

Business Basics

How To Recession-Proof Your Job

Tara Weiss, 02.12.08, 1:00 PM ET

Whether we're actually in a recession or not is the subject of debate.

What *is*

certain is the rising unemployment rate. U.S. unemployment rose to 5% for the first time in two and a half years in December. That's likely a result of the fallout from the subprime mortgage crisis--and there's probably more to come.

Don't wait for the alarm bells to sound. Recession or just a temporary slowdown, there are things you can do to keep your job as safe as possible. "You have to be proactive," says Dale Winston, CEO of the executive recruiting firm Battalia Winston International.

In Pictures: Steps To Making Yourself Recession-Proof

The first step: Make yourself indispensable. Show up early and stay late. Now isn't the time to slack. If your boss needs someone to volunteer for a project, raise your hand to do it, then do it well. "Prove you're a contributor no matter what level you're operating at," she says.

If possible, take on projects for other divisions. It's hard to fire someone when they're valuable to several areas of the business. But be prepared to be stretched. Open jobs might go unfilled for long time periods and you will have to take on extra work. Don't start sleeping at the office, but don't complain about working extra hours for several managers.

Also, look for ways to save the company money," says Bill DeMario, chief operating officer of Ajilon Consulting, a staffing firm that specializes in accounting, finance, consulting and human resources management. That includes everything from telecommuting to a faraway meeting to gently encouraging colleagues not to print all 100 pages of a document unless they absolutely need them. (You can even make the reduced printing targets a competition between different departments so it seems less like a company mandate and more like a silly office game.)

Take a broader view, too. Be aware of your profession's and your company's financial well-being and act accordingly. In other words, people who work in industries that are clearly suffering, like print media, should ramp up their job search and consider ways they can use their skills in similar fields. Look for signs to determine how healthy your company is. Are they tightening the purse strings by limiting travel? Are they asking employees to bring their own lunches to previously catered staff meetings? These may seem like small things, but they can be indications of tight financial times.

If you notice those signs, do more than just work hard. Talk to people in your industry to find out which companies are thriving and make contact with employees there. Use your professional network to accomplish this.

On the bright side, if there is a recession, it likely won't be as severe as the last one. Back then there was a confluence of factors, including the dot-com bust and Sept. 11, 2001, that took a severe toll. Also, the demographics of the workforce are evolving. Large numbers of baby boomers are about to reach retirement age, and while they won't necessarily leave the workforce entirely, they will look to slow down or switch careers. That means there is opportunity for younger employees to fill those gaps.

In the immediate future, if there are widespread layoffs, younger generations will likely handle it differently than their older peers, says Mary Crane, a career consultant who specializes in bridging the generation gap. "They've come into the workplace never suspecting they'll take one job and have it for life," says Crane.

"Lots of them will look at it as an opportunity to explore career opportunities. They might take six months off-- that's how long recessions last--and work on a political campaign because they can build their resume and make great contacts. Or they'll teach. They look at this as opportunity."

We can all learn a lesson from that attitude.

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