

Take Charge of Your Career

Surviving in today's world of work requires a fresh mindset and a focus on what you have to offer.

By Marshall A. Brown

“The days of the mammoth corporations are coming to an end. People are going to have to create their own lives, their own careers, and their own successes. Some people may go kicking and screaming into this new world, but there is only one message there. You’re now in business for yourself.”

—ROBERT SCHAEN, Former Controller, Ameritech

If you don’t know it yet, let me tell you: the world of work is very different from that in which we grew up. The days of retiring after 30 years with one company are over. The days of employer loyalty (and for that matter employee loyalty) no longer exist.

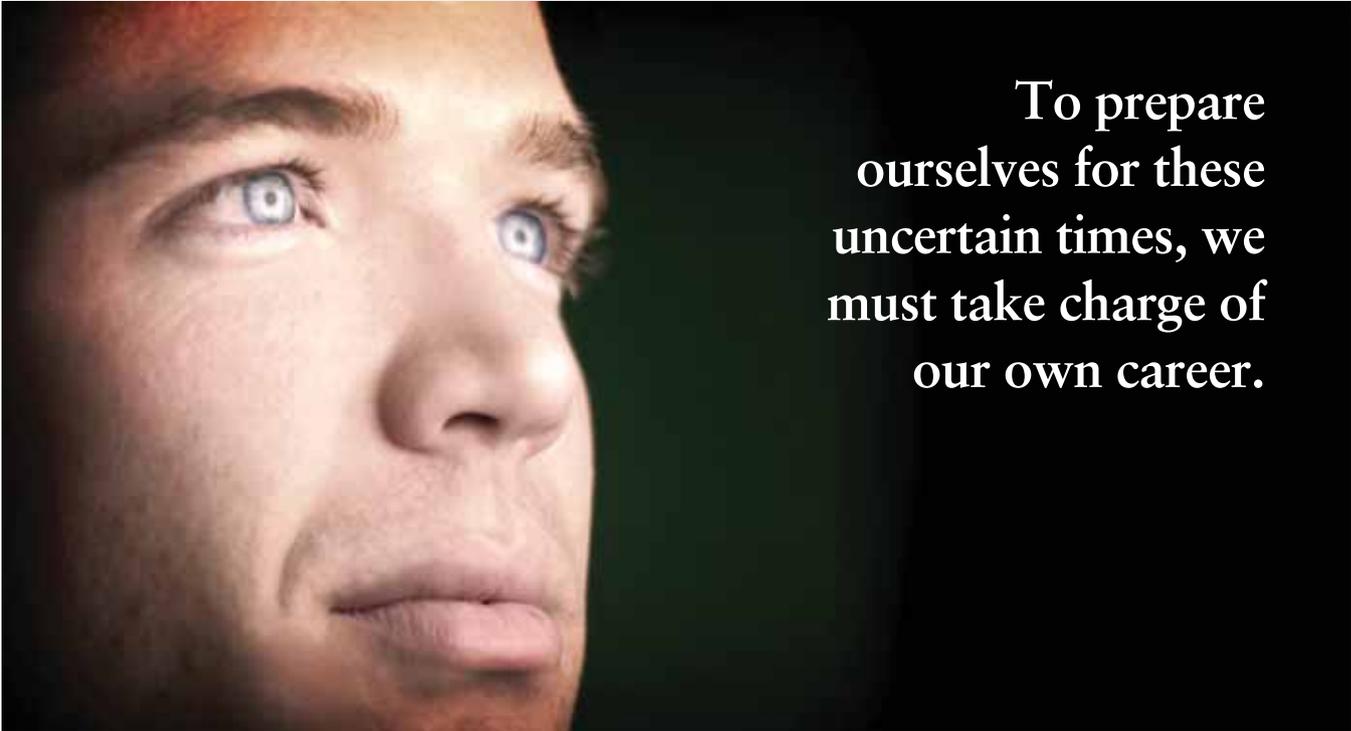
In the past, as long as you did your job and met expectations, you were paid. According to William Bridges, author of *Creating You & Co.* and *Jobshift*, “Jobs were slots, boxes, and pigeonholes. Jobs demanded performance in a script that was already written.”

Today’s work world is full of uncertainty. Every day, we hear about another organization going out of business, downsizing, or rightsizing. To prepare ourselves for these uncertain times, we must take charge of our own career.

Another factor that is affecting today’s changing world of work is our increasing quest to find meaning in our work in new ways.

Especially since 9/11, people realize how short life can be and want to be doing what is important to them. They want to feel passion in their work, a commitment to their values and personal mission statements. Individuals want to make a difference. They want to know that they are good at their work, that their work is important, and that it fits with their values.

The harsh reality is that your stake in your work satisfaction is greater than your employer’s. We cannot rely on our employer to provide us with job satisfaction. In the highly competitive global economy in which we work, we



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need to look out for our own best interests. We must take responsibility and manage our own career. It is no longer an option to wait for our employer to manage it for us.

Whether you are searching for a job now or thinking about making a career change soon, it's time to discover what makes work satisfying to you.

So how do you do that? Here are some tips to help you survive in today's changing world of work:

1. Be self-managing. Think of yourself as your own boss. You are the person in control of your career, and you must manage it. No one else can do it for you. Put a marketing plan together for *you* and just do it!

2. Know what you have to offer. It is imperative in today's competitive job market to know *yourself*. Know what you have to offer, and then market yourself as the person with those attributes. This approach will help separate you from your competition. Your marketability will depend on your ability to demonstrate, on paper and verbally, your skills (even within your current organization).

Today, whether you work in a for-profit or nonprofit organization, employers pay for results. And those who succeed know what they have to offer and what they are capable of doing better than some of their competition. What do you bring to the table in the way of assets, strengths, and values?

3. Keep learning. Look beyond your current skill set and develop additional benefits to market yourself. By asking yourself the following questions (and discussing with your peers, friends, family, or "board of advisers"), you should be able to come up with specific ways to improve your product (you) in the next six months:

- My peers or coworkers know me for which projects or skills?
- How do my projects challenge and stimulate me?
- In the last three months, what new things have I learned that will help me move forward?
- Have I added three important people to my contact list in the last three months?
- By this time next year, what skills or projects would I like to be known for?

4. Understand business trends. Read industry papers, keep track of the fast-changing economic and social landscape, and understand your competition. Stay current in your field(s).

5. Prepare yourself for areas of competence, not jobs. Focus on developing core competencies that your organization or another organization will likely require in the future. Define yourself by what you do and how to get it done, *not* by your job title.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND NETWORKING: THE KEYS TO MANAGING MY CAREER

By Cindy Reilly, SFO

As children, we spent many hours thinking about what we wanted to be when we grew up: police officer, firefighter, parent, movie star. Few of us, including me, ever thought, "When I grow up, I want to be a school business official." But growing up takes us down paths that eventually lead to a career choice. And if we're lucky, we find joy and fulfillment in our vocation. I am one of the lucky ones.

While living in Alaska, I got my first job in school business management. I got the job not because I was highly qualified for the position but because I was the most qualified applicant. During those first few years, I learned much about the job, and I deliberately focused on two things in taking

charge of my career: professional development and networking.

I always had a love of bookkeeping, so school business seemed a good fit from the outset. I earned an associate's degree in applied accounting, a very practical degree, and the base on which I began my career as a school business official.

Within my first year, I joined ALASBO (Alaska Association of School Business Officials) and attended its annual conference, where I began to make mental notes of "who to call when. . . ." It was there that I first met Melody Douglas, who happened to be running for office at ASBO International. She told me about ASBO, and I quickly became a member.

Melody also told me this: "Cindy, it's very easy to feel all alone out in a



6. Find a mentor. Find someone who will provide you with honest and effective feedback, someone who takes an interest in your development and will support you in your career progression.

7. Build financial independence. When your finances are in good shape, you can make career (and life) decisions based on what is important to you. You won't feel that you must accept a certain job because you need the money. To manage your career effectively, you must also be able to manage your personal finances.

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8. Network, network, network! Even if you are not looking for a new job or career right now, develop your network. *Now* is the time to do it, not when you decide to look (or when you have to look).

Join an association, networking groups, and other organizations, and get involved. Don't be just a check-book member. Develop your network by meeting with people regularly. Schedule a meeting with one new person every month.

Get to know people who are doing what you are doing—or want to be doing. Spend at least 85% of your job search time networking. If you can devote only

two hours a month, fine. Then spend 85% of those two hours meeting with “like-minded people.”

9. Keep your résumé up-to-date. Don't wait until someone calls you asking for your résumé—that is the worst time to develop it. You will be anxious and stressed and may leave out some of your significant accomplishments. Add your new expertise, skills, and memberships as you accomplish them.

10. Create a vision. Picture yourself doing what you would like to be doing. Think and verbalize it in “I am” statements. “I am a school business official. I am helping develop our future leaders.” Envision what you want to be doing and put it out there! What do you have to lose?

The old ways of thinking about how and why we work are no longer useful. To survive in today's world of work, we each must know what we have to offer, must realize our potential, and must take charge of our own careers. As stated in the Talmud, “If not now, when?” Wishing you much happiness and success!

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small Alaskan school district, literally hundreds of miles from other business officials. But don't spend time reinventing the wheel. If you come up against something you don't understand, pick up the phone and call one of your fellow business officials. If we don't know the answer, we'll at least know who to call.”

Needless to say, I did come up against many things I didn't understand, and I developed a network of peers to lean on.

After a few years in the business, I began to feel the need to expand my knowledge base. So I enrolled in Ellis College of the New York Institute of Technology and earned my master's degree in business administration. I took advantage of the online format offered by NYIT, and after a year and a half, I had my MBA without leaving the comfort of my western Alaskan village home.

When ASBO offered a national certification for school business

officials, the Certified Administrator of School Finance and Operations® (SFO), I signed up for the beta testing group and passed the rigorous exam. Passing that test assured me that my knowledge base was vast enough that I could succeed in any school business setting, whether in rural Alaska or elsewhere. That proved to be a valuable lesson.

In 2011, the business manager position in my hometown in Wisconsin became open. The SFO certification was my seal of approval from a highly respected international organization and was even recognized by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, which granted me a professional educator license. I continue to stay in touch with my ALASBO friends and am meeting new ones here in Wisconsin's ASBO affiliate.

Looking back, I did some things that I wish I had done differently, but I also did some good things that were career changing. Our

family has moved often; I've served five school districts, leaving a piece of my heart in each. But having become involved in professional organizations and working to share what I do and know, I became recognized as a skilled business official and thus never had a problem finding a job and staying in school business.

To those readers new to the profession, never discount or take for granted the lessons to be learned or the opportunity to become involved in others' lives. Work to be lifelong learners: attend conferences, take in webinars, and read professional journals. Consider sitting for the SFO exam. Get immersed in ASBO International and your state affiliate, and network, network, network!

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Blackburn's career-planning strategy has matured as he has taken on more responsible roles. "At a certain point, I started identifying positions that included opportunities in both technology and in management and leadership," he says. "I started targeting companies where I could grow in more areas than just technology." Own Your Career Development. Build a pool of money to ensure your own development over the course of your career. Work with Your Mentors: Check in with your long-term professional allies and mentors, many of whom won't be your bosses. "You always need to have mentors inside and outside your employer, experienced people with an interest in your personal and professional well-being," Aretakis says. So what can you do on your own to take charge of your career development? Gone are the days when a company would dictate your career path. Now, with employers more focused on their business plans than on employees' career plans, career development is another item all workers need to have on their to-do lists. What does this imply for professionals seeking meaningful career trajectories, now that the paternalistic corporation is history? Career management is much like preventive medicine. Preventive medicine calls for you to take care of yourself by eating right, exercising, drinking in moderation, and if so inclined, taking in the Pamplona Bull Run or skydiving only once every couple of years rather than regularly. Career management uses the same proactive approach and, just like preventive medicine, there's no time like the present to start. Career management is actually investing in you and in your career aspirations. It is something you'll do over the course of your lifetime. By committing to lifelong learning an