

## Don't Be Lulled

It's hard to imagine an active hiring market in our present condition, but the seeds of one are being sewn. It is entirely possible that as business conditions improve, job changing will increase in intensity and speed to the extent that it will take on the appearance of nuclear fission. Why? There are a variety of reasons, but none of them guarantee a job for everyone, because those in transition will be competing with the gainfully employed but also active job seeker.

- I have remarked to several people that there is "one degree of separation" between our Active and Associate Members, namely a paycheck. This is a huge difference, but in many cases it is the only one. Read on.
- While some of our newly landed members claim to have found the job of their dreams, many others have not. Some are working without pay or at reduced pay in startup ventures. More than a few have accepted lesser positions than they previously held. Others have taken consulting assignments that offer possible conversion to permanent positions, while others have accepted job offers, which offer little career fulfillment, but pay the bills. Hiring companies seek perfection and will search for months and in some cases a year or more until they find the exact fit. They never compromise and want a Mercedes at a Chevrolet price. Candidates search for their dream job until financial pressure, worry and frustration set in, then they accept almost anything.
- People who have accepted positions with business development or sales responsibilities are under relentless pressure to deliver new or repeat client business, and they face the constant threat of termination on a monthly or quarterly basis.
- Some of our landed TENG members have asked me not to chronicle their success, because they're not sure if their latest position will last. This is for a variety of reasons including but not limited to job stability, company performance and top management philosophy. More than a few landed members have asked me to keep them connected to the stream of job leads we share, to hedge their bets.
- Recently, a member who landed a CIO position in 2002 reported that the COO who hired him was terminated; now placing his own position in jeopardy.
- Members in final negotiations with potential employers encounter impatience and annoyance when discussing compensation issues. Many companies are hiring on a "take it or leave it" basis. People who accept such offers will leave when it is convenient to them, not the company.
- People who remain in the workforce, who have survived the downsizings and layoffs and outsourcings, are stressed out by their increased workload. This heavier burden with longer hours comes with no raise and reduced benefits as companies trim costs. Many employed people are

experiencing anxiety levels that compare to their unemployed counterparts, but with that one big degree of separation, the paycheck.

All of these conditions are symptomatic of the uneasiness and indecision, which pervade corporate America. Eventually business conditions will improve and companies will need to hire more employees. I suspect that this will unleash the pent up demand shared by the employed and unemployed alike creating a scramble to find a position that offers more stability, security, fulfillment and sanity.

If you have landed in the past year and have a staff reporting to you, be prepared to deal with the negative consequences of an improved economy and its attendant job market:

- As a manager and leader you must constantly sell to your subordinates to motivate them to work for you and to accept your goals as their own. The old saw, “Sell, don’t tell” still applies.
- Take the time to meet your staff and get acquainted with them. Many newly hired IT executives barely start working and are stunned by staff resignations. Most often, the resignations are triggered by frustration with the previous regime and occur simply because the subordinate is in the latter stages of his or her search when the new VP or Director came on board. More than one IT executive has said to me, “She was a valuable employee. If only I had spoken with her a week or so earlier, I could have prevented her resignation. I was addressing the problems but didn’t know she was frustrated enough to be actively looking”.
- Communicate with them on a regular basis, both orally and via Emailed and written announcements and memos. Be visible to your people. One of the most frequent criticisms that I hear levied against an ineffective CIO is that she or he never communicates with the troops, is behind closed doors and keeps everyone in the dark. Some management confidentiality is essential, but operating in a complete shroud of silence and mystery, punctuated by occasional restructuring layoffs, feeds the rumor mill, fuels feelings of insecurity and kills employee productivity.
- Solicit subordinate opinions, listen to them and prove it by your actions.
- Evaluate your subordinates as soon as possible to identify key, high-impact players. Let them know periodically and regularly that you consider their efforts and accomplishments to be critical to the success of your mission.
- Solicit, encourage, reward and publicize employee excellence.
- Help your subordinates to develop professionally via training, mentoring and other programs that show your concern for their careers and the future value they may give back to the company.
- Lead by example.

- Begin today. Once the resignations start, it may be too late. A recently hired executive can lose top management support if respected and admired subordinates resign. This compromises effectiveness, breaks departmental momentum and causes delays, which in turn kill CIO careers.
- Once a subordinate resigns, wish them well and let them go. Work out an orderly plan to transition her or his responsibilities. Extending a counter-offer is a sign that you are desperate and have managed poorly. It has been illustrated many times that the best-managed companies never extend counter-offers. Many top executives utilize this ploy to ensure that a function is covered or a deliverable is met, and then fire the employee who accepted the counter-offer. Other staff members will see through this and will have even less respect for you as a manager and leader. Your credibility and effectiveness will be greatly diminished if you continue this practice.
- Maintain your network of business contacts. Be prepared to act quickly to find replacements. Use staff departures as an opportunity to upgrade your team. Hire only “A” players.
- Hire people with fair compensation packages. You may be tempted to “low-ball” an unemployed candidate, to hold down costs, but you will inevitably create added cost. You are planting the seeds of that employee’s departure. Anyone who is hired under these circumstances commonly feels that they have been “had” and will leave when a better opportunity comes along.
- Being an effective leader and manager are important and ongoing parts of your job. If you ignore this fact, you will not succeed.

If you are still in transition, be aware of the following issues:

- You are being hired to fill a perceived need. No matter how much advance research and diligence you do prior to accepting a new position, you cannot eliminate risk altogether, but you can reduce it.
- All enterprises are dynamic. Change is ever present. Be prepared for staff turnover at all levels above you, at your level and among your subordinates. Anticipate changes. Be mentally and managerially prepared to deal with sudden resignations.
- When interviewing for your next position, try to assess the stability of the management team you may be joining. Economic pressure may cause you to accept a less than perfect job offer and you may find yourself working on a team that has challenging political issues. Adopt a consultant’s outlook that this will not be your last position and that it will end at some time in the future. Do your best to make contributions and build alliances, which will serve you well when you search for your next position.
- When interviewing, ask each of your interviewers about his or her longevity and tenure with the company. Ask them to describe the positions they have held. Inquire about the challenges

facing the management team. You should be able to develop some sense of the culture, political environment and potential career risk. Some interviewers are very candid and will tell you if the company is suffering abnormal turnover or other problems. You must then decide if this will be an opportunity or a threat to your career. Many successful executives have built their careers improving companies with severe management problems, but they welcome such dilemmas and don't fear them.

- If you are considering a position that is not your ideal, but pays the bills, develop a strategy to maintain your network and continue to confidentially watch the job market. While our present business environment may cause you to accept a position that you would ordinarily dismiss, you must also be able to plausibly explain your present strategy and rationale to future interviewers.
- The job market will improve, but we may never see the frenzied hiring that typified the late nineties. Major companies are terminating the paid medical benefits, which they had previously granted all retirees almost as a birthright. This will expand the labor pool as potential retirees realize that they can't afford to pay for family medical coverage until they reach the age that qualifies them for Medicare. People who planned to retire at age fifty-five will find themselves working ten or more years, competing with younger workers for positions.

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