

Are We There Yet?

Any parent is all too familiar with this question, usually uttered by a youthful voice from the back seat of a car during a family vacation or outing. Even if it is spoken at near whisper level, its effect on the listener is annoying at best. As we mature, we learn to complain in a more grownup manner. The adult versions of “Are we there yet?” include, “When is the company going to call me back for another interview?” or “When am I going to find a job?” or “How are we ever going to pay the bills?” “When will this economy pick up?” and “When are the markets coming back?” etc. In many ways adults are no different from children, we simply acquire more sophisticated ways of expressing our feelings and emotions, but our needs are also more complex and our “destinations” are not a mere one hundred miles or so up some interstate highway. We are experiencing the same boredom that children have during a long trip. We are bored with waiting for business conditions to change; only our boredom is laced with generous doses of fear, stress and anxiety.

Each of us would like to see a return to the kind of economic and business conditions we enjoyed two or three years ago. Someday, prosperity and growth will return, but it will never again be exactly the way it was. We are waiting for something to happen, asking ourselves “Are we there yet?” when we may not know what or where “there” is anymore. Arriving “there” for many of us has been or may be a long, slow and painful process. I don’t think we will all wake up some morning and find that we are “there”. You might argue with me on this point. After all, if you land another CIO position that pays well and if your investments bounce back, you’re all set, right? But I suspect that only a slim minority still believes this. The overwhelming majority of our members who recently landed have asked to maintain their membership at the Associate level. While they may be pleased and relieved to have found a new position, they are well aware that again they may and probably will lose it very easily. “There” is no longer a permanent destination or job for life the way it once was for our parents; rather it is a temporary stop during a long journey.

Let’s review some present realities:

- The IT job market has been slow for nearly two years. IT spending is expected to remain flat into next year. April and May promised some improvement, but hiring slowed down again through June and July. In August, the job market was without a pulse. We have some anecdotal evidence that conditions are improving, but not enough to call it a trend. If the quantity and pace of hiring don’t improve substantially by late October or early November then they will probably remain at their present level until sometime in 2003.
- Many analysts and pundits offer differing opinions about when business conditions and hiring will improve. We won’t know who’s right until late next year. Business clients and prospects respond to my inquiries typically saying they don’t anticipate any new hiring until the fourth quarter or early next year. This is a polite way of saying, “I have no idea when things will improve, and I would like to end this conversation with you”. All opinions look about the same right now because none of them is especially encouraging.

- We are dealing with global forces that far exceed our individual control. While doing nothing and waiting for something to happen is not prudent, we must also understand that as individuals we are limited as to what we can do. We are not able to change market conditions, nonetheless, we must do our best and persist with our searches or we will not arrive wherever “there” exists for each of us.

A recent article in BusinessWeek, September 2, 2002, entitled, “Wall Street’s Broken Spirit” captured the despair and anxiety shared by many stockbrokers who had earned six and seven figure incomes as recently as two years ago during boom times and who were now leaving their industry, which collapsed in the wake of the stock market implosion. An undisclosed number of them were reportedly working retail jobs paying as low as eight dollars per hour. Some of my colleagues in the recruiting industry, who have over twenty years experience are experiencing these same feelings and are contemplating career changes. Some frustrated TENG members who have endured lengthy transition periods are struggling with whether they should pursue a new career path that will offer personal fulfillment with the opportunity to sustain an acceptable standard of living or continue their search for a senior IT executive position. Everyone is looking for “there” and can’t find it. Suddenly a previously disdained Starbucks or Mailboxes, Etc. franchise, or some other entrepreneurial venture looks attractive. Since last September, the print media has been filled with accounts of people who have reassessed their lives and who have chosen entirely new careers. Making such a move in a “knee-jerk” fashion carries a high level of downside risk. Many people make major career decisions without careful consideration because they are trying to get away from an unpleasant situation when they should be driven by a desire to head in a direction that is arguably better and offers greater opportunity than their previous career track. Mistakes are costly. Trying to re-enter your former career field will be a daunting challenge as you face an army of competitors who have unbroken track records. Choose carefully. I mentioned this in a previous newsletter late last year, but it bears repeating. If you are unsure of your career direction, I highly recommend that you get a copy of this book: The Pathfinder: How to Choose or Change Your Career for a Lifetime of Satisfaction and Success, by Nicholas Lore. Fireside/Simon & Schuster, New York, 1998. It retails for \$14.00. Lore will lead you through a step-by-step, self-evaluation process that is granular. It takes time, but if you’re out of work, it may help you to understand what makes you tick and where you should best apply yourself. It is intended both for people who wish to change her or his career altogether and those who wish to reposition themselves in their present career.

All of us are tired of failure, frustration, uncertainty, fear, stress and anxiety. We want to arrive at a place where this will end. All of these emotions can be very fatiguing, causing us to lose energy and enthusiasm. How do we continue to maintain an even keel emotionally and act positive on an interview and in our daily lives in the face of seemingly overwhelming issues that are beyond our control? Some thirty years ago, I had a similar reaction when reading the accounts of American military prisoners of war who had been recently released by the North Vietnamese. I found it incredible that some POWs had endured many years of captivity that included beatings, starvation and abuse, not knowing if it would ever end; yet they emerged from their experience in relatively good spirits, buoyed by an internal and moral strength of character that would not let them accept defeat. Fortunately our experiences are not nearly as extreme, but the parallel lesson is that we must face life one day at a time. Each day of failure, pain and rejection brings us one day closer to success.

Not long ago, I heard this story about Florence Chadwick, a famous distance swimmer of the 1950's who was the first woman to swim the English Channel in both directions. On July 4, 1952 she attempted to swim from Santa Catalina Island to the California coast. She was well trained and very experienced, but the water was rough and very cold and a heavy fog enveloped her, obscuring her ability to see her nearby support boat. The extreme cold, fatigue and fear of unseen sharks overcame her and she asked to be pulled aboard the escorting vessel. Shortly thereafter, the fog lifted, revealing to her dismay, the California coast just a few hundred yards away. She later commented that had she known that the coast was so close, she would not have given up. We face a similar challenge: hopelessness, boredom, stress and anxiety notwithstanding, we may arrive at our destination after only one or two more phone calls or Emails; or it may be two hundred, but we have to make them, one at a time, much the way that a swimmer propels herself through the water.

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Ed Pospesil
Chairman
Technology Executives Network Group

Vice President
Bruner Consulting Associates, Inc.
33 Elizabeth Street, 3rd Floor
Derby, CT 06418
epospesil@brunerconsulting.com
www.brunerconsulting.com
Phone: 203-732-7084 / 866-566-2224
Fax: 203-732-9033

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