

**Surviving the Economy in 2009:
Becoming an Indispensable Employee**

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The economy's recent downturn has taken its toll on the job market. Current reports indicate that unemployment has climbed to 6.7%, the highest rate in 15 years.¹ Economists expect job losses to continue to worsen through the first half of 2009.² According to a government report issued December 5, 2008, employers cut nearly 1.7 million jobs across the country this year. These cuts have spanned the country's major industries, leaving few areas of employment untouched.³ In such dismal economic conditions, employees often feel they have little or no control over their job security. However, this may not necessarily be the case. Rather than submitting to the tide of economic times, workers should actively strive to secure their jobs. Penny Nathan Kahan & Associates has 10 tips for becoming an "indispensable employee."

1. Take Initiative

In this economy, performing your specific job duties satisfactorily will not be sufficient to retain your job. An increase in responsibilities leads to improved job security. Seeking additional responsibilities and volunteering for more tasks and projects demonstrate initiative. Think of the company as your personal business. Create ways to improve the business and increase office efficiency. Your efforts demonstrate that you have the company's best interest and that you are sensitive to the company's needs during this economic downturn. Then, if your

¹ JIM ZARROLI AND RENEE MONTAGNE, NPR, U.S. UNEMPLOYMENT AT 15-YEAR HIGH (December 5, 2008), <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=97847966>.

² DAVID GOLDMAN, CNNMONEY.COM, LOST: 1.9 MILLION JOBS (December 5, 2008), http://money.cnn.com/2008/12/05/news/economy/jobs_november/?postversion=2008120517.

³ UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF LABOR, BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, EMPLOYMENT SITUATION SUMMARY (December 5, 2008), <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm>.

employer must decide who to keep when times get tough, your efforts will factor into the decision-making.

2. Educate Yourself

Constantly look for ways to expand your knowledge of your company and your field. If possible, attend conferences in your line of work. Subscribe to a publication or search online for information pertinent to your career. During non-work hours, take time to read articles to keep up with the trends and the direction of your field. Being up to date on current events and research demonstrates not only personal interest, but an applied concern for the direction of your company. Your understanding will impress your boss and provide the foundation for your ability to develop solutions to problems at your company and challenges unique to your industry.

3. Be Reliable

Always follow through with your commitments. An indispensable employee consistently completes her assignments perfectly and promptly. If you realize that you cannot meet a goal, communicate with your boss as soon as possible to find a solution or to set a new deadline. That being said, set realistic goals and strive to meet deadlines. The key to reliability is staying organized. You cannot meet your deadlines if you cannot keep track of them. Find a method that works for you. If you are proficient in Microsoft Outlook, Mozilla Sunbird, or other software specific to your industry, use these resources to keep track of important dates. Also take advantage of devices such as cell phones, personal digital assistants or BlackBerrys; nearly all now have a calendar function. If you find the digital calendar intimidating, use a book or planner instead. Finding an effective method for keeping track of deadlines can significantly reduce your stress and assure that you do not miss any deadlines. Once you have made it work, you can use it to manage both your boss' and your own workload.

4. Manage Your Boss

Constantly look for ways to simplify your boss' job and to make your boss look good. "Managing" your boss will help her keep track of her own deadlines and allow her to focus on performing her job more successfully. You can easily manage your boss by sending her weekly updates. For example, create a list organized by client or project, and identify (1) what tasks you have recently performed; (2) what deadlines are coming up; and (3) what you and your boss must and should do in the future. Not only will your boss perceive your organization and support as essential to her success, your weekly updates will become written evidence that you are indispensable.

5. Take Care of Yourself and Stay Healthy

Frequently missing work, even due to legitimate health issues, often creates problems. Although there are laws which protect employees from discrimination on the basis of disability and provide employees medical leave for severe illnesses, frequent absences still pose problems for employees. Many of these laws have loopholes and exclusions for small employers as well as employers engaged in certain businesses. Employers also violate employment laws, whether intentionally or not. Frequent absences not only prevent you from assuming additional responsibilities, but also interfere with your ability to perform your job duties. Moreover, if an employee is always absent, others learn how to get along without her. In contrast, when an indispensable employee is out, the whole office suffers.

6. Maintain a Positive Attitude

A positive attitude is essential for succeeding in the workplace. Develop and maintain a positive and professional attitude that reflects the company's values. Your attitude should express a "can do" spirit, which requires flexibility and adaptability. Take on challenges without

complaint. Volunteer for tasks that do not fall within your job category, even if you perceive them to be “beneath” your job title. If you are a manager, do not complain if your supervisor asks you to answer phones when the receptionist is absent. An indispensable employee never says “That’s not my job.” If your boss knows that you will enthusiastically and successfully perform additional tasks, she will be more willing to increase your responsibilities or even promote you. In tight economic times, your flexibility and willingness to adapt to change may provide opportunities in other departments if yours ends up downsizing. Moreover, an employee who can multitask and easily adapt to change is more valuable to any company forced to consolidate jobs.

7. Remain Professional

Your attitude must always be professional. Avoid office gossip and office politics; refusing to engage in them will demonstrate to your boss that you can be trusted with private or confidential information. This trust will translate into more responsibilities. Also, minimize your time conducting personal business at work. Do not make personal calls or check your personal email. Stay on task and do not spend free time surfing the internet or playing games on the computer. Instead, use this time to take on additional responsibilities.

8. Accept Constructive Criticism

Never take criticism personally. Doing so, or being defensive may damage your relationship with your boss. Even if you feel that you have not made a mistake, recognize that you and your boss may have different opinions about how things should be done, but always remember your boss is your boss. Rather than arguing with her or dismissing her criticism completely, use her criticism to identify your mistakes and avoid making them again. Follow up

within a short time in writing demonstrating that you have taken the criticism to heart and have done something about it.

9. Dress for Success

Even if your job does not have a strict dress code, always dress professionally. You may not have to come to work in a three piece suit if your job is in the mailroom, but avoid arriving at work dressed too casually. Keep in mind that your employer views each employee as a “representative” of the company. Dressing professionally demonstrates that you take your job and your responsibilities seriously. A good motto: Dress for the job you want, not the job you have; your professionalism will pay off later if you strive for a promotion or a transfer to a more formal department.

10. Build and Maintain Professional Relationships

If you work in a larger company, build and maintain relationships across the company. If you have the opportunity, offer to work on projects that span multiple departments. This provides the opportunity to build company-wide contacts. If you work in a smaller company, look for organizations relevant to your field and attend their networking events outside of work. Continue to maintain professional relationships with others at your current job. If your department is cutback, you can use a variety of contacts to find another position within the company, or even outside the company.

Conclusion

Although you may feel that you have little influence over the general economic status of the country, at an individual level you do have more control than you think. Following these tips could mean the difference between protecting your job and becoming one of the many casualties of the most recent economic downturn. Reinventing yourself as an indispensable employee improves your chance of success while securing your place in the company.