

YOUR CAREER IS A BUSINESS—SO RUN IT LIKE ONE!

by David J. Bowman

Hoppers and floaters are everywhere! I see them nearly every day, and I feel for them. What are hoppers and floaters? Those are the folks who come into my office wondering what's happened to their jobs and careers. They've been downsized out, or let go because of personality clashes with supervisors, or their management styles weren't right – and now they're on the outside looking in.

Hoppers and floaters have gone through their entire careers hoping they would get a raise, hoping they would get a promotion, and simply floating through their working lives. They've never taken control of their careers and run them like the businesses they are. In short, they didn't become the CEOs of their careers, and do for themselves what CEOs do for companies – assess their strengths, strategically plan their futures and market themselves like a product or service. Thus, on the day of dismissal, or at the end of their working years, they wonder what's happened to what was supposed to be a promising career.

So, how can such a calamity be avoided? Well, there are eight keys to running a career like a business, and thus not becoming a hoper and floater.

Realize your career is your own small business – don't turn it over to anyone else to run.

Take control of your own working life. Don't assign its management to your boss, your boss' boss, your spouse or a human resources department. If you hand it over to others, they will run it to their best advantage, not yours. Instead, turn it over to YOU, INC.

Define who you are and what you can offer. This means discovering your interests and strengths. It's certainly what any successful business does. There's an old saying, "you do best what you best like to do." In other words, you must find your passion – what you really love to do – and go do it. Your strengths probably help you accomplish your interests; they are "how" you get things done. For example, those who love selling or acting have persuasive strengths. Accountants who love what they do are good with numbers and detail. Graphic artists who are passionate about their work can see interrelationships of size, color and shape.

Know your customer/employer. If you run a business, you'd better know your target customers, as well as their needs. So it is with employers. You must decide to whom you will sell your expertise and for how much money. Obviously, you'll choose an employer that has a problem you can solve, or a situation or issue you can help resolve. Then you must decide what that's worth. However, when that task is finished, either find another, or find another organization with a problem you can help fix.

Understand your "value added" issues. Why should a customer buy from your business? Is it high quality you offer, low price, great service? An employer will buy from you on the same basis. What are the qualities that make what you offer unique? These are what you probably do better than most other people. You must become articulate in marketing these features to those hiring.

Quality and customer/employer satisfaction are paramount for your success. If customers are not satisfied with your product or service, as well as with the buying experience, they will go elsewhere. An employer also will shop elsewhere if your service isn't up to expected standards. And that goes for a boss, or others in the organization with whom you work. A cooperative attitude, timely delivery, quality of work, ethics and all the other aspects of "a good experience" add up to whether folks want to come back to you again. If they don't, you'll be out of business as an owner, or out of work as an employee.

Know what's happening in your industry, as a business owner or an employee. Is your industry growing, shrinking or stagnant? Individual businesses and careers can boom in any one of

these scenarios, but only if they are carefully planned. Thus, strategic planning is a must, whether you are a business owner or an employee. For example, if industry growth is occurring, go to the area of fastest growth. If shrinkage or stagnation is the story, businesses and careers can prosper if small niche sectors can be found to provide growth, or if problems causing the shrinkage/stagnation can be solved.

Be your own R&D department – keep your skills at cutting edge at all times. If you own a business, you must constantly bring out new, better, higher quality products and/or services. The same is true with managing your career. You must go back to school continually to learn new skills, methods, techniques, strategies and tactics. This is true whether you're a senior manager, a security guard, or any function in-between. Always remember, be as good as you can be, because there's always a competitor behind you that may have more and better skills.

Always be able to change direction. This means be ready to start a new business or career when the time is right. If a business is failing and it can't be saved, get out! Sell what you can and start something new. If you're an employee in a failing organization and it can't be saved, don't go down with the ship, get out! If your career is soon to be outmoded due to technology, get retrained and move into a growth industry and function. If a reorganization and/or a downsizing is coming, and you aren't absolutely indispensable (and very few of us are!), begin looking for opportunities elsewhere. This way, you'll have some choices available should the ax fall.

If you follow these eight keys to running both a business and career, and if you truly become your own CEO, you'll never be a hoper and a floater. Instead, you'll be using solid business practices to successfully manage YOU, INC.

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