Building a Resilient Career

By Kim Dority

You know the drill: some friends are scrambling for jobs, others dodging pink slips, even more in dead-end jobs that aren’t the direction they meant to go. You may be in the same spot. So is now really the time to be thinking about building a resilient career? Actually, this is the perfect time to start.

So what is a resilient career? Basically, one that’s:

- Agile – able to move quickly in many different directions
- Opportunistic – able to respond to (or create) opportunity
- Sustainable – able to engage you, support you, and reward you both financially and emotionally over however many decades you may want to work

Whether you change careers seven times (the old stat) or twenty (likely!), now is the time to take charge of building your resilient career. How? First, by realizing that whether you have a job or not, these days we’re all self-employed.

Second, by focusing on the three A’s: Aptitudes, Attitudes, and Actions.

Aptitudes

What are you good at, and what do you enjoy? You don’t want to focus your career-building efforts on work that you may be good at, but don’t enjoy, so now is the time for you to identify your strengths and focus on moving them from “strengths” to “excellence.”

How do you identify your strengths? The best starting point is an excellent series of self-assessment books, *First Break All the Rules*, by Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman (Simon & Schuster, 1999), *Now Discover Your Strengths*, by Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton (Free Press, 2001), and *Go Put Your Strengths to Work*, by Marcus Buckingham (Free Press, 2007.)

Basically, the central idea of the books is that we tend to take our strengths for granted, and focus all our energies on “fixing” our weaknesses. According to the authors, it’s a lot smarter (and more rewarding!) to instead focus on what you’re naturally good at (your aptitudes or strengths), and build them to excellence. These books will help you identify your own strengths, and how to build a career around them.

Attitudes

Your attitudes determine how you interpret the events and experiences of your life. Negative attitudes will keep you “stuck” in situations that drain you of energy and joy, whereas positive attitudes can help move your forward out of a bad situation and into the terrific career you envision.

Some of the attitudes that will help you build your resilient career:

- Expecting change as an ongoing part of your career (and life), and not wasting energy trying to resist it.
- Becoming more of a risk-taker, focusing on those risks that are smart in terms of your career, and whose results you can manage if things don’t turn out as hoped for.
- Understanding that failure is an indicator that you’re trying to grow and accomplish new things, rather than something you should be ashamed of. The only people who have no failures in their lives are those who have never attempted to achieve anything – and that’s not you.
• Learning to accept reality, rather than living in an imaginary universe of how the world should be, or how you wish it were. Dealing with reality enables you to identify a problem, and decide how you will resolve it. It puts you in charge of making things better, instead of waiting – hoping – someone else will fix them.

• Getting comfortable with taking action despite fear. In order to create the career you’d like to have, you have to get comfortable with moving beyond your comfort zone. Start small, then continue to take on new challenges that have seemed frightening to you. As has been noted by many, courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the willingness to act despite it. Practice, practice, practice....

• Understanding “setbacks” as temporary, and a necessary part of your determination to get where you’re going. Everyone has them; what sets you apart is your ability to get back up and keep moving forward.

• Becoming a confident decision-maker, and embracing the fact that while you can make the best decision with the information you have at hand, sometimes there IS no right answer – the key is in what you make of the results.

Actions

While your attitudes will set the stage for your resilient career, your actions will be what create that agile, opportunistic, and sustainable career for you. Here’s how to get going:

• **Put together your career agenda.** Remember the statement that we’re all self employed? This is where you take charge of your career. Put together an agenda that identifies your career goals, and the actions you’ll take to reach those goals. Not sure how to achieve one of them? Ask friends or colleagues whose judgment you trust to help you brainstorm solutions. Then evaluate your progress on a regular basis.

• **Expect change, and position for the opportunities it provides.** Change can destroy existing jobs, companies, and even industries, but it can also create new opportunities for those positioned for them. Pay attention, and find ways to use change for your benefit. It’s not going to stop or even slow down, so your best option is to expect it, and figure out what opportunities changes in your organization, profession, or industry may present. Then be ready to act.

• **Always have an exit strategy in place.** Hope for the best, plan for the worst. Your exit strategy is built around your “what next” questions: what kind of work would you like to be doing next, for whom and where, and what actions do you need to take over the next several months/years in order to be positioned to have those opportunities?

• **Keep growing your expertise.** Given how quickly processes, technologies, and existing knowledge advance, it’s important to keep learning just to stay current in your field. Figure out what you need to learn to keep your skills competitive, and how, where, and when you’ll do that.

• **Build, nurture, and expand your network.** Face-to-face or online, your professional relationships are critical to opening up career opportunities. Participate in your professional associations, contribute to online communities, and find ways to help others in your network. Genuinely caring about the people in your professional universe will reward you as a human being as well as a job-seeker.

• **Establish and maintain your professional brand.** As with building your network, today’s online tools make it easy to showcase your strengths to the world. Establishing your professional brand outside of your employer provides an opportunity for others to learn more about the value you could bring to their organization and the contributions you’ve made to others’.

• **Start or keep building your project portfolio.** A project portfolio indicates not only what you know, but what you can do with what you know. Essentially, it demonstrates the value you have added to projects and organizations, which helps potential employers understand the value you could add to theirs.

• **Seek out and work with mentors.** A mentor relationship can be formal (let’s create goals and meeting agendas) or casual (let’s go grab a cup of coffee and chat), but either way your
objective is to find someone you respect who can help coach you through career decisions. And that doesn’t always have to mean someone who’s older than you are!

- **Make sure you know your own definition of success.** When you think about career “success,” you may care as much about the positive impact of your skills as your salary, or the quality of life and life-balance you have, or that you’ve gained the recognition of your peers for outstanding professional contributions. When you think about your resilient career and the success you’re shooting for, make sure it’s success that’s meaningful to you personally.

Base your career choices on the assumption that you’re always self-employed, whether or not you’ve got a job. Assume your employer (current or potential) is going to focus on what’s best for the company, so you need to focus on what’s best for you – and your career. Recognizing and staying ahead of change, building your professional platform, and taking intelligent risks – these strategies will position you for a resilient, sustainable career whether you’re just starting out or starting over.

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