

CareerSmart Advisor™

Strategies & Solutions for Your Career Success

A Note From Dave

January is often the time when we see many new members join ExecuNet — these folks are typically adjusting their career path or just following through on New Years’ resolutions related to their career development.



Whatever brings them — and you — to ExecuNet, we’re proud of how we’ve evolved over the last 20 years from simply a resource to help members find jobs to a full-service network. We provide a slate of career development resources and contacts that can help regardless of whether you’re in job search or just searching for ways to make your current role more successful and fulfilling.

Our job board is still a vital part of our business, as searches of our membership and requests for referrals are being made by more than 15,000 companies and third-party executive recruiters at any given time. But it’s just one important facet.

ExecuNet’s *Lessons from Leaders* series are compilations some of the best of our content, and they’re focused on the top issues and subjects that are of the most interest to you. We learn a lot about what’s on your mind through our forum discussions and executive Roundtables, which along with our online seminars and member profiles, receive considerable traffic on our site everyday.

We hope that you become involved — or more involved — with all of the content and services that ExecuNet has to offer. It’s more important than ever to build a strong network of professional contacts. Let ExecuNet help become your networking — and career development — partner.

Sincerely,



Dave Opton
ExecuNet Founder & CEO
www.execunet.com/davesblog

Engagement as a Pathway to Retention

By Marji McClure

While layoffs continue to make headlines in practically every industry and job function, it would seem that keeping employees gainfully employed would not be an issue for executives. But, the fact is that keeping top talent engaged and productive — and on your company’s payroll — is a challenge that is oftentimes immune to economic conditions.

As companies strive to do more with less, it’s imperative that everyone on the team is satisfied and that employees comprise a high-performing team.

Richard Cronen, founding partner of California-based Meridian Consulting Inc. notes, “I was talking to a former client of mine and she was telling me how fortunate they had been lately. With the economic downturn, the number of quality people seeking employment has increased, and they recently benefited and hired some people whose skills were better than they normally attract. I pointed out to her that her challenge now was how to keep those people when the economy recovers.”

It is clear that solid retention numbers aren’t recession-proof, but the good news is retention is top-of-mind for many executives. According to a recent survey from Robert Half International, a staffing firm that serves the accounting and finance sectors, 39 percent of the senior executives polled said that retention was their largest staffing issue. Recruitment was second at 22 percent (followed by productivity and staff morale at 17 percent each).

Experts agree that executives must charge themselves with creating a culture in which employees feel supported and nurtured — one that engages them and creates company loyalty, giving employees more than one reason to stay.

Beginning with Recruitment

Surprisingly, the most crucial step in the retention puzzle happens before employees walk through an organization’s doors on their first day of work. The success of a company’s recruitment processes lays the foundation for solid retention. The bottom line is, experts agree, that if you bring in the right employees for the right reasons and with the right skills and attitude, they won’t want to leave.

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Career-Enhancing Programs
January/February 2009
Hosted by Dave Opton,
founder and CEO, ExecuNet

- 1/15 — **Winning Interviews: Converse, Connect, Convince** — Judy Rosemarin
- 1/16 — **FREE PROGRAM FOR MEMBERS** — **12 Ways to Jump Start Your Job Search in the New Year** — Karen Armon
- 1/23 — **FREE PROGRAM FOR MEMBERS** — **Effectively Use Online Contacts for Your Job Search** — Rod Colon
- 2/13 — **FREE PROGRAM FOR MEMBERS** — **Uncover the Hidden Job Market** — Karen Armon
- 2/19 — **Market Your Potential, Not Your Past** — Karen Armon
- 2/20 — **FREE PROGRAM FOR MEMBERS** — **Critical Components of Executive Compensation** — Charles Csizmar

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- 1/5 — **Boston** — Marg Balcom
- 1/6 — **San Diego/Carlsbad** — Mark James
- 1/7 — **New York City** — Judy Rosemarin
- 1/7 — **New York City Sr. Executive Roundtable** — Judy Rosemarin
- 1/7 — **Philadelphia** — Ed Kelleher
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- 1/7 — **Cincinnati** — Jennifer McClure
- 1/8 — **Atlanta** — J. Patrick Haly
- 1/9 — **Parsippany** — Linsey Levine
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- 1/12 — **Miami/Hollywood** — Jeannette Kraar
- 1/12 — **Boston Sr. Executive Roundtable** — Marg Balcom
- 1/12 — **Detroit** — Marge Larsen
- 1/13 — **Phoenix** — Fred Coon
- 1/13 — **Houston** — Michael Grove
- 1/13 — **Orlando** — Catherine Coates & Mike Murray
- 1/14 — **Greensboro** — John O'Connor
- 1/14 — **Stamford** — Linda Van Valkenburgh
- 1/14 — **Toronto Sr. Executive Roundtable** — Martin Buckland
- 1/14 — **Cleveland Sr. Executive Roundtable** — Rick Taylor
- 1/15 — **Vienna/Tysons Corner, VA** — Peter McCarthy
- 1/15 — **Jersey Shore/Lakewood** — Rod Colon
- 1/15 — **Indianapolis** — Romona Camarata
- 1/15 — **Minneapolis** — John Wetzel & Barbara Johnson
- 1/15 — **Louisville** — Thom Crimans & Cathy Fyock
- 1/15 — **Pittsburgh/Cranberry Township** — Tina Winner
- 1/19 — **Raleigh/Durham** — Stuart Levine
- 1/20 — **Irvine (Orange County)** — Mark James
- 1/20 — **Cleveland** — Rick Taylor

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Learnings from Landings

Networking, Internet Yield Winning Combination

When ExecuNet member John LaGrand found himself in transition for the second time in just over three years, he discovered a marketplace abundant with opportunities. Using a combination of networking and web searching, LaGrand secured one of those opportunities in just four months.

LaGrand's networking put him in touch with both old and new contacts. "Take advantage of good past relationships with your former bosses. Keep them in the loop on your search," suggests LaGrand. "Join local networking groups and attend the functions, especially the social gatherings." He also suggests joining small support groups of peers.

LaGrand adds that it is important to hone interviewing and negotiating skills. "I was surprised by the rust on these skills," he says. Other advice LaGrand has for fellow ExecuNet members in job search: "know what you want and know how to ask for it."

While the market was better this time, LaGrand says he also found it tighter in terms of how closely employers and recruiters followed specifications of positions when screening candidates. "I think failure to look beyond the job description unnecessarily excludes many qualified candidates," he says.

LaGrand also notes many challenges with working with the recruiting community. "I found an unacceptably consistent pattern of unacknowledged email, phone calls and written correspondence," he says. "As for using a recruiter...in my nearly 30 years of

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Have a good email version of a summary and résumé available and ready to go at all times.

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professional work, I think I've landed one or two positions with the aid of recruiters. I think the high-end retained executive recruiter is the best of the breed if you can build relationships with them."

LaGrand says that he used the web, including sites like ExecuNet, to search for job opportunities and found many of his leads online. "I found the Internet search mode a necessary evil, but ineffective and inefficient," notes LaGrand. "My advice to seekers: have a good email version of a summary and résumé available and ready to go at all times."

What surprises LaGrand about Internet technology is "the degree to which it has failed to help seekers land that perfect job or even to make the task of electronic search more efficient and effective. Also, the same failing is noted with respect to employers and recruiters." ■

What Not to Do When in Transition

John LaGrand offers these tips on what job seekers shouldn't do during their quest for a new career opportunity:

- Do not fail to follow every lead.
- Do not rely only or heavily on Internet search engines.
- Do not fail to form relationships with executive recruiters.
- Do not fail to be financially prepared for your next search — planned or otherwise.

Insider Insight

How Organizations Can Recruit and Retain Their Top Female Performers

By Marti Barletta

I think that the most important thing that organizations can do is acknowledge that men and women are different and that these differences can actually be strengths when viewed in the proper context. I refer to these as GenderTrends differences, and they impact communications and decision-making in the workplace (and beyond!).

Let's Start with Decision-Making

Women tend to work collaboratively and build consensus. They are ensemble players who see the world from a perspective of “we, not me.” Men tend to be soloists and see the world from an individual perspective. You may have heard the saying, “Every man for himself!”

Employers who don't recognize this difference is significant may see female managers as ineffective. When they observe her gathering input from others prior to making a decision, they may view her as either uninformed or timid.

Reality check — by gathering input before making a decision, she is ensuring that the majority will be pleased with the outcome, feel invested in the process and thus the full team will have a stake in seeing the plan she has crafted succeed.

GenderTrends differences impact communication styles as well. When asked to rate their own performance, men have a tendency to emphasize the value of their own contributions, while attributing failure to something/someone else.

Women tend to attribute success to teamwork and luck and failure to themselves. Women are “compulsively confessional,” telling the bad with the good. Men are more likely to “put their best foot forward.”

These differences in style can translate into big differences during salary and performance reviews if employers are not

tuned into GenderTrends nuances.

Employers who are aware that these are differences and that neither gender is right or wrong are more likely to foster an environment where both styles flourish. When all management and communication styles are respected, they will have taken the first step (dare I say leap?) toward retaining and motivating their female employees.

Generally when you meet the expectations of women, you exceed the expectations of men. So I think that although they may view, define or utilize them differently, most programs will benefit both genders.

A woman may see flextime as a way to multitask and accommodate her different roles. Men may see it as “freedom,” an opportunity to spend time with family or pursue an outside interest.

Investing in Female-Focused Retention Strategies

People are an organization's most valuable asset, and the competition for talent should be a top priority. Since women are typically ranked higher on the vast majority of management skills than men — by bosses, peers and subordinates and because of their education advantage (they earn 60 percent of college degrees) — they are more likely than men to have the skills corporations need for the jobs of the 21st century.

Furthermore, because women tend to be people-centric, they are typically focused on customer care even when that is not their primary job responsibility. That translates into increased customer satisfaction which is, after all, tied to increased profit.

Becoming an Organization Women Want to Work For

Organizations need to understand what a woman is looking for in a career and a company and market jobs accordingly.

She is likely looking at more than one company, and she is evaluating more than just the length of her commute.

It's no surprise that title, competitive compensation (including benefits) and autonomy are top priorities to women as well as men.

But women also want an insight into team dynamics, both internal and external, when interviewing. They also want to see that there are women in key management roles. If there are not, they will wonder about their own opportunities to succeed. They would also prefer to work for a company that is a good corporate citizen.

Don't underestimate the value of PrimeTime Women! Women aged 50 to 70 are different, but not deficient! Economists predict a labor shortage, and this energetic group is ready, willing and able to fill that gap.

In fact, according to AARP, almost 80 percent of all Boomers expect to be “working” after they retire. It's a bit of an oxymoron, I know, but this group has energy, skills and drive that they want to put to good use. Once again, flexibility is the key to harnessing their power and experience.

Learn everything that you can about GenderTrends differences. Improving internal communications and the recruiting and retention of female employees are both excellent ways to cultivate success. Remember, it is often a two-way street — not only are men managing women, women are managing men! ■

Marti Barletta is a speaker and author of Marketing to Women and PrimeTime Women: How to Win the Hearts, Minds and Business of Big Boomer Spenders, and founder of The TrendSight Group, a marketing-to-women consulting firm that helps companies learn about women. She can be reached at TrendSight.com

Retention Program

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The first step is a clear job description, along with clarity around the roles and responsibilities an individual will hold in that position, notes Peter Barron Stark, author of the forthcoming book, *ENGAGED: How Leaders Build Organizations Where Employees Love to Come to Work*. “If you are clear, then it is easier in the interview process to determine if you have the right candidate,” he says.

Manage and Create Honest Expectations

During the hiring process, it’s imperative that executives honestly and accurately portray to candidates what it is like to work for their organization — not just related to specific job duties, but company culture as well.

Online shoe retailer Zappos has established 10 core values that it asks its employees to follow. Among them are embrace and drive change; pursue growth and learning; do more with less; and be humble. To determine if a candidate is the right fit according to the values, Zappos has a core values interview assessment guide that outlines how well candidates embrace the values.

As part of the new employee orientation at professional services firm Merrick & Company, employees are introduced to “The Merrick Way,” which is “the way we embody our mission, vision and values,” says Debbie Norris, vice president of human resources. This has undoubtedly helped build a foundation for a company that was recently awarded the Alfred P. Sloan Award for Business Excellence in Workplace Flexibility. Merrick has also been named a “Best Company” to work for by a variety of sources.

Measuring Engagement and Loyalty

One way in which companies can gain insight into how to measure (and improve) employee retention is through a theory called “Organizational Climate,” created by Bob Stringer and George Litwin at Harvard University. The Brookside Group, led by president and

Steps to Successful Onboarding

Experts agree that solid onboarding is the cornerstone of any organization’s successful retention strategy. George Bradt, managing director of Prime Genesis, offers the following guidelines from the upcoming book, *Onboarding — How to Get Your New Employees Up to Speed in Half the Time*, which he co-authored with Mary Vonnegut.

Executives need to think about these three things, advises Bradt:

1. Set the stage for success even before your new employees sign up.
2. Help your new employees get a head start before day one.
3. Enable and inspire all your employees to deliver better results faster.

The process of onboarding new employees is comprised of 10 steps, says Bradt.

They include:

1. Align key stakeholders around what and how you expect the new employee to deliver.
2. Create a powerful slate of potential candidates.
3. Evaluate candidates against the recruiting brief in a way that sets up closing the sale.
4. Make the offer and close the sale in a way that reinforces your leadership message.
5. Co-create an individual tactical onboarding plan with the new employee.
6. Manage the announcement cascade in a way that sets your new employee up for success with all their key stakeholders.
7. Assign someone to do what is required for the new employee to be ready, eager and able to do real work starting on his or her first day (**Accommodation**).
8. Manage first impressions — both ways.
9. Create conditions for your new employee to start working well early on with those who can be most helpful (**Assimilation**).
10. Give your new employee the resources and support he or she needs to deliver better results faster (**Acceleration**).

Bradt cautions against stopping the onboarding process after completing these 10 steps. “Follow through with your new employees to ensure ongoing adjustments and success,” says Bradt. “Leadership is about inspiring and enabling others. How you handle the introduction of new employees communicates volumes to everyone. In many ways, this is one of the acid tests of leadership.”

founder Tom Cates, helps companies understand Organizational Climate through its consulting services. Cates explains that Organizational Climate is comprised of six dimensions of the work environment between management and employees. The belief is that when the climate is stronger, people work harder and are more motivated.

Those six dimensions are: structure, standards, responsibility, recognition, support and commitment. Through an Organizational Climate survey, managers can learn how they are perceived by employees, and perhaps change ill-perceived behaviors. “What [the tool] does is it brings order to relationships,” says Cates. The Brookside Group collects the survey results and delivers it via training program. “We provide [managers] with the tools and coaching so that they can get better at it,” explains Cates. “We try to

engage the managers of the managers. It needs to be reinforced and coached.”

Employees can also learn more about a company and become more ingrained with its cultural nuances through a mentoring program. Ron Mitchell, CEO and co-founder of career mentoring platform Gotta Mentor, says it’s important to match individuals with mentors that share common backgrounds and interests — from demographics and educational background to professional background and personal interests.

Encouraging Engagement

For some organizations, this learning process begins the moment new employees are hired. Many organizations that strive to improve their retention rates offer extensive training to smooth the introduction of new employees. At

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Retention Program

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Zappos, all new hires — regardless of the department in which they will work — complete a four-week training session in the call center. During the first couple of weeks, they receive classroom training, which includes guest speakers (employees who come in and talk about their experiences with the company). The last two weeks of training are comprised of 40-hours worth of taking call center calls. “Because it is a mix of people — half are from the call center and half are from other departments — it breaks down the hierarchy that exists in other companies,” explains Christa Foley, recruiting manager for Zappos. “It connects all of the people in the class and helps people form bonds across departments.”

About halfway through the training, in an effort to weed out people who are still harbouring doubts about the company, Zappos offers employees money to quit — currently, the amount is \$2,000. Only two percent took the offer over the past year, according to Foley.

Most agree that continued communication is key in ensuring that employees remain engaged. A president’s message every month at Merrick reveals how the company is doing financially. Pamela Springer, president of ECNext and developer of Manta.com, an online network for business, holds company meetings every six weeks to inform employees about financial and other happenings. At least once or twice a year, ECNext employees gather for

a one and a half day off-site meeting in which they participate in team-building exercises. Everyday, each team meets to discuss three things, explains Springer: the big thing yesterday, the big thing today, and what’s blocking you?

Recognizing Disengagement

What causes the disengagement? It can be a series of events or one specific issue. “Research shows that employees usually disengage after some negative event, such as discovering that the job is not what was promised, being passed over for a promotion or being assigned a new boss that they clash with,” says executive career coach Cheryl Palmer of Call to Career.

According to Darleen DeRosa, PhD, managing partner of OnPoint Consulting, signs of disengagement are if employees:

- Seem very likely to leave the company for a better opportunity.
- Do not discuss promotion opportunities or a career path within the company.
- Do not feel valued by the company (e.g., may have been passed over for a promotion opportunity).
- Have expressed dissatisfaction with their compensation/rewards.
- Do not seem to be fully motivated (e.g., may not seek out challenging opportunities or do anything beyond their basic role).
- Demonstrates interpersonal problems (e.g., is skeptical, negative, not getting along with others, etc.)

According to the Allegiance Pulse of America survey, engagement drops

significantly during the first year of employment. A 2008 ExecuNet survey of corporate HR executives revealed that the excitement of a new senior leadership role wanes at about 13 months, leaving the door open for dissatisfaction to creep in.

“After the six-month anniversary, drivers of employee engagement shift,” says Kyle LaMalfa, best practices manager and loyalty expert for Allegiance Inc., a feedback management software provider. “During the second phase of employment, employees need to feel like they are achieving something meaningful in their work and that their manager has realistic expectations about what they can achieve.”

Responding to Disengagement

If you notice any of these signs in your employees, it’s important to address any problems before they worsen. Springer suggests that executives open a dialogue with the affected employee to determine what the problem is and how to address it.

During these tough economic times when financial perks are being cut from budgets, some employers are turning to recognition as a way in which to keep employees happy, says Eric Mosley, CEO of Globoforce, a provider of employee recognition solutions based in Massachusetts. “Recognition is a low-cost way of getting that return. You’re filling a gap and boosting their feelings toward the company.” Mosley says that the company is seeing surging interest in recognition programs.

“Over the past three years, we’ve seen recognition grow as an important tool in HR, and in the past months, we’ve seen the rate increase even more,” says Mosley. “In a recession, the first thing that gets hit is productivity.” As people worry about the economy and the stability of their jobs, recognition programs can help alleviate some of that worry. “New hires should be asked to complete a survey asking for their choices of modes of recognition — public or private,” suggests Christi Gibson, executive director of Recognition Professionals International. “The survey should also ask what products or services they would select as meaningful rewards.” ■

Expert Resources:

- George Bradt, Prime Genesis (PrimeGenesis.com)
- Tom Cates, The Brookeside Group (Brookeside.com)
- Richard Cronen, Meridian Consulting (MeridianConsultingInc.com)
- Darleen DeRosa, PhD, OnPoint Consulting (OnPointConsulting.com)
- Christa Foley, Zappos (Zappos.com)
- Christi Gibson, Recognition Professionals International (Recognition.org)
- Kyle LaMalfa, Allegiance Inc. (Allegiance.com)
- Ron Mitchell, Gotta Mentor (GottaMentor.com)
- Eric Mosley, Globoforce (Globoforce.com)
- Debbie Norris, Merrick & Company (Merrick.com)
- Cheryl Palmer, Call to Career (CalltoCareer.com)
- Pamela Springer, ECNext (ECNext.com)
- Peter Barron Stark, Peter Barron Stark and Associates Inc. (PBSConsulting.com)

Leadership Briefing

Finding Your Authentic Self

By Robyn Greenspan

“These are the times that try men’s souls,” Bill George quoted Thomas Paine to lay the foundation for coping with the turmoil that Wall Street has recently experienced. “What are we going to be as a nation, and what will our impact be on the world?”

The former CEO of Medtronic, professor of management practice at Harvard Business School, and author of two best-selling books, *True North* and *Authentic Leadership*, challenged the audience of 4,500 senior executives from 50 countries to think about themselves as leaders and how they will bend the course of history while staying true to themselves.

“The world is crying out for leadership,” said George, “What can you do to step up?”

The recently failed financial institutions didn’t understand about building for the long-term, George noted. “We’ve chosen the wrong leaders. More for charisma, image and style rather than integrity and substance.”

But George is encouraged by the new generation of 21st century leaders because they are looking for meaning and significance — not money for fulfillment and satisfaction. These new leaders will need to align, empower, serve and collaborate. “Align around the company’s mission and values,” George implores. “We also want to empower everyone to step up and lead in the organization. Not just the leaders on top but those who are leading from within and inspiring others no matter where they are in the organization.” Leaders should also seek to serve customers and employees, which will result in service to shareholders, rather than putting stock price first. “Finally, we should all collaborate to solve customers’ problems,” George said.

When George wanted to learn how to develop the kind of authentic individuals who aligned, empowered, served and collaborated he interviewed 125

successful leaders. “They didn’t talk about characteristics that generated success. But what stood out were the life stories of these leaders. They needed to go through difficult experiences to appreciate what was important. They all struggled with making a difference versus satisfying their egos.”

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Nothing is more fulfilling than leading, bringing people together to make a difference in the world. I challenge each of you to step up and make this world a better place. The only thing we take with us is what we leave behind.

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There are six things George identified that were important to self-development. They are characteristics that aren’t external but come from within.

1. Self-awareness: “Make sure that top management knows who you are, not who you want to be,” said George. “As Jeff Immelt, CEO of GE said, ‘Leadership is a long journey into your own soul.’”
2. Practicing your values under pressure: “You won’t know what those values are until you are challenged.”
3. Motivations and capabilities: “We like extrinsic motivations but they should be balanced with intrinsic motivations. What kind of satisfaction do you get? Are you a good team leader? Build upon your greatest strengths and capabilities, and when you find the

balance, that’s the sweet spot.”

4. How do you cope with the loneliness of being at the top? George recommends that all leaders have at least one person with whom they can be completely open and honest...and who will reply and challenge with equal honesty.
5. Lead an integrated life: George urges leaders to decompartmentalize and maintain integrity so they are the same whole person whether at home, at work or in the community.
6. Know the purpose of your leadership: Why would others be inspired by you?

George cites the career path of Andrea Jung, CEO of Avon, who left Nieman Marcus as an executive vice president at 35 years old because she no longer wanted to make luxury products. Initially, she was passed over at Avon, but someone encouraged her to follow her compass and not her clock, to be on course and not on a timetable. Two years later, Jung became chief executive. “She changed Avon’s mission from cosmetics to empowerment of women,” George says of the major change that led to the company’s recent success. “When you know your purpose you can empower others.”

“Nothing is more fulfilling than leading, bringing people together to make a difference in the world,” said George. “I challenge each of you to step up and make this world a better place. The only thing we take with us is what we leave behind.” ■

ExecuNet was invited by global executive education organization HSM to create a series of articles based on the presentations at their World Business Forum in New York City in September 2008. HSM delivered the articles to the senior business leaders who attended the two-day Forum of innovative thinking, and ExecuNet’s Executive Editor Lauryn Franzoni and Editor-in-Chief Robyn Greenspan will continue to share the insights from this exclusive event in upcoming member programs and reports.

Your Career Advisor

Checking References: Candidates Should Do It Too

By Tony Beshara

In theory, an individual's relationship with his employer is mutually beneficial and reciprocal in respect, trust and open communication. You and I know that the reality is much different. At no time is this imbalance more pronounced than during the recruiting process. The recruiting process places you under the microscope, while the employer feels free to cover its weaknesses with a facade of perfection.

Before offering you a position, most companies will ask for references. They want to check with your previous employers and supervisors, or perhaps, personal acquaintances, who can attest to your integrity, character, work ethic, work performance and skills. Some companies, with permission, will check your credit history and academic qualifications.

Yet, think about most of the jobs that you have had. Did the company, the job, or your co-workers turn out to be exactly as represented during your recruitment? How many candidates think to check the "references" of their prospective employer? Very few. It seldom occurs to most candidates that they should perform the same due diligence on the hiring organization and on the individuals leading that company, as that organization does on them.

Just as you do not reveal the inherent risks you bring as a prospective employee, the hiring organization is not going to intentionally reveal its imperfections either. Although you may not be able to completely level that playing field, here are some tips to help you check the references of your next employer:

Find an Inside Source

For obvious reasons, you will want to make a positive impression on every person you meet in your rounds of interviews — decision-makers, other managers, and even support staff. However, be alert for anyone who can be cultivated for an "off

the record" conversation about the company. Phone this person later; inform her of the offer extended to you and ask if there is anything "she would want you to know before you took the job."

Assure the person that her openness and honesty is appreciated and that your conversation will never be divulged. Consider asking specific questions such as, "Are there any serious problems with the company or its people?" Ask why she works there, and whether she would choose to work there again, knowing what she does now. This type of research has the potential of revealing information you will not get anywhere else.

Reach Out to Customers

Research the company's customers or clients. Identify the individuals at those companies who deals directly with your potential employer. Contact them and, with a brief explanation of your call, ask every question you can think of. Even better: try to locate any of the employer's previous clients to learn why they chose to end the relationship.

Investigate Possible Legal Issues

Check legal records to determine whether the company or its leadership is a defendant to any serious lawsuits — business or personal. Although minor lawsuits are hard to avoid in business, major suits can be devastating to an organization. Even if their defense prevails, they may be unable to recover substantial legal fees. On the personal side, an acrimonious divorce can necessitate the sale of a smaller business or completely distract its management. Personal bankruptcies and grand jury indictments of officers in a company present problems that most firms don't want to talk about.

Connect with Former Employees

Talk to previous employees. The person who was in the position you are applying for is an excellent source of information.

If he has left the company, he will apt to be very open and blunt. If he is still with the company, ask him to be frank with you about what it takes to be successful in the position, as well as the difficulties you might expect. Even previous employees who were in other positions at the company are still very good sources of general information.

Enlist Future Co-Workers

Try to get to know, on a personal basis, any of the people with which you would be working. In a social situation, listen carefully to the way they talk about the company, other employees, customers and their jobs. Observe their overall attitude. If the general morale is upbeat and positive, it is probably a safe bet that the company environment encourages that attitude. Be alert for signs of the opposite attitude, although the company will try to cover up any problems during the interview.

Minimize Your Risks

Understand that no company or situation is going to be perfect. After all, they do pay you to show up; they don't sell tickets to your desk. By researching the company, you are simply trying to minimize surprises and ensure you are going to work for the company you thought it was. Whatever you discover, put it in the context of the other things about the job and the company, and assign it an appropriate value as you weigh your decision. I think that you will find that performing your own reference check on a prospective employer is time well spent. ■

*Tony Beshara is owner of Babich and Associates, a job placement firm. Beshara is also the author of *Acing the Interview: How to Ask and Answer the Questions That Will Get You the Job* and *The Job Search Solution: The Ultimate System for Finding a Great Job Now!* He can be reached at Babich.com*

Food for Thought

What Doors Will I Open?

By Cliff Hakim

Work can be a source of greater happiness if you become adept at opening and closing doors.

There are some doors you'll want to close because you feel the room has grown too stifling and there's no point being there. And there are doors you'll want to open to set your spirit free and welcome new colleagues and experiences.

"I've become increasingly unhappy with my firm," said Edward, an accountant. "I've been shutting my office door and I've even moved my desk into a corner."

"What exactly are you shutting out?," I asked.

"I no longer agree with the way that the firm bills and manages its clients," Edward said. "Our clients' needs are changing and I think our rates are way too high. I did my best to examine these procedures with our founders. I developed a strategic plan to update our daily operations, but I got lip service only. My door is shut because I want to close out the firm's dogmatic beliefs and also hide my frustration, boredom and apathy. I long for change, and I've created a hot house of sorts where I've been formulating my plans for the future."

"Feeling frustrated, bored, and apathetic are not necessarily signs of failure," I said. "Has this period been productive? Has it opened any doors?"

"Oh, yes," Edward said. "I've been

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Self-imposed exile has its purpose, but it's important not to remain in the hot house for too long.

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the silent partner in the development of a housing project after hours. Adam, my partner, is an energetic, sales-oriented personality. I'm the other half, the strategic planner, calm advisor and detailed deal structurer."

Self-imposed exile has its purpose, but it's important not to remain in the hot house for too long. Edward carefully crafted his exit from the firm as to preserve his relationship with the founders and his connection to colleagues and clients. The network that he had served and built would be useful in his next venture. As a housing developer, he would not only open new doors, he would build them too!

Some Openings and Closings

Here are some examples of the doors my other clients have chosen to open

and close:

Door closed: Forcing people and events to change.

Door opened: Being present, listening and giving opportunity a chance to grow.

Door closed: Saying "yes" too often.

Setting few limits.

Door opened: Saying "no" when necessary. Establishing a focus.

Door closed: Imitating what others have done hoping to be you.

Door opened: Creating ideas that represent who you are and following through.

Determining Your Next Move

To find out "What doors will you close and open?" you'll need to determine:

- What am I doing that seems boring or makes me feel downright ineffective?
- What qualities or talents do I want to use that I've been ignoring?
- If I closed door X, what would happen?
- If I opened door Y, what would I like to see occur?
- What's one step that I might take now to get over the threshold? ■

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