

Employees need well-designed game plan ***Resumés should be just one aspect of a solid career portfolio***

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Heading into RRSP season, most of us spend a bit more time taking stock of the assets in our investment portfolio. It's prudent and deadlines for contributions tend to push us into action.

But there's another type of portfolio that most people spend little or no time on - their career portfolio.

And managing a career portfolio is much more than just keeping a resumé up to date, says Mary-Frances Fox, president of Work Creatively Career Advisors Inc. In fact, resumés should only be a tiny part of the overall game plan.

Instead, career management is all about creating opportunities, establishing relationships and building a reputation that says, "I'm the one you need to hire."

It is a way of controlling what people think of you before you even get to the interview process, says the Toronto-based consultant.

And it's about how we identify the three or four key talents that we use the most - and importantly the ones we like using - and fit them to the needs of a potential employer.

Face it, we are going to hit roadblocks in our careers. Boredom, lack of advancement, downsizing or other factors will likely force us to look for work elsewhere.

But U.S. surveys show that only one-third of employees take the time to manage their careers, Fox says, which puts them at a distinct advantage.

"When someone's job dries up or they hit a brick wall ... the average person thinks they'd better take what they can get, that it's like a lottery.

"They cross their fingers and hope for the best. I take a strategic and business-like view of what's possible. Your career is an asset portfolio that you need to manage."

Like a sound investment portfolio, a person needs a long-term plan. First and foremost, a person needs to assess his or her talents and develop a thorough understanding of the fundamental characteristics that he or she brings to the job each and every time.

For example, you might have an ability that lets you get to the heart of a matter; or perhaps you're a great organizer whose projects run like clockwork.

Then it's up to you as an individual to sell the potential of those talents to the employer, Fox says.

Second, she tells clients to think beyond discussing the education they have received and the titles they've held. Instead, focus on results and contributions. Most often, she says, a job description doesn't describe a person's entire potential.

To illustrate, Fox uses the example of a former IT professional whose job was eliminated. Fox says her client, a woman, thought she was destined to continue in IT. It's what she liked and what she knew.

Instead, with Fox's encouragement, the client began exploring a different sector. She met with various spa owners and discovered they were going through the same issues that the software industry encountered five years ago.

"This person has talked about her fundamental approach to work (the three or four characteristics she always uses) and why it succeeded in another context," Fox says. "And she's made herself an expert on the business problems spas have."

Spas started as entrepreneurially founded companies with a small staff, she explains. Now they need to automate and standardize because competition is intense.

Her client learned that spa owners need to grow their operations, develop infrastructure, and create policies and procedures.

"We learned she could be a tremendous help. They (the spa owners) weren't going around saying, 'Yes, this is the skillset we need,' " Fox says.

"My client needed to talk them into it. This is how you do professional business development for your career today. You have to go and listen to business needs and think, 'How have I corresponded to that need in another time and place? And what would be the buzz words and touch points that would make these guys see me as just the thing (they need)?' " Fox's third key revolves around networking.

It's a given that networking leads to most good jobs, but people still spend too much time sending resumés for advertised jobs, she says.

A constructive use of a resumé is that it's a place to corral the best talking points about what you have to offer, Fox says. Resumés are something to be handed out at the end of the meeting you've had with a potential employer. And it's a meeting the jobseeker has called.

"There's a buzz in each industry and part of managing your career is to be part of the buzz ... who's doing what? Who's moving and shaking? Frequently when a company wants the least risk in choosing a new staffer, they just ask around ... or look to who they know."

It's a point worth reinforcing, she says. And it's a jobseeker's role to control the way people think of them.

It can be done by setting up informal meetings, by being active in an industry association, volunteering with the local chamber of commerce, and keeping in contact with editors of industry newsletters and websites, Fox says.

"You are telling your story ... all the time."

And understand that employers all want to hear one particular story: How you saved time, made or saved money, improved relationships, found efficiencies or made innovations.

"This is the only language employers want to hear," she says.

Fox adds the whole idea of establishing career management services for private individuals has taken root in the past five years.

In the past, businesses and human resource departments helped individuals to plan long term. Today, there's a "natural tension" between the two, and companies are more likely to focus on their own short-term interests.

"There's a whole ocean of career 'best practices' that are semi-unknown to the private individual," Fox says. "And it's not in the employer's interest to tell you if they know."

As a member of the Association of Career Professionals International (with consultants in Alberta, B.C. and Ontario) Fox explains that her role is to structure and accelerate an individual's career management game plan. Essentially it's a one-time investment, where once a person "learns the ropes," they're ready for the future.

"Each individual can profit by looking at their career as an asset portfolio that they must manage," she says. "They are entitled to manage it - and get better at it."

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