

Smartest career moves for the year ahead

With the economy in meltdown, several pros were asked to weigh in with their single best strategy. Here are their top resolutions

WALLACE IMMEN
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Remember the good old days - like just last summer?

Before the economy started its meltdown, employees thought they could confidently set long-term career goals and count on the support of employers who valued them and were convinced that, in a war for talent, they had to nurture and reward people to keep them loyal.

All that seems to have changed in just a few short months. Suddenly, the focus has shifted to survival, with many companies looking to prune costs and putting jobs on the line.

That means career development may be dropping off corporate agendas, career experts warn.

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So, employees should be setting their own course to weather the economic storm and set themselves up for success in a recovery, the pros say.

How best to do that? Several career pros were asked to weigh in on the single smartest strategy to employ through the new year for your career. Here are each of their top resolutions to consider.

Rick Lash

Practice leader,

Hay Group, Toronto

Key strategy

Be adaptable.

Why now

Changing circumstances are a given. In tough times, it's about showing your employer you can roll with the punches. It's not just about learning new skills; it's about being willing to see yourself in a new light and shedding your old identity. That's how you can see opportunities.

How to do it

Look for opportunities to change the way things are done that add immediate value to your business, and talk about it with your boss.

Test out some new roles: Ask if you can job shadow someone in a completely different job function. Be willing to feel incompetent for a while to learn something new. Broaden or change your social network.

What it can achieve

Take a lesson from the dinosaurs that died out when an asteroid hit the Earth in prehistoric times: It is the nimble and adaptable ones who survive tough times.

Steve Mitten

President, Principal Evolutions Coaching and Training Inc., Vancouver

Key strategy

Reflect.

Why now

Because everything is in flux, there are fewer options for shifting to a new employer. Focusing on what you do well and where you add value can help ward off the feeling of being trapped in a role and can point to new opportunities.

How to do it

Ask yourself these questions: "What are the activities I enjoy the most? Does what I do each day make the best use of my skills, strengths and values? What do I want more of? What do I want to leave behind?" Using these insights, you should look for opportunities in your current role to do work that best aligns with your interests, strengths and values.

What it can achieve

Reflection will raise your overall self-awareness, help you feel more fulfilled in challenging times, and give you ideas for new, career-boosting directions and moves.

Tim Cork

President, NEXCareer, Toronto

Key strategy

Be a listener.

Why now

Especially in stressful times, people can fall into a trap of concentrating on personal survival and asking "what's in it for me?" when people seek their help. Instead, your goal should be to offer your assistance to others, which establishes you as a supportive and essential team player.

How to do it

Have discussions with each of your colleagues on the current challenges they are facing. Spend the majority of your time listening to learn what is important to them.

Suggest an action you can take to help them with their situation or to make their work less burdensome.

What it can achieve

The listening and networking lays a groundwork for receiving. The offer will be appreciated because it will demonstrate your support and your co-operative attitude.

And when you need to ask these people for help in the future, they will be ready to say yes.

Dave Crisp

President, Crisp Strategies Ltd., Toronto

Key strategy

Stretch yourself.

Why now

In tough times, employers are looking for new approaches but employees who feel their jobs might be in jeopardy are likely to hunker down and cling to the tried and true, rather than take a risk with something untested. You will stand out if you show your eagerness to step into the breach.

How to do it

There are roles and projects you have always believed you have the talent for, and now is the time to make the move. Volunteer your services: Suggest to management that you are ready to take on a new challenge that will help the business. Of course, you'll need to prioritize. Don't just take on a new role as an add-on to your job or your work-life balance will crash. Find a way to shift out of routine tasks or a role you have outgrown to focus on the new challenge.

What it can achieve

This can be both a differentiator and a great learning experience that will be welcomed by managers looking for enthusiastic employees who want to create change. You will show your flexibility and positive attitude.

Nina Spencer

President, Nina Spencer

& Associates, Toronto

Key strategy

Think "Me Inc."

Why now

Acting like an entrepreneur and taking charge of your own advancement will increase your personal commitment to doing the best job possible - at a time when employers are looking at which employees consistently add value, and which are expenses they could do without.

How to do it

Acting like a partner in the business will see you coming in earlier and leaving later, and actively engaging with colleagues and your boss on what you can do to meet the day's challenges. Ask yourself on a daily basis: "How is this current task or activity helping my company prosper? How does this current task or activity advance our declared goals, values and overall mandate and serve our clients the best way we can?"

What it can achieve

The entrepreneur's reality is if you don't perform, there's no payback. By treating your employer, every colleague and client as someone who consumes your services and pays your bills, you'll be seen as providing top value.

Colleen Clarke

President, Colleen Clarke

and Associates, Toronto

Key strategy

Form a brainstorming group.

Why now

Employers are looking for good ideas to cope with challenges and rapid change. Employees are already having informal discussions, and by formalizing them, a group can come up with creative, out-of-the-box solutions and agree to try to implement them.

How to do it

Invite people representing different parts of the company to meet weekly or monthly at lunch. Get ideas in advance from participants for problems they want on the agenda. Describe the issue for about three minutes and then go around the room asking each participant to suggest a creative, outside-the-box idea for finding a solution. Forward the best ideas to management.

What it can achieve

You are sure to receive a wide range of perspectives and develop some creative solutions from gathering with your workmates. As organizer of the meetings, you will be recognized by management and co-workers as a dedicated employee who is a source of creative, life-preserving ideas, which will result in your being considered a keeper even if the company is cutting staff.

Claude Balthazard

Director of human resources excellence, Human Resources Professionals Association, Toronto

Key strategy

Make a measurable difference.

Why now

Having quantifiable accomplishments will be increasingly important as organizations keep an eye on costs and consider eliminating staff who aren't pulling their weight.

How to do it

Determine what you do best and where you create the most value for your organization, and focus your efforts on showing concrete achievement in this area. A simple way to do this might be to just ask colleagues and managers what they think you excel at and how you can get even better.

"This sounds easy, and it is very effective, but very few individuals actually do this."

What it can achieve

You'll set yourself up as a valuable asset to be kept even if cutbacks get drastic.

Randall Craig

President, Pinetree Advisors, Toronto

Key strategy

Invest in your development.

Why now

Success on the job often depends on training and expanding your skills, but employers cutting costs often see the elimination of training and development programs as an easy short-term saving. Taking the initiative to get more knowledge gives you a leg up in your current job and greater flexibility to take on different assignments.

How to do it

Education can be formal, by enrolling in a development seminar, taking a college or university course, or beginning work on a new professional certification.

At the very least, vow to read the business section and industry websites regularly, and set aside time each month to read a trade publication and the latest business books.

What it can achieve

You will improve your knowledge, skills, credentials, performance - and improve your value to your employer. Your classmates will also give you new networking connections.

And a bonus is that if you do find yourself on the job market in a cutback, your updated training goes with you - boosting your value and differentiating you from other candidates.

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