



How the economic downturn can make for a personal upturn

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A tightening economy often forces you to reassess your career situation, which is so intimately connected with your personal life, and the result is often surprising.

A slump in the economy – with the implied or actual threat of a layoff – can be the catalyst that pushes you out of your complacency and into a hard look at what's working and what's not in your work-and-home dynamic.

If it forces you to do what you know you "should" be doing anyway (networking, updating your resume, planning ahead), then, in a strange way, a poor economy can actually bring about a richer balance of career, family and self.

The food pyramid is a great analogy for what often happens in working women's lives. Everyone knows they're to have certain proportions of grains, fruits, vegetables, proteins and fats for healthy, balanced nutrition. But it's easy to find yourself focusing on one area while neglecting others. It's the same in your life. Rarely does anyone get the optimal balance of career, family, self, professional networking and personal development. No one's plate (or life) is balanced every day. The goal is to be able to look back at the end of the month and see a reasonable mix. But even that is not always easy.

Depending on your circumstances, your career may be sucking up all your energy, or constant family obligations may have put you into auto-pilot at work, or your social life may be blossoming while your professional goals are relegated to the back burner.

So here you are, coasting along in your imbalanced life, when the reality of a down economy and potential layoffs rises up like a brick wall in front of you.

Suddenly, it's no longer an option just to keep coasting. It's time to look closely, reassess your path and take whatever steps are necessary to avoid crashing into the wall. Here are some of the most important steps in that process.

Update your resume

True or false? You haven't looked at your resume since you got the job you're now in fear of losing. (If you said true, join the club.) So at minimum, you need to add your current position to your resume. But it's just as important to make sure the resume as a whole is a true marketing tool, not just a collection of past job descriptions.

A job-winning resume answers the employer's question: "How will my company benefit if I hire you?" Present your skills, talents and expertise with an emphasis on your accomplishments and results, and the context in which you achieved them.

How did you make things more efficient, effective or profitable? If you don't have actual numbers (sales or profit margins), think about other intangibles that improve a business. Did you help decrease errors, shorten learning curves, raise morale?

Step up to the plate

If others are getting laid off at your company, it's frightening and tough to watch. But you're not helpless. Rather than wringing your hands, wondering if you'll be next, think about the now-missing skills and expertise that your laid-off coworkers had been providing. Analyze the roles and attributes that these folks brought to the table and see if you can fill any of these gaps for your company.

Maybe a seminar or course would help you, or maybe there are skills you utilized in a past position that you can now offer to your current employer. Any new skills or training you acquire can then be added to your resume, which makes you a more attractive candidate for your next employer.

Nurture your network

If your manager gets laid off, too, you could lose an important part of your network and a possible reference. A great place to start networking is among coworkers and supervisors at your current place of employment. Now's also the time to start or update your profile on social networking websites such as LinkedIn, Ryze or Facebook.

Having an online presence is a huge advantage in today's job market, and every person who joins your network brings along their own network, which you can access. Since getting a job is often a matter of "who you know," it makes sense to find out who the people you know know.

Plan for a layoff

A layoff is one of those things you can't control, but you can control your reaction to it by devising a positive plan of action for when it happens (while still hoping it doesn't). If you do experience a layoff, you'll have a lot of extra hours in the day, even while job hunting. Take advantage!

- Reconnect with family and friends (it's all part of networking).
- Visit the dentist. Not only are you probably overdue, but just think how many people a day the dental staff sees and how many people they could tell about you and your job skills.

- Try new activities or jobs on a volunteer, freelance, part-time or temporary basis – an option that can help keep your confidence up and fill the inevitable gap in your resume.

Start (or keep) moving

Being worried about a layoff, and especially being unemployed after a layoff, is stressful and depressing. Physical exercise can help alleviate both. A yoga class, a daily trip to the dog park with Sparky, a charity walk-a-thon – these can all help your mental outlook and your physical well-being, and give you more chances to network.

And your employer (current or future) will respond much more favorably if you seem like someone with an upbeat outlook who's active and fit (or working on it) than if you succumb to the temptation to curl up in bed with a sleeve of Oreos and pull the covers over your head.

With a resilient attitude, an up-to-date resume, an active network and a positive what-if strategy, you won't be blindsided if a layoff happens. You'll be ready to pounce if the opportunity of a lifetime should present itself. If the threat of a layoff is what gets you to take these positive steps, then bring it on.