

Arrive

(Not So) Extreme Career Makeover

Kick off 2011 with a fresh plan to breathe new life into your career

BY DENNIS MCCAFFERTY

When Dena Lefkowitz started out as a personal injury lawyer in Philadelphia, she envisioned herself as a David facing down many Goliaths, pursuing insurance company executives who sought to avoid paying what was due to those in need. Sometimes there were cases to cherish: She once successfully represented a widow whose firefighter husband died of a heart attack on the way to a blaze, after the insurer argued that the death was not work related.

But such moments were too infrequent. There were so many fender-benders and other relatively inconsequential cases. They dragged on for what seemed an eternity, thanks to defense attorneys' "delay, delay, delay" legal tactics and endless appeals. Meanwhile, she grew discouraged as her chosen field's reputation took a hit.

"I recall thinking, 'How did the profession of trial lawyer become a menace to society?'" she says. "This was in the midst of going through endless streams of medical records, depositions and subpoenas. The stress of constantly meeting unforgiving deadlines kept me up nights. Any personal gratification was outweighed by daily pressures. I had enough."

But instead of completely abandoning law, Lefkowitz opted for a career makeover. She did research and found

that lawyers in government work are among the happiest. So she volunteered at her firm to represent some school districts when the designated education attorney was unavailable. She performed well enough to get more work and used it as a résumé builder. When a legal position opened up with the School District of Philadelphia, she presented herself as a polished, winning candidate and landed the job. She felt reborn.

"I love working in academics," says Lefkowitz, who now works as a senior attorney for the state of Pennsylvania. "You work with some of the smartest, most dedicated people you'll ever meet."

Lefkowitz's story demonstrates that you don't have to resort to dramatic change to recharge your career. With massive layoffs and double-digit unemployment, workers often feel too stretched with additional grunt work—and are too anxious about their own job security—to take stock of where they are. As opposed to getting energized by what they do, experts say, they develop a sense of resignation, looking to simply get through the day. They feel like a faceless cog in a large machine. It's a common scenario, as only 45 percent of workers today are satisfied with their jobs, according to recently released findings from the Conference Board. That's down from 60 percent in 1987.

But what's commonly called a career makeover can take place incrementally, without disrupting the daily needs of the office or requiring a dramatic vocational change. In fact, career advisors say workers may discover that reinvigorating their careers is hardly as intimidating a prospect as they'd anticipate.

Take a Personal Assessment

The concept of "job crafting" is emerging as a reality. It requires that workers take inventory of their day-to-day roles and pinpoint those that provide satisfaction and those that do not. After this is determined, the employee needs to come up with ways to increase involvement in duties that are engaging, says Amy Wrzesniewski, an associate professor of organizational behavior at the Yale School of Management.

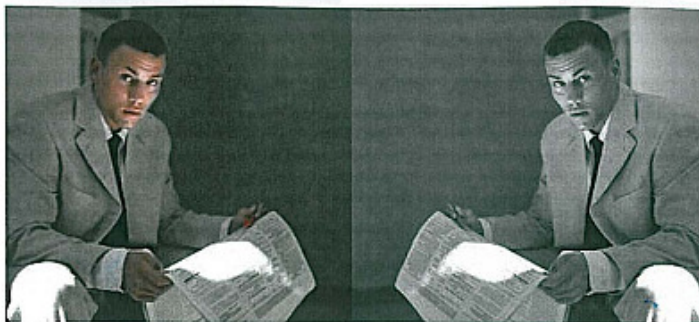
Too often, employees let slip daily opportunities to transform their roles. For example, a marketing executive may want to develop a big, multiplatform social network promotional strategy. But, given multiple rounds of layoffs, the exec is too besieged with training subordinates for their now expanded but basic functions.

"What that executive can do is tap the talents of those he's training to transition to doing what he wants to do," says Wrzesniewski, who is a coauthor of a recent article on this topic in *Harvard Business Review*. "He can assess which employees have the talent to help him work on his big-picture project and allow them to do that. He can also prepare employees to take over his training, further freeing him up for his project."

Establish Your Expertise—and a Niche

Ever wonder how someone emerges as an expert? For some, it comes down to knowledge with a healthy dose of marketing. New Yorker Mary Lou Quinlan rose to prominence as a female-consumer strategist in part because she started writing Op-Ed pieces in trade publications and went on to write magazine articles, then books—subsequently gaining demand as a public speaker.

"It's a matter of being visible out there," she says, "and showing up."



Online Resources to Help With Your Career Makeover

hbr.org: The *Harvard Business Review* website features other guides to help employees reduce multitasking, discover what bosses want and evaluate their potential

mbtcomplete.com: Allows you to take the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator test online, for \$59.95

google.com/alerts: Monitors whenever anyone mentions you, your company, your competitors or relevant business trends

It's the kind of effort that feeds upon itself. "Those who write and speak are often asked to write and speak more," says Thom Singer, a business consultant and author of the *Some Assembly Required* series of books on professional networking. "These are the people who are seen as experts. It's an effort that creates an ongoing circle."

Not everyone, of course, is that assertive and extroverted. But nearly everyone can elevate himself or herself as a valuable expert by developing skills in a unique niche. Thomas Rees grew frustrated attempting to distinguish himself as a broker in New York. He felt he was simply one in a cast of thousands trying to get ahead. Then he did some homework and discovered that less than 1 percent of his fellow brokers were involved in a particular, salable niche that entailed the discretionary management of customers' money.

"I deemed it well worth the six months in training required to get into this program," Rees says. "The commission was actually slightly less than what I'd get by promoting stocks and mutual funds, but it was a dependable, annually recurring income."

Become the Go-To Person

Take a look around the office and figure out what isn't getting done that would satisfy you, then volunteer to do it.

It can work, as long as the big bosses are on board. To win them over, you need to present the case that the time invested would be good for the company. In the case of a worker who wants to mentor, it helps to present a plan with lasting benefits. The worker could propose creating a permanent, all-purpose training manual for new employees, including digital components and even "fun" stuff such as an online quiz.

"It would not only help these employees get to know how the company works, but they'd get to know you better in the process," says Judi Perkins, a Connecticut-based career coach. "This increases your value within the organization."

In some cases, a worker may struggle to identify exactly what would be motivational, but there are tools that can help. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, for example, has been around for seven decades, providing professionals with a sense of their strengths and how they're perceived by others. And Myers-Briggs has now posted an online version of its

self-assessment, for employees who want this kind of evaluation but don't have access to an in-person session. (In a downsized economy, training budgets are often sharply reduced.)

Then, think like a senior manager to figure out how your passion will benefit the company. Ask yourself, Where does this business want to go and how can something I love doing get it there?

"It could be reaching a new market or finding a new way to reach an existing market," Perkins says. "Do your research. Make some projections about the benefits of doing it. And then make an appointment to present it."

Empowering Yourself via Social Media

Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn are often used to network with other professionals and to promote accomplishments, thus increasing the perception of one's value. But the levels of user sophistication vary, and those who are the most social media savvy get far more return for their time on these sites. Those having a difficult time connecting with others within their own fields might try tweepl.org, which allows Twitter users to search for other users with shared interests and experiences.

You also can increase your visibility on Facebook and LinkedIn by customizing your public profile URL, using your name and industry-specific keywords to attract peers throughout the world.

"After doing this, you'll want to establish a Google Alert on your own name," says Chandlee Bryan, a social media consultant and coauthor of *The Twitter Job Search Guide*. "That way, you'll get notified whenever anyone mentions you, and track your rise in visibility over time."

And you don't have to be a social media whiz to get the most out of online tools. You can present yourself as a tech-savvy professional with deep industry knowledge simply by setting up and reviewing custom Google Alerts to receive mentions of your company, your competitors and relevant business trends in the field, by keyword or search phrase.


"You'll establish more value within your organization because people will come to you to find out what the key discussions and issues are," Bryan says. ☞

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