

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

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## Introduction

It is often suggested that layoffs (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 and Hayward 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 (2002), it is now the associates’ responsibility to manage their own careers.

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 everyone for management to anticipate associates’ questions and for the

1. This document is HR013, one of a series of the Food and Resource Economics Department, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date June 2002. Revised July 2019. Visit the EDIS website at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu> for the currently supported version of this publication.

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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. Using this same concept, associates can conduct their very own SWOT analyses for their careers. A personal SWOT analysis provides 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.

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. Knowing your key weaknesses can help reduce vulnerability to threats.

### 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 (1997), "opportunities are identified by scanning the environment to see what is available." 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 check job advertisements and should network with people who work for firms in the associates' 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.

## Career Management

Personal career management is an important tool for 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 by defining job responsibilities more broadly, without requiring job reclassification. By combining more job assignments into a single, but broader layer, managers have increased flexibility in making job assignments and giving pay increases.

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 ten 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 for 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-term 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 career strategy hinges on career management. An associate must take a proactive approach to professional development because a reactive approach will only keep an associate reliant on opportunities that may or may not be forthcoming. Therefore, a strategic "road map" is necessary to plan for and achieve career goals (Buhler 1997).

Formulating a career 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 (MBA, MD, JD) 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 (1997), 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.

## Conclusions

Four topics have been discussed for improving careers: the personal SWOT analysis (identifying and assessing individual strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats); personal career management (being responsible for your own professional development); setting career goals; and formulating a career 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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