission. It gets you in the door. (And don't lie on it, because we've seen what happens when people exaggerate or lie.) But [back to the resume], I think it's important to have one and to have one updated and current. You want to be able to pull it out on request. But a resume doesn't hold a candle to what relationships can do to help you move through your career and get the recognition that you want. And resumes don't help you at all after you're in the door.

What about a mission statement on your resumé? Do you advise that?

No. I encourage people to have the clarity of what they want to create for themselves. Whether it appears on the top of a resume or not I think is irrelevant.

How can employees communicate their employability to a prospective employer?

When someone says they have a skill or an experience, I want to hear a couple of stories about how they handled whatever it is they handled whatever it is they've said they've done. I'm looking for poise. Depending on what the job is, I may be looking for different types of behavior. If I'm looking for a salesperson, that may be a very different level of energy and behavior than if I'm looking for a librarian. I'm looking for someone who is interviewing me, not just me interviewing them. I want someone who is very interested to know: What is this company all about? What is this job all about? What are my potential opportunities to move around or cross-train or get promoted, if that's important to them. I'm also looking for someone who is not too glib. If someone gets too cocky, that's a real turnoff for me, but that's just me. And it goes without saying that they're dressed appropriately for whatever position they're applying for. And

if you have to ask yourself when you take out something, Is this enough for what I'm looking for? Put it back in the closet and pick out the next level up.

If a job comes along and it's not exactly right, is it better to take it and risk jumping ship again too soon, or should you hold out for the right job?

That's such a tough question. It's industry specific. Everyone has to make their own decisions based on their economic needs at the moment. If it means you're going to lose your house and this is the only job on the horizon, you do what you have to do for yourself. But, you're probably not going to be happy and it's going to show in your work and you're going to be looking around almost immediately. And that's going to be a problem.

If you do take the wrong job, is there a set amount of time you have to stick it out before you can get a new one?

Human Resources people are generally really good at understanding authenticity and sincerity. If you go into an interview and you say, "Look, I can't believe I'm out looking again. I'm really disappointed. This job wasn't either what I had thought it was or what had been promised to me." In either case, the HR person would probe more to make sure it's an authentic, not a BS answer. I think a good HR person could tell the difference. And that's a lot different than: "I just took it because there was nothing better." Because then I would wonder if that is what you're doing with me today. And you would be shocked at what people say in an interview. You would think someone wouldn't really say something like that, but they do.

What are the three or four things to keep top of mind when you go into your boss' office to ask for a raise?

This is always a difficult conversation because you're hoping that they're going to acknowledge your contributions and that you don't have to go ask. But sometimes you have to go ask. I would do my homework before I go in. I would be mindful of what the length of time is from the time that I got an increase and if that seems to bolster the case. {For example}, we normally do then on 12 months and it's been 14 months and I haven't heard anything. I would also come armed with any commitments that were made either at the time of hire or at the last time I was reviewed. I would also come armed with a list of my contributions since the last increase period. I would also recommend bringing any accolades that satisfied internal or external customers had shared. I wouldn't

wait until the review either, by the way, I would be sharing those with my boss as they come along.

What if you get turned down?

If for some reason, I didn't get my raise, understand what it's going to take to get the increase. I think the often overlooked question is: What is it that you need to see me doing that I'm not doing? And when can I expect that we can revisit this issue again? Because it also puts the boss on notice. You're not going away. And if it happens a couple of times, I would be asking what my future is with that company.

By the way, [when you're first interviewing], you want to go in at the absolute highest salary you can negotiate. That's when you have the most bargaining power on salary — when you're coming in the door. I had a recruiter friend of mine say: Don't even bother considering a move unless you can do a 20% increase. Just to make it worth your while to change companies.

Any final word of advice?

Get a mentor. We're strong advocates of mentors. If there is something systemic going on [that's troubling you at work], a lot of time mentors will be able to help you figure out what's going on. They'll tell you, "Oh, there's this unwritten rule, didn't anyone tell you about this?" We're advocates of having a couple of mentors. One inside the company and one specifically not inside the company.

FOR PHOTO OF HEATHER BRADLEY:

<http://www.theflourishingcompany.com/pages/aboutus.htm>