

Grow Your Career—Right Now

If you find yourself in a career rut, don't blame it on the dismal economy.

LISTEN, THESE ARE TOUGH TIMES for all of us. But if you are still employed, believe it or not, now is a time when you can shine in your professional role. You have opportunities to be a hero even if you don't directly close new business—provided that you take charge and get creative with your ideas and execution.

Many people are discouraged this year. Rise above it, keep your chin up, and stand out. Here are five ways to make it happen:

1. Stay visible—internally and externally. Internally, make sure your boss sees your efforts often. Don't try to be invisible, with the hope that they won't notice your limited billable workload. Rather than shuffling through drawing sets and reports to appear busy, remember how project managers struggle every week to balance the workload.

Regardless of your experience level, make it crystal clear that you are open to doing unconventional, non-billable things during slower times. Suggestions might include: market research, gathering information regarding a current project pursuit, writing a white paper, creating a blog to strengthen your firm's website and search results, and conducting face-to-face satisfaction surveys with existing clients.

Yes, all of these efforts are marketing-related and will require the guidance of the firm's marketing leadership to get the most out of your contributions. Why am I focused on the marketing aspect? Because your firm needs to book more quality business, plain and simple. The closer you are to the revenue stream, the more likely you'll be one that survives—perhaps even thrives—during this economic turbulence.

Externally, review your network of contacts—professional and personal. Touch base with them. Perhaps your firm will create a campaign to mine everyone's individual networks; they may equip you with a message regarding a special service, a hot relevant trend, or even a direct request for new business. But even if there's no formal process in place for mining your network, still do it. Reach out with a call (yes, a call). Feel free to leave a solid, concise, friendly voicemail. Express your hope that their year is going well thus far, and reflect upon a time when they did something kind for you, or a

time when they did something notable. That sort of positive check-in may not glean an immediate response of new business, but it will most certainly paint you in a favorable light. Right now, we're all welcoming positive sentiments.

2. Don't be downer. While it may be neither credible nor sincere to walk around with rose-colored glasses pretending everything is bright, you do need to maintain a positive attitude—one that makes you part of the solution rather than the problem. Over the years, I have encountered many grumpy, cynical engineers—especially when I worked in-house at a firm as a business development director. When times were good, I would reluctantly accept their cynicism as an inherent personality trait. But the minute things got rough for the firm, those same people became toxic to the company's health, and I found myself isolating them rather than including them in strategic efforts to turn things around. If you are a downer, don't expect the leadership to consider you a part of the solution, much less vie to keep you on board during layoffs.

3. Keep your cool and behave like a pro. In times when employees at all levels are jockeying to keep their jobs, there are two routes: increasing your own value or bashing the other guy. The latter is not only unproductive and unprofessional, but it's also going to come back to bite you down the road. People have long memories when it comes to destructive, inappropriate behavior in a business environment. Further, maintain a healthy lifestyle; if you feel good, you'll look good—plus your head will be clear and your mind sharp.

4. Stretch and invest in yourself. Whether or not your company has a reimbursement program for continuing education, you must invest in yourself to add value to your skill sets. One of the most accessible value-added routes is to become LEED Certified. Before you say "Sustainable design is not a necessary pursuit for structural engineers," check out an article that I believe provides a forward-thinking, long-term argument on environmentally-savvy structural engineers: "Moving beyond the LEED checklist" (visit www.go-structural.com; while you're at it, also check out



BY ANNE SCARLETT

Anne Scarlett is President of Scarlett Consulting in Chicago. She can be reached at anne@annescarlett.com or 773.251.8132.

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“Going Beyond Material Issues” and “Full Potential” at www.modernsteel.com for more on sustainability and steel). In the meantime, you can also stretch yourself by seeking out internal resources—other professionals with whom you could learn from. And remember to remain keenly aware of any “white spaces”—duties or roles in the firm that are needed but are currently being neglected due to distractions and limited resources.

5. Recreate an environment where you’ve previously excelled. I read something recently by life coach Martha Beck. She suggested documenting a “lifeline” that tracks highs and lows that you’ve experienced over time from any particular “vice” or challenge. While her suggestions were primarily focused on personal life, I believe they can be applied to your career as well. Here’s a simplified description of how it could assist in your career evaluation:

Draw a chart with the years of your career (year 1, year 2, etc.) on the x-axis, and a scale of 1-10 on the y-axis. Then, think about years when you felt you had a great handle on your career—where you were productive, recognized, rewarded, satisfied, and perhaps even proud. Rank each year’s overall performance, with 10 being the highest/“excellent” and 1 being the lowest/“unsatisfactory.” What happened during those low years? Have you been able to overcome the challenges? Even more important, can you recreate elements from the years where you most excelled? These might include:

- ✓ A strong relationship with your boss
- ✓ Completing continued education/training

- ✓ Having control or autonomy over decisions within your realm
- ✓ An attentive mentor
- ✓ Having a realistic alignment between the expectations of your work and your actual capabilities

Perhaps when your career was lackluster, or even suffering, these things might have occurred:

- ✓ Personal loss (divorce, death of family member, etc.)
- ✓ Health issues
- ✓ Negative work environment/culture
- ✓ Poor relationships with coworkers

Some things are within your control; others are not. Motivation and initiative are essential ingredients to excel in your career as a professional engineer. When, during the course of these years, were you most motivated? What triggered that motivation?

Once you’ve done an analysis of “the ideal working environment” for you to shine in, assess what you can change and what you simply cannot. For those unchangeable conditions, try to adjust your attitude, if possible (i.e., try to overlook certain irritations or challenges in the work environment in order to rise above and move forward in your own rite).

One thing is for certain: Once we weather this tough economic climate, we’ll all want to come out stronger, with valuable lessons learned. In the meantime, why not make a personal commitment to approach the present climate as an opportunity to grow and excel?

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