

Report on **Business**

Smooth sailing ahead: How to take advantage

It's been a scary, bumpy ride over the past year, with work forces decimated, lofty goals falling victim to market realities and continual demands to do more with fewer resources. What makes it all survivable is the increasing number of predictions that smoother sailing will be ahead as the economy brightens, creating new career opportunities. But will you be ready to take advantage of the trends? Reporter Wallace Immen asked a range of career experts a single question: What is the smartest thing you can do right now to enhance your career prospects for the coming year? Here's what they advise:

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Ask and you may receive

Why: As prospects brighten this year, companies that froze salaries and scrapped bonuses last year are considering opening their purses, says Liz Wright, compensation practice leader for [human resources](#) consultancy Watson Wyatt in Toronto.

Its survey of 72 Canadian companies found that even the 26 per cent that froze wages in 2009 are now thinking about salary increases in 2010. "That may not translate into immediate payroll increases, but employers are going to be more open to employees who take initiative and can demonstrate they deserve more because their track record has helped in the recovery," Ms. Wright says.

Strategy: The poll found companies planning salary increases in a range of about 2.5 per cent to 2.8 per cent, so that is a target to shoot for when you ask for a raise, Ms. Wright suggests.

"This might also be a perfect opportunity to ask for bonuses for performance, and pay or perks for the extra workload many people are being asked to take on in organizations that have been downsized," she says.

That's because, as the economy begins to recover, employers will be doing their best to retain top talent who might leave for greener pastures, Ms. Wright says. Employers are nervously looking at evidence such as a recent poll Watson Wyatt did of U.S. employers that showed a 23-per-cent drop in employee engagement among high-performing employees from a year ago, she says. "Half of those who said their satisfaction had dropped also said they would jump ship if the economy improves."

Become the expert

Why: Anxious workers are scrambling to demonstrate their versatility, hoping that being able to work in a number of areas will help spare them in job cuts. Wrong thinking, says career coach Sharon Graham, president Graham [Management Group](#) in Toronto. "They forget that the more things they try to juggle, the more they dilute their strengths," she says. "Why try to be a generalist when it means you will end up competing with a lot of other generalists?" **Strategy:** Cultivate your expertise in a unique skill that can't be easily outsourced as companies continue to look for ways to pare their payrolls. Take additional training, get an advanced certification and be able to use technology that no

one else is able to use effectively.

In your networking, rather than join multiple associations and networking sites, focus on groups that discuss specific topics related to your area of expertise. "This will enable you to actively participate and make a name for yourself as an expert at what you do, which will have you in demand no matter how the [job market](#) performs," Ms. Graham says.

Groom a successor

Why: As companies come out of the recession and start to expand, they will be looking to promote from within, out of necessity and to retain their best talent, says career coach Paul Copcutt, principal of Square Peg Solution in Hamilton. But if you want to be in line for a promotion, you'd better have someone at the ready to take over your old job.

Strategy: "If you have been able to identify and mentor a replacement, your boss will feel a lot better about promoting you," Mr. Copcutt says.

Make it clear to your manager you are aiming higher, but also want to think strategically for the business in terms of people and team development. Drop the name of someone you've carefully watched that you believe has the skills and qualities to take over your role as you move up. "This will establish your career ambitions and in the process the subordinate you befriend will become a strong ally."

Review your effectiveness **Why:** Last year saw so much disruption in so many organizations that many people focused only on daily survival rather than on how to do their job more effectively. Now is the perfect time to sit down and consider behaviours you've fallen into that may be holding you back, says Jeff Haltrecht, principal of Jeff Haltrecht Executive Coaching, in Oakville, Ont. **Strategy:** Three things to look at: whether you are spending too much time on details, how you are misaligned with colleagues and what you could do to be more effective in communicating your ideas to the team, Mr. Haltrecht says.

To find out where you need to evolve, ask several colleagues with whom you regularly interact such questions as: What do I do well that you want me to keep doing? What should I improve or stop doing altogether?

"Make those your goals for the coming year, following up with the same people to measure your progress monthly for the first quarter, then quarterly thereafter. You will find your relationships improve, your results get better, and a level of stress is reduced."

Get recommended

Why: Being on the [social networking](#) site LinkedIn has become a must for all people in business. Clients, recruiters and employers alike use it to check your background and expertise.

But because so many people are now on the site, just having a writeup and a lot of networking connections is no longer enough, says Tim Cork, president of career transition company NexCareer Inc. in Toronto and author of the advice book *Tapping the Iceberg*. "Increasingly important this year will be the quality of the recommendations from those who have worked with you."

Strategy: Actively prompt bosses, clients and peers to say great things about you and recommend your work. "You can even write the one- or two-sentence recommendations yourself and ask contacts if they

will agree to post the praise on your LinkedIn page," Mr. Cork adds.

"You can beat your chest all you want, but when others who have worked with you or know you say you are great in certain areas, you get instant credibility. The more, the better."

Be part of the inner circle

Why: This is a time when organizations are searching for answers that will give them an edge, and pull them out of the slide faster than the competition. So you can give yourself an edge by being able to lead your company to those answers, says Toronto-based executive coach and speaker Dave Crisp, president of Crisp Leadership Strategies in Toronto.

"If you can become a hub of information in your specialty, people will seek you out," he says. "Your goal should be to become one of the inner circle of 'in the know' people in your industry." Strategy: Identify and cultivate people who are best informed and most influential in your field. That generally represents about 10 per cent of all your contacts, Mr. Crisp says.

You can identify them by asking everyone you meet in your field: "Who would know the most about topic X?" You'll hear the same go-to names again and again, he says. "These are people you need to meet and cultivate."

You'll have to have something to offer to catch their attention - like information they can also use. "If you've thought enough about the tough challenges in the field to have a clear point of view, it will position you in their eyes as a thoughtful player, and they will be likely to seek you out when they have information to share."

Plan an exit strategy

Why: The past year has shown how tenuous job security can be. Even if you think it may be years before you actually make a move, develop a strategy now for how you might make the transition to a new job or profession if you were forced to leave your current job, advises career coach Nina Spencer, president of Nina Spencer & Associates in Toronto.

Strategy: Even if you aren't ready to leave yet, start to mull an escape plan. Take a few minutes to ask yourself: What would I do if a career change was forced on me? Each time you ask, you will get closer to a clearer picture. Start a file of your thoughts and ideas about a potential escape plan, including interesting article clippings, and a growing list of contacts and relationships you want to nurture, Ms. Spencer suggests.

Without tipping your hand, you can also take courses to get training or certification that will make you more valuable to a potential new employer and, in the process, build your value in your current job.

