

# Tips to Avoid Getting Laid Off

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## **These Six Smart, Field-tested Strategies Will Help Ensure You Don't Get Burned By Cutbacks at the Office.**

By Donna Rosato, Money Magazine senior writer

(Money Magazine) -- When you read the latest blog postings about layoffs in your industry or hear about another colleague losing his job, do waves of anxiety wash over you? Well, you don't really need us to confirm that you've got good reason. The unemployment rate among college-educated workers has jumped 41% over the past year, with layoffs only expected to accelerate over the next few months.

The good news: There is plenty you can do to decrease the chances that you will join the 1.4 million professionals currently out of work. The following six strategies have helped others who faced job cuts successfully stand down the threat. While there's no guarantee they can do the same for you, it pays to try. Maybe the boss will decide you're indispensable, after all.

### **Stand out and step up**

Strategy: Make sure higher-ups know you by solving problems and taking on high-profile projects.

Just doing your job well, even exceptionally well, doesn't cut it anymore - unless your boss knows you're exceptional, and so does his boss and anyone who could be your next boss.

"The invisible guy is first to go," warns executive recruiter Stephen Viscusi, author of "Bulletproof Your Job: 4 Simple Strategies to Ride Out the Rough Times and Come Out on Top at Work." Small stuff counts, such as regular face time at the office (arrive a few minutes before everyone else and leave a few minutes later) and making cogent points in meetings. Big stuff matters even more, like volunteering for assignments no one else wants or devising a plan to meet a key challenge (say, cutting overhead by 20%).

Dave Dishman, 34, a manager for an IT consulting firm in Phoenix, knows that during recessions companies are quick to scale back on consulting projects, so he makes sure he's "memorable" to execs who are responsible for staffing decisions.

"I don't want to be forgotten when it matters most," he says. He's aggressive about completing assignments on time and considers it a plus if he has to get in front of a senior person to get information or approval.

When several colleagues were recently let go, Dishman took over their projects even though he already had a full plate. "I was told that senior managers appreciated my hard work and specifically requested me for upcoming projects." The lesson: Tough times often yield opportunities to take on more responsibility; handle it well, and it can pay off later.

### **Be a money-maker**

Strategy: Share client leads or ideas to generate revenue even if that's not part of your responsibilities.

The easiest jobs to cut in a downsizing are usually the ones that cost the company money rather than make it money. If your job is in the first group, start acting like you're in the second.

Devise ways to create new revenue streams or bolster existing ones. A P.R. manager can share client leads with the sales staff. An IT specialist may spot an opportunity for a follow-up project. Then put your ideas in a memo to higher-ups. Even if they're a no-go, you'll gain a rep as someone who's trying to be part of the solution, not the problem.

That mind-set has helped Paul Huo, a business school professor at Henderson State University in Arkadelphia, Ark., keep his job even in the face of sharp cutbacks in state university budgets. Huo, 53,

routinely goes beyond his regular duties to help the university bring in needed revenue. He actively recruits new students by attending high school college fairs. He's created a mentoring program, pairing students with local business leaders - a program that helps attract and retain students. Huo is also an active fund raiser, often helping the university president and business school dean when they host VIPs who they hope will make a donation. "Nothing beats resource generation as a way to motivate your employer to keep you and make yourself irreplaceable," says Huo.

Be proactive about coming up with cost-cutting moves too. You might suggest a switch to a less costly vendor or identify a task that's currently outsourced to expensive consultants that your employer could bring in-house. Saving money is a good skill to be associated with these days.

### **Don't be a Debbie Downer**

Strategy: Hang out with the people the boss respects most. The halo of their good reputation may extend to you.

Nobody likes a complainer, and layoffs give managers free rein to get rid of the people who make their lives difficult. So think back over the past year. Were you asked to be more of a team player in your last performance review? Are you the last one asked to represent your company in meetings with senior management or clients?

It's not too late to change how you're viewed, says Alexandra Levit, author of "How'd You Score That Gig? A Guide to the Coolest Careers and How to Get Them." Levit, a former marketing communications manager at a Fortune 500 software firm, believes an attitude adjustment is what saved her position when her employer began cutting jobs after 9/11.

"I had been complaining to my boss about our bureaucratic department and pushing for a promotion," says Levit. Once she saw other companies in the field laying off staff, Levit immediately stopped her complaints and made a concerted effort to appear "can do," sending higher-ups e-mail updates about how she was managing critical projects. Her boss told Levit her change in outlook was noted and appreciated; when the layoffs came, she emerged unscathed.

Mind the company you keep as well. If you hang out with a bunch of negative Nellies at work, you may be labeled with a bad attitude, even if you're Pollyanna at heart. No need to abandon your buddies entirely, but when talk turns toxic, change the subject or walk away. Better yet, make an effort to associate with the people the boss respects most and who routinely nab the best assignments. Lend them a hand as needed. Invite them to lunch. Ask for advice. The halo of their good reputation may extend to you.

### **Increase your value**

Strategy. Keep on top of advances in your field and expand your expertise beyond your core area.

Are you the only person in your division who is familiar with cutting-edge technology? Or one of the few multilingual speakers at a company looking to expand abroad? Then you have a true competitive edge.

Proprietary knowledge in this economy is the equivalent of winning an immunity challenge on "Survivor." Make an effort to stay on top of advances in your field (professional associations are a good resource for classes) and try to expand your expertise beyond your core area.

To ensure he doesn't become a victim of budget cuts in the space program, Brian Kirkland, a software engineer at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston, is constantly seeking to upgrade and add to his skills. On his own time, Kirkland, 31, attends technical workshops at least three times a month.

"I'm learning new technologies that NASA isn't using yet and gaining skills in software testing and project management," he says. Kirkland also reaches out beyond his own area as needed, recently developing a fix for a software breakdown to allow ground sites such as schools to communicate with the International Space Station. "Tackling challenges like that makes me more valuable," Kirkland says, "and enhances my reputation."

Go beyond your job description Strategy. Look for problem spots that you can help fix. And pitch in whenever extra hands are needed.

Every employee these days is being asked to do more with less. You have a choice: Gripe about it or embrace it. Either way you'll end up working harder. But when you act like a team player, you greatly increase the chances you get to stay on the team.

So look for trouble spots you can help fix. Pitch in when extra hands are needed. That's what Jeremy Hinton, 36, a financial services manager at a credit union in Georgia, is doing as layoffs mount in his industry. Though he's responsible for overseeing accounting and finance services, it's not unusual to see him troubleshooting problems with the credit union's security system; recently he volunteered to spearhead efforts to meet a new regulatory deadline, winning kudos from senior managers. He even brought in a drill from home so he could replace the worn hinges on an office door instead of calling in a carpenter. "By doing this, I save the company time and money," says Hinton. And maybe his own job as well.

### **Make a sacrifice**

Strategy. Volunteering to take a pay cut during an industrywide downturn can make you look like a hero.

If you're well compensated and suspect that your position is in danger because your company needs to cut costs, you may be able to save your job by offering to forgo a bonus or take a cut in base salary in exchange for, say, stock options or a temporary cut in hours. It's an admittedly risky strategy.

"Most people regard someone who's willing to take a pay cut as less valuable," says Jodi Glickman Brown, founder of Great on the Job, which trains professionals in workplace skills. The exception, says Brown, is when there's an industrywide downturn and taking a pay cut can help keep your company afloat. Then you can look like a hero.

The strategy worked for Mark Cummuta, 45, who blogs at the tech site CIO.com. Cummuta gave up several paychecks when he was the chief technology officer of a software services company that hit hard times after 9/11. The move enabled lower-level employees to keep getting paid and the company to stay on track with its projects. In today's tough economy, taking a short-term hit could be the key to your long-term survival.

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