

When flames of fear lick at your feet

In nervous times, it might be tempting to leap to the safety net of a new job. Caution: Don't jump from the frying pan into the fire

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The heat is on.

Job cuts are starting to hit the auto, retail and publishing industries, and the credit crunch is causing grimmer moods on Bay Street, as pink slips wash over Wall Street.

Have these kinds of things got you feeling like the flames may be licking at your feet? Worrying that your job could be next?

In nervous times, it's easy to overreact and make an impulsive jump to a new job or industry that may seem to offer a safety net.

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Indeed, 84 per cent of more than 6,900 respondents to a Globe and Mail on-line poll last week said that they'd search for a new job if they heard rumours that their company was planning layoffs.

But leaping out of the frying pan could just land you in the fire if you make a move without thinking strategically to ensure it meets your long-term career goals, career experts warn.

At the same time, it's only prudent to seriously examine your career options, because there is nothing worse than being caught without an escape route when you're told it's time to clear out your desk.

"It's the instinctive reaction to address short-term uncertainty by finding a new job," says Lou Clements, a partner in executive recruiter and transition consultancy Miller Dallas Inc. in Toronto.

But that could mean you give up a reputation, alliances and seniority you have built over time that might keep you from being singled in an economic meltdown.

When companies trim staff, it is often last in, first out, he warns.

And in a new job, "once you get over the initial thrill of change, you may find you're shovelling the same manure - it is just a different pile," he says.

If your next move is weighing on your mind, career experts say it pays to take the time to do it right.

Your first step, they say, is to look for options within your company.

"People can get so wrapped up in the daily grind of their profession they can lose sight of how their company's needs are changing," says Mark Toombs, president for Alberta of executive search and career counselling company KWA Partners.

Approach your boss about the challenges your company is facing, and where your attributes and skills can best fit its needs, he says.

In troubled companies, management will be anxious to keep employees who offer solutions and volunteer to be involved in projects that could help engineer a turnaround, Mr. Toombs adds.

"This is definitely not a time for a bunker mentality," advises Sharon Jordan-Evans, an executive coach in Cambria, Calif., and co-author of *Love It, Don't Leave it, 26 Ways to Get What You Want at Work*.

"Now is the time to toot your own horn, to remind your boss of the last piece of business you brought in, or the cost-cutting you and your team did last quarter.

"Boy, do you increase the odds of being one who survives if you have some recent examples of things you are doing to create profit in an organization awash in red ink."

Demonstrating winning performance is also critical to your fallback position. Success stories will help you sell yourself to a new employer, she adds.

Even if you don't see an immediate risk of the axe, you should be looking at how marketable your skills are in today's job market, advises Tim Cork, president of Toronto-based career transition company NexCareer Inc. and author of the advice book *Tapping the Iceberg*.

Check career ads and job boards for openings in your specialty, and where else the demand is, Mr. Cork says.

But since most jobs, particularly at executive levels, are not advertised, devote most of your efforts to networking with colleagues and industry sources to get a feel for what might be available, he advises.

Even if you're not ready to move, accept headhunter phone calls and go on interviews. It's great practice and you get a feel for what is out there and how marketable you are, he says.

"Create a 30-second recession elevator speech to articulate why people should be interested in you at a time when they are thinking of tightening their belts," Mr. Cork says.

"What's your unique skill and why will it help them recover from a challenging situation?"

You should also be collecting testimonials, both written and verbal, from references, he adds.

Make it clear to your current employer that you remain loyal and are doing your best - but don't confuse loyalty with inaction, advises Carolyn Cohen, an independent human resources consultant in Toronto.

Loyalty doesn't mean you should not be looking out for your own career and reviewing options, she says

A new poll finds that most Canadian executives agree. The survey of 100 Canadian finance and marketing executives by staffing service Accountemps found that 80 per cent would feel comfortable setting their sights on greener pastures while on their current employers' payrolls.

Still, it can be very difficult to look for a job while you are in a job, Mr. Clement says.

For one thing, you have to keep it quiet so that it doesn't get back to your boss and make you look disloyal, he says.

For another, "while you are in the job, you are trying to perform to your fullest capability and you may actually have to do more than in the past just to show that you are still a viable employee.

"That can make it hard to do the due diligence necessary to find out what is going on with a potential new employer and what it would be like to work there."

The best way to find out from the outside how companies work is through informal networking with contacts in the industry, Mr. Clements says.

"You should develop a list of things that are important to you and your motivation and create questions that get to whether these things are part of the culture of the new organization."

Meanwhile, you should also diagnose your own goals and needs, Ms. Jordan-Evans recommends. Assess your skills and aptitudes with psychological tests, and feedback from your organization, co-workers and friends.

And ask yourself what things motivate you now. "Too often people fall into ruts because they got into a job at the beginning of their career and don't review whether the work and the rewards are still meeting their needs," she says.

She suggests identifying the key factors you are looking for in a job, such as having a great boss, supportive co-workers, a challenging job, or flexibility in hours. Rate them on a scale of one to 10 and weigh what you have in your current job against what you might find elsewhere. And make sure you are realistic about your enthusiasm for a new position, Mr. Clements adds.

"When you are under great stress, you may get answers that raise concerns, but not adequately heed them because you are projecting your hopes that things there will be better than the job you are escaping from. That's dangerous."

"You don't want to be running from something, you have to be able to honestly say: 'I'm going to the best job I will ever have.' "

Above all, keep your head when others are panicking, Mr. Clements concludes:

"People do go on in tough times. And if they look at it as a real chance to evaluate what they want to do with the next stage of their career, it can be a fresh start to something better."

Reading the tea leaves

Media reports suggest your company's in trouble? Overhearing whispers in the hallways?

Pay attention to the rumours, because there is generally a basis in fact for them, says Lou Clements, a partner with executive recruiter Miller Dallas Inc. Here are his early warning signs that pink slips may be on the way:

Your industry or company is suffering from falling stock prices.

Your industry or company is getting bad press.

The industry is seeing big layoffs or your company is losing market share to a foreign rival.

Hiring is frozen even for key positions.

Bonuses and raises are eliminated.

Your company is a merger target and the buying company will put its managers in control of you and your team.

You are on a project or team that has had problems or lost money during the year.

The company has lost a key client.

Needed equipment updates or replacements are put off.

The company is overly scrutinizing expense reports and cancelling non-essential travel.

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Signs of trouble

It can be just as risky to make a change as to stay where you are. So here are some signs of trouble, and actions to take to make yourself a survivor, according to career pros:

Restructuring is on the way

Signs: The company is reorganizing, for reasons ranging from a merger to efficiency drives.

Action plan: Dig in and be a champion of change. Retrain and develop new skills.

Red ink is flowing

Signs: Your company is running at a loss and losing market share.

Action plan: Lead efforts to achieve a turnaround; find a role in a bright spot in the earnings picture.

A shakeup at the top

Signs: A new chief often brings in a new slate of executives - which could render you redundant.

Action plan: Update your résumé, get in touch with recruiters and network with industry contacts.

Lack of feedback

Signs: Management's lack of interest may indicate you are not valued long-term.

Action plan: Ask your bosses how you are perceived and what management sees as skills and experience you should have to move up. Show you're working to develop new abilities.

Hiring from the outside

Signs: It puts a limit on upward mobility, an indication management doesn't see potential in current employees.

Action plan: Be vocal about reminding managers of your current accomplishments and long-term goals.

You're being ignored

Signs: Meetings are held without you, new projects leave you off the team.

Action plan: Build bridges, point out your skills and volunteer for new roles or transfer to another department that will make better use of what you have to offer.

Your mentor vanishes

Signs: The senior person who was your champion in the organization leaves.

Action plan: Make sure you have a network and broad base of support to avoid being viewed as an unknown who is easy to eliminate.

Your performance is sliding

Signs: Your results are below the top tier of employees, and performance reviews are critical.

Action plan: Make a concerted effort to ask about expectations, get feedback and put in the effort needed to be in the top 25 per cent, preferably the top 10 per cent of performers, who are least likely to be chopped.

Your motivation is fading

Signs: You're doing your job but you no longer find it satisfying. People start to question whether you're pulling your weight.

Action plan: Examine what you want in a job and what new role in your company or another employer will motivate you to be an A-list performer who can survive no matter how tough times become.

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