

## ■ MID-IOWA BUSINESS

# Making yourself indispensable

Recent graduates are entering an Iowa job market as tight as the one which my classmates and I encountered when we received our diplomas in 1982. An article a couple of months ago in the Ames Tribune interviewed a half dozen or so graduating seniors from Iowa State University on their plans following graduation. What struck me was that not a single interviewee was headed for a traditional full-time job.

In addition, the recent uptick in the economy has prompted many previously underemployed and discouraged unemployed workers to renew their searches. A recent opening for a math teacher in Eastern Iowa reportedly resulted in 70 applicants. In short, it's tough out there.

Unfortunately, the Great Recession will certainly not be the last recession nor perhaps even the worst that graduates or those returning to work will experience over the course of their careers. There will be other waves of layoffs.

For those lucky enough to land a job (or for those that have a job and want to keep it), I'd like to offer some words of advice on what you can do now to minimize the chances that the lay-off reaper will find you the next time the economy turns south.

First of all, understand that while your education, skills and experience may get your foot in the door, it's the demonstrated ability to work with others to consistently produce results that keeps you there. On more than one occasion I've had to gently pull aside a recent graduate engineer and explain that, although I understood how hard they worked in school over the past four or five years, it didn't mean a lot to Joe who spent the last 30 years learning in the factory.



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A commencement speaker at an Ames High graduation several years ago said it best: "Today we're heroes, but tomorrow we're zeroes."

This requires a major shift in behavior. During much of our formal education and job search, we compete against our peers for grade or jobs. Once we're hired into an organization, however, our peers are now partners in making the organization successful. The more effective we can make co-workers, the more valuable we are to the organization.

Remember, it's not about you or what you know. It is about the relationships that you forge with colleagues to blend your knowledge with theirs to serve customers better than anyone else.

That leads to my second piece of advice: Figure out who your customer is and determine what's really important to them. Depending on your job, your customer may not be the consumer that actually buys or uses the product or service which your organization provides; it may be other employees.

We all have customers. Figure out who yours is and focus on being excellent at satisfying those vital few features that they truly value. This will convert them into vocal fans and save you from wasting time perfecting things which they don't give a hoot about.

Next, continually challenge the status quo by looking for better ways of doing things. Again, by better I mean an improved (safer, high quality, quicker, less costly) method of

meeting customers' needs, not just better for you. Employees that can get the job done and actually improve the job differentiate themselves.

Finally, never stop learning. The rate of new information being discovered and disseminated each day via the information revolution renders the majority of our formal education obsolete within a decade of graduation. Going forward, the rate of knowledge depreciation is only going to accelerate. Thus the ability and willingness to continually learn becomes critical to remaining relevant to your employer. Discover the methods of learning that work best for you and take full advantage of

them to keep your skills current.

Unfortunately, there are no guarantees of employment in today's global economy. But if you understand that there are no entitlements, and it's up to you to prove your worth to your employer each day, you'll put yourself in a good position.

**Rick Brimeyer** is the president of Brimeyer LLC, an independent management consulting firm located in Ames that guides organizations to higher performance by focusing on process improvement and leadership development.

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