

## Demonstrating *Personal Competitive Advantage* in a "Rightsizing" Environment<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

It is often suggested that layoffs or "rightsizing" in firms create such a negative atmosphere that the people who are retained in the company feel as though they are "survivors of a slaughter" (Caudron, 1996). How one views the actions of rightsizing, however, is not as important as the realities it carries with it, which is that some people lose their jobs and others are left behind to carry a heavier workload. Is it all negative? It does not have to be. It can be a time to "discover your unique qualities" (Mallory, 2000). One way that the survivors, or associates (employees), remaining in the workplace can turn rightsizing into an opportunity to effectively market themselves as assets is by conducting a personal SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis to evaluate their career technical skills, management skills, specific career goals, and career management strategies.

Although the focus of this article is on associates, companies have responsibilities during rightsizing. The goals and strategies of the company

should be communicated to the remaining associates before or during rightsizing to reduce adjustment time for the changes made. Management should follow a specific strategy to ensure the future success of the firm. Uneasiness still may exist and there will probably be many questions, but the company must move forward. According to Buhler, it is now the associates' responsibility to manage their own careers (Buhler, 2002).

Associates may be wondering what assistance is available to compensate for the additional workload as a result of rightsizing. It is in the best interest of all for management to anticipate associates' questions and for the surviving associates to begin developing a *personal competitive advantage*, starting with a personal SWOT analysis.

### Personal SWOT Analysis

Traditionally, SWOT analysis has been used by organizations to identify their internal strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities and threats. By using this same concept, associates can conduct their very own SWOT analyses in terms of their careers. A

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personal SWOT analysis will provide the knowledge and ability to effectively communicate an associate's worth or value to a company. With massive layoffs and rightsizing, associates can use this tool to prepare themselves for new positions both inside and outside their current organizations.

### **Strengths**

The easiest part of constructing a personal SWOT analysis is identifying strengths. This seems relatively easy since most associates know their strengths (Buhler, 1997). However, it is sometimes difficult for some associates to maintain a realistic and honest evaluation of themselves. Therefore, strengths are often best analyzed from an outside frame of reference (e.g., consulting a supervisor or respected colleague). If done correctly, the associate can build a meaningful *competitive advantage* (e.g., carrying out details related to implementation of a plan).

### **Weaknesses**

Weaknesses are often more challenging to identify than strengths because they are not always apparent to the associate at first glance. Once weaknesses are identified, steps should be taken for improvement (Buhler, 1997). For example, *your* immediate supervisor recently noted in a semi-annual evaluation that you lacked proficient knowledge in Excel spreadsheets. As the associate, *you* should identify your understanding of Excel as a weakness and take the necessary steps to attain proper knowledge in creating spreadsheets. It is important to recognize that weaknesses can involve interpersonal working relationships, as well as technical skills.

### **Opportunities**

According to Buhler, "opportunities are identified by scanning the environment to see what is available" (Buhler, 1997). This is an important step in rightsizing. For instance, an associate must stay aware of job openings in his area of interest in case his current position is terminated.

Matching strengths to opportunities will create a *competitive advantage* of sorts. In today's marketplace many skills are transferable across a

wide variety of industries, so the opportunity analysis should not be limited to one industry. The associate should scan newspapers and the Internet and network with people who work for firms in their areas of interest.

### **Threats**

Threats are those obstacles or challenges that may inhibit career objectives. For example, an obstacle may be a supervisor who does not always agree with or support an associate's views. It is extremely important to stay abreast of any future obstacles to reduce the chance of unexpected hindrances (Buhler, 1997). Once threats have been recognized, a *competitive disadvantage* can be formulated to match weaknesses to threats. This is an important tool because it helps identify the areas for improvement to protect against future threats.

The personal SWOT analysis is an important tool for assessing current and future career objectives and preparing an associate for recovery after layoffs. SWOT analysis is most productive when the associate matches key strengths with key opportunities (i.e., an associate with outstanding interpersonal skills working as a Human Resource Manager). Knowing your key weaknesses can help reduce vulnerability to threats (i.e., someone with only average computer skills should not seek employment as a Computer Network Manager). Another important tool is career management.

### **Career Management**

Personal career management begins with understanding the opportunities within and outside the firm. There is no longer the "traditional upward career path." In recent years, career paths have changed from moving vertically within one organization to moving horizontally across different organizations and industries. Therefore, firms have been forced to develop alternative tools to help associates. Two of these alternatives are "job revitalization" and "broad-banding" (Buhler, 1997).

Job revitalization is a tool that increases opportunities by changing requirements for a particular job without job reclassification. For

example, a manager may decide to require associates to work in cross-functional teams on various projects. Broad-banding is a tool that increases compensation without job reclassification.

Job revitalization and broad-banding are lateral, not upward, career progressions. The more skills an associate can gain, the more valuable the associate becomes. Career management can help in determining how to obtain career objectives and goals (Buhler, 2002).

## Setting Career Goals

Setting a career goal is the first step in reaching a desired goal. It involves the following:

- Generate a vision. To be able to reach something, it is important to see *yourself* achieving it.
- Create a time frame for the vision and be as specific as possible. What do you want to be doing in five or 10 years?
- Commit the vision to writing and communicate it to people who may assist in attaining it.
- Establish short-term goals as a mechanism to help achieve long-term career goals.

Identifying the right industry or type of company of employment is the second step. Again, specify the size, type of company or job, and region or country where the job would be located (Buhler, 1997).

Having realistic and attainable goals is the third step. While unrealistic goals may set an associate up for failure (e.g., expecting to be the CEO after only one year in a new business), setting goals that are too easily achieved will not help the associate reach long-time career goals. Proper goal-setting establishes self-esteem, which can create a competitive advantage in today's business world (Fisher, 2001). After setting career goals, strategies should be formulated.

## Formulating a Strategy

The idea of formulating a strategy hinges on career management. An associate must take a

proactive approach to professional development because a reactive approach will only keep an associate on the *coattails* of everyone else. Therefore, a "road map" is necessary to achieve career goals (Buhler, 1997).

Formulating a strategy means setting up specific steps to achieve career objectives. Broad goals should not be vague. For example, getting a college education is not a specific goal, but getting a particular degree such as a Master's of Agribusiness is a specific goal.

Another step involves utilizing all the available resources for advancement. Pairing up with a mentor provides direction and coaching to develop the necessary skills and abilities to improve career objectives. According to Buhler, total quality management (the concept of continuous improvement) is a critical component of managing your career. Associates must continuously seek improvement through lifelong learning to take advantage of every opportunity. In other words, to stay the same means becoming obsolete (Buhler, 1997).

Formulating a strategy will help an associate continue to improve and develop the necessary skills to remain competitive in the marketplace. If an associate does not create a strategy to follow, then career development will remain stagnant and career goals may never be met.

## Conclusion

Four topics have been discussed for improving careers: the personal SWOT analysis (identifying and assessing individual strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats); career management (being responsible for your own professional development); setting career goals; and formulating a strategy to achieve career goals. When combined, these tools will enhance career development in both a traditional and a rightsizing employment environment.

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