

Building Up Your Employment Security

If you've been employed for more than fifteen minutes over the past five years, you know that the workplace is a stressful environment. Corporate America's addiction to "doing more with less" and downsizing has added more tasks and higher expectations to everyone's day with very little additional pay. That reality was also confirmed by a report a year ago from the academic community. It found that more than one-third of all workers (34%) had greater difficulties at work because of ever increasing stress. Stress on-the-job was hurting their performance and thus their prospects for the future.

There are, of course, many reasons why we feel stressed at work. These include worrying about:

- Meeting current financial obligations,
- Being able to retire comfortably,
- Falling victim to the next downsizing or reduction in force,
- Getting all our work done (and often the work of someone else who was laid off), and
- Feeling burned out, used up or dead-ended in our career.

While all of these stressors are equally as difficult to endure, the first two—which represent income security—are often the result of the last three—which represent employment security. In other words, if we can successfully achieve employment security, it's likely that we'll also reach genuine and lasting income security.

So, how can we avoid employment insecurity? As my long time readers know, I think there's only one way to meet this challenge: we have to alter our view of what work is and why it's done. In other words, we have to abandon the traditional notion that work is either a race up some company's career ladder or a quest for wealth by the age of 30, 40, 50—you pick the birthday. Comfortable as those familiar goals may be, they will not protect us from the triple threats of nonstop layoffs, ever higher performance requirements, and the souring sense that our career has become an endless expanse of ever more dull 12-hour days.

What will protect us from these stressors? I call it **Career Fitness**. It is a philosophy of working based on two simple tenets drawn from what we know about physical fitness. A healthy career, like a healthy body, depends on our recognizing that:

- We are—each of us—individually responsible for the state of our career (not our boss, not our employer, not the Government), and
- We have to work at protecting the health of our career every single day.

Achieving Career Fitness is something that everyone can do. I've developed a set of exercises—it's called the "Career Fitness Work-In"—that you can use to work more meaning and satisfaction into your life. It is the best way to reduce stress on-the-job and strengthen your employment security. I'll focus on two of the seven exercises here to get you started.

Employment security is based on a person's ability to contribute to the success of an employing organization. They may not work continuously in the same job or even for the same employer, but they will be continuously employed. Why? Because they can deliver skills, knowledge and experience that organizations need to achieve their goals. How do you achieve such career strength and endurance? You must:

- pump up your cardiovascular system, and
- increase your flexibility and range of motion.

Here's what I mean.

Pump Up Your Cardiovascular System.

The heart of your career is your expertise. It is the knowledge you have and can use on-the-job. Now, expertise is often misunderstood.

- It's not unusual for recent graduates (and many hiring managers) to believe that expertise is based on one's education, on having the latest knowledge in a particular field. It is, in their view, all about being at the state-of-the-art.
- Those who've been in the workplace for awhile, on the other hand, often believe that expertise is grounded in experience on-the-job. It is, in their view, all about knowing how to apply skills in the workplace.

The reality, however, is that expertise is a function of both education and experience. One is not a substitute for the other. Both are required. And because the world of work is a dynamic and ever-changing place, the education and experience required for success are always changing, as well. That's what this exercise is all about. In order to be able to contribute to your employer's success today and to the success of your employer (whoever it may be) tomorrow, you have to stretch and strengthen your muscles of expertise all of the time and without let up.

Increase Your Flexibility and Range of Motion.

The reach of your capabilities defines your (current and potential) value to an employer. In other words, the more you can do in and outside your job, the greater your contribution will be to an organization. To extend the reach of your capabilities, you should:

- add skills that will enable you to take on a broader array of assignments in your current job. These might include the ability to speak a second language, to make public presentations, or to use a specific software program. The goal is to enhance your ability to adjust and respond effectively to an ever wider range of circumstances and/or requirements as they emerge in the workplace.
- add skills that will enable you to expand the scope of your job beyond the limits defined in its official position description. These might include your ability to take on a subset of a coworker's responsibilities when they are out with an illness or to manage a special task force. The goal is to extend your (real and potential) contribution beyond the confines of what you are required or even expected to do in the workplace.

This exercise will enable you to play both a larger role and a greater array of roles in your employer's organization. That flexibility and range of motion make you a more versatile and, therefore, a more valuable employee.

Stress can endanger our career health as much as it can undermine our physical well being. While there is no single way to alleviate stress, exercise can have a significant and positive impact. For your physical health, that exercise must promote strength and endurance; for your career health, it must build expertise, flexibility and reach.

Thanks for reading,
Peter