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Add value

"You need to start by understanding the big picture," says national certified career counselor Susan Guarneri. "Any position can have an impact on the bottom line." Guarneri and DeCarlo are co-authors of "Job Search Bloopers: Every Mistake You Can Make on the Road to Career Suicide and How to Avoid Them" (Career Press, 2008).

Wodynski found a way to make herself more valuable. She got to work activating her employer's membership database, which had been defunct for almost three years. "I realized it hadn't been installed correctly," she says. "I called the company that owned it and found there were components missing, updates hadn't been done."

Within a few weeks, Wodynski had revived the database. She also increased its usefulness as a registration tool and as a way to communicate with members through mass electronic mailings.

Finding projects to show how you add value at work might be easier than you think. If you don't know where to start, ask around.

"Talk to your colleagues," Guarneri says. "Not to the guy in the cubicle next to you, but people above you, like your manager or supervisor. Say to them, 'How can I help you make this easier on both of us?'"

Volunteer for special projects and committees

Offer to take on new duties, and make sure you are strategic about the work you choose. "It should be stuff that's key to the organization's future. If you take on additional tasks, make sure they are not tasks that nobody else wants," says Lee E. Miller, author of "Get More Money on Your Next Job ... in Any Economy" (McGraw/Hill, 2009). "If you hook into the right project, you actually will be more valuable."

In Wodynski's case, she identified her own pet project, took charge of it, and saw it through to its successful conclusion.

Market your personal brand


What are you the go-to person for in your organization? At work, your personal brand is what you're known for, the thing that makes you unique. Wodynski defines her personal brand this way: "I get things done." For someone else it could be, "I'm always willing to stay late to help out others." Or "I volunteer for the tough assignments, not just the easy stuff."

If you aren't sure of your brand, ask friends and colleagues for feedback. That can be as simple as asking, "What three things come to mind when you think of me?" If you find that your co-workers are less than forthcoming, there are also free, confidential career assessments and personal branding tools online. (Try 360° Reach at www.reachcc.com/360v4register or Guarneri's Web site at www.assessmentgoddess.com.)

Take credit for your accomplishments

If you don't, someone else surely will. It can be as simple as sending e-mail congratulating your team on a job well done, with copies going to senior members of the organization. You'll get recognition for sharing the credit as well as for the accomplishment, Miller says. You don't have to send out kudos every week, DeCarlo says. In fact, that probably wouldn't be a good idea. Once a month or so will do.

"It's innocent," says DeCarlo, who cautions that you should choose your words carefully to set the right tone. "You never create it from the standpoint of, 'In case you hadn't heard'" Instead, DeCarlo suggests a softer opening such as, "I'm behind you. I wanted you to know how I'm doing my small part."

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Also, don't wait for your performance appraisal to trumpet your talents. Request a private meeting with your supervisor and have your list of accomplishments ready. DeCarlo recommends creating a "brag book."

"Highlight courses you have taken or certificates for leadership roles you have achieved in professional organizations," she says. "I've encouraged people, when they're not dealing with confidential matters, to create synopses of the projects they've done. It may require a little more work but you'll have a really strong visual tool to support what you're saying."

If you're not comfortable talking about your accomplishments, now is the time to overcome that fear. "One woman I know did well at work and never got promoted monetarily," DeCarlo says. "She put a brag book together and walked out of there with the largest single raise without a promotion at the company."

Make an emotional connection with key decision makers

Demonstrate to your bosses that you understand their challenges and want to help in any way you can. If you are feeling that your employment is at risk, your boss is probably worried about her job security as well.

"The emotional connection takes it beyond getting noticed to 'Hey, this is a really good guy. He's a fun person to be around, and look at all these fun ideas he has,'" Guarneri says. "And he's making my life easier." Guarneri cites a client who offered to consolidate his boss's weekly reports into a single monthly statement.

Making an emotional connection has another benefit that can come in handy in times like these. "It's really, really hard to fire somebody you know and like," says Miller, who formerly led human resources departments for TV Guide Magazine, USA Networks, and Barney's New York. "You don't always have a choice. But if I have to choose between two people and one of the two I like, I'm going to generally choose [to lay off] the other person."

Behave more like an owner than an employee

Pay particular attention to costs and look for ways to increase your company's revenues and bring in more clients.

"You probably already know of ways costs could be cut, but it wasn't money out of your pocket so you never mentioned it to anybody," Guarneri says. "Now is the time."

If you are an IT worker, for instance, consider ways to make processes faster and more efficient. Or adopt greener standards at work and limit the amount of paper the company uses. You don't have to be in an executive or managerial role to find ways to save your company money, time, and energy.

Wear the cloak of confidence

People are attracted to a confident, positive attitude. That can be hard with so much bad news circulating. But even if you're scared of getting laid off, try not to let it show.

"Put on a good act," DeCarlo says. "Now is the time to act as if you're that confident person, even if it means emulating your favorite character in a movie. Acting helps boost your confidence to start doing it on your own."

Network your network

Everyone has a circle of colleagues, professional contacts, or even relevant friends. Think about how people in your network can add value to your company.

"By sharing your network with others, you're opening doors for people and can become a catalyst for something that makes profits for them," explains Ann Marie Sabath, author of "One Minute Manners: Quick Solutions to the Most Awkward Situations You'll Ever Face at Work" (Broadway Books, 2007).

Create an A-list of contacts you can access quickly for advice and assistance with problem solving. "You want your employer to see you as a valuable resource with other contacts," says Jaime Velasquez, assistant director of the office of career services at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "Once people know that you can just pick up the phone and talk to someone and get it done, it makes you more valuable."

Keep your skills fresh

Now might not be the time to ask your company to pay for special courses to update or expand your job skills. But it could be worth footing the bill for them yourself. What you learn could make you more valuable in your current job. And if you do get laid off, it might help you snag that next one.

Stay visible

When times are tough you might feel like putting your head in the sand, but that won't keep you top of mind with decision makers. So this might not be a good time to work from home or take a lot of vacation days.

Rack up the IOUs

You have to give to get, and you will be in a better position at work if key decision makers feel as though they owe you for all your hard work, rather than the other way around.

De-stress

In an AP-Gfk poll of 1,001 adults earlier this year, 47 percent of respondents said they were worried about losing their jobs. Unfortunately, the stress of worrying can make your worst fears come true. Too much stress can impair your job performance and damage other people's perception of you. That combination can, in itself, make you more vulnerable in a downsizing.

Some layoffs are inevitable, no matter what you do. But in today's economy, there is every reason to try to hold on to the job you have. Beyond recession-proofing your job, you might even give your career a boost.

That's what happened to Wodynski. Her boss later acknowledged that the threat of a layoff had loomed, just as she had feared. She avoided the hatchet, and all the work she did to keep her job made her more valuable. A few months later she left to take a new, better-paying job as the executive director of another trade association.

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