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MANAGING YOUR CAREER

Exit Your Current Job By Building Bonds, Not Lobbing Bombs

A DISILLUSIONED FUND-RAISER for a big animal-protection charity penned a bitter resignation letter during a February business trip. He blew off steam about his blocked promotion, inadequate title and other unfair treatment.

The 43-year-old manager read his five-page missive multiple times, then ripped it up and erased the computer file. The fantasy letter "reduced my frustration and enabled me to stay positive," he says. Returning from the trip, he calmly announced that he had accepted a job with greater chances for advancement. His departure without rancor helped to persuade charity officials to offer him re-employment after his new gig didn't pan out this spring.

He turned them down for the same reasons he left, but "was thrilled" by the offer. In the small-town world of fund raising, his dignified exit enhanced his reputation.

Building solid bridges generates more than a rosy reference letter when you resign. It can boost your future job prospects. "Leaving well is a basic career competency," observes Dory Hollander, an executive coach at

WiseWorkplaces in Arlington, Va. "If you leave on a high note with connections that are real and true, you create opportunities for yourself down the road."

Plenty of people will soon head out the door. About 25% of 2,149 executives intend to quit within 12 months, concludes a recent poll by ExecuNet, a career-networking organization in Norwalk, Conn.



By Joann S. Lublin

A graceful exit strategy requires careful planning. You should draft an upbeat explanation that includes praise for the skills acquired on the job. Rehearse your remarks before giving notice in person.

Express gratitude to your superior, citing "specific, genuine ways that she assisted you," recommends Stefanie Smith, a New York management consultant and coach. "Even if she made hurtful, caustic remarks, thank her for some aspect of her expertise."

Trying to settle scores could be destructive. Some employees even refuse to participate in exit interviews, fearing they'll sound too negative.

Also, submit a brief, neutral resignation letter, leaving any angry fantasy one behind. Web sites such as I-resign.com supply templates that cover different departure scenarios.

KEEP YOUR COOL—even though your supervisor may resent your desertion. "You are making a mistake," a financial-services executive fumed after his paralegal announced her return to full-time school in May.

"I understand," the assistant replied. "But you've taught me a lot."

Anticipate an unwanted counteroffer by preparing a diplomatic response that reiterates why you chose to quit. Your tone and body language should suggest that you are rejecting the counteroffer rather than the individual.

This tactic doesn't always succeed, however. When an unhappy departing partner of a global management consultancy spurned a possible counteroffer, her chief executive declared, "I haven't given up on this!"

The partner realized the CEO would continue the pressure. She feared blurring out what she really thought about the place "in very unpleasant terms," she says. So she worked from home until she left last September.

Give enough notice to ensure a smooth transition with customers and fellow staffers. The consulting partner stayed five weeks to finish projects for two key clients. In that way, she was able to use those clients as references in getting work at her new job, she reports.

The paralegal, known for her messy desk, also made extra efforts to wrap things up before she left. She began filing documents faster, took better meeting minutes, wore a dressy jacket every day and invited her boss to call her afterward about any unresolved issues. "I left everything in perfect shape," she remembers. "He seemed surprised."

WHEN YOU INFORM peers about your departure, provide a vivid, positive description of your next employer. But avoid boasting about your enlarged paycheck. A simple statement that you're happy with the compensation package should suffice.

Several other steps will solidify your web of work contacts upon your exit. Make peace with your enemies. Dr. Hollander proposes saying, "The heated discussions we've had have been both positive and negative" because those interactions "will make me a better leader."

Naturally, your closest colleagues deserve the most attention. "These people are going to be part of your eternal career network," Dr. Hollander notes. Bid farewell face-to-face and promise to keep in touch. Send a handwritten note along with your new business card. Reconnect regularly over a meal.

A 36-year-old Washington consultant used a job change to create fresh business ties. Before leaving a strategy consulting boutique for a midsize firm last year, he approached five coworkers about possibly joining forces again. Already, there have been two joint projects between his former associates and his latest employer.

"It has worked out great," he recollects. A resignation represents "a strategic opportunity to stay engaged."

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