

Survive and Win

Building Your Career through both the Upturns and Downturns

Andrew Wilson
July 6, 2009

Abstract

When the economy goes down, the chances of losing your job go up. How do you protect your job in a climate of cost cutting and reductions? The smart ones take proactive steps to protect their jobs. This article will show you how. The smart ones also realise that an economic downturn will provide many opportunities to advance their careers. This article will help you see these opportunities and give you ways that you can position yourself to take advantage of them.

Andrew Wilson is the management partner of Vaughan Govier (www.vaughangovier.com), an organisation he founded to support organisations through the specialised craft of organisational coaching. He can be contacted at andrew.wilson@vaughangovier.com.

The Worst

Kim dreaded walking in the door to face his family. He had heard of others who just never told their families and kept up the pretense of working. It's tempting, really tempting. However he knew he wouldn't be able to keep it up. So he went home and faced his wife. "Honey, I lost my job today."

Don't Panic, Prepare

There is no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing.
Swedish Proverb

Survive and Win

Copyright July 6, 2009 Vaughan Govier Pte Ltd

At some stage in your life expect to lose your job. In the modern economy jobs are no longer guaranteed. There is no need to panic, just prepare. In a modern economy most get another job.

This article is not about how to prepare for the worst. That is for others. Our topic is protecting and progressing the job you already have.

Prepare in case you lose it.

Prepare and act so you don't lose it.

The World Just Got Smaller

The recent economic upheaval occurred for many reasons. The details do not matter. The economy has shrunk and there is less money to go around. Demand for products has gone down, companies need less staff.

Not everyone wins.

We understand this. The English Premier League premiership is just as scarce. Just a single team will win. Can you guarantee that it will be your team? The team in the best form will most likely win. Those out of form will most likely lose and may even be relegated.

So how do we get into top form for our career? Getting into peak form will take us through four areas:

1. Be Known
2. Be Special
3. Be Proactive
4. Be New, Renew

Ready?

Bosses are People

While some bosses do push the limits of acceptable behaviour, the vast majority are normal people who sincerely care about other people. They don't enjoy making people redundant or terminating their employment.

However as people they have their limits. To you, there is only one boss. To the boss there are lots of you.

Who's Going?

Before that fateful day when Kim lost his job, there were many conversations among HR and management.

So how do the big bosses decide who goes? Roll a dice, random number generator?

The decision to make people redundant is usually made by the big big bosses. The boss will pass a message like this, "You are losing money, please start making money or fix the problem." The best way to make money is to earn more, sell more. In a downturn that is hard so they take the easier route and focus on costs. Unfortunately in most companies the easiest variable cost to change is payroll.

For quite sensible reasons, the big bosses will usually push the decision down to the lowest level. They know they don't have the information to make an informed decision. That should be made by the person who does.

So in the end Kim's boss will arrange a meeting with the HR Manager. Let's listen in ...

Boss So you have the spreadsheet?

HR Yes, all staff with their ranking from their last performance review, their salary, last bonus and grade.

Boss Thanks. We need to reduce the payroll by 15%. Wow this is a lot of names. Do all these people actually work for us? Have you met these people?

HR Well they are on the spreadsheet so they must work for us. Yea, I have met some of them.

Boss Well let's start at the top. Who's that? He's expensive!

HR That's you.

Boss Well we have to keep him. Who's that?

HR That's me.

Boss That's your chinese name? I didn't know that. Do we need you?

HR Absolutely!

Boss Oh OK. Let's look at the rest.

HR (Pointing to some names) How about these three?

Boss No we need them. They are the best guys we have on our key manufacturing processes.

HR (Suggesting someone else) How about her?

Boss No, she's the one the customers call whenever there is a problem. Technically she's not great but the customers love her.

HR How about this one?

Boss I remember him. Isn't he the guy who keeps playing music too loudly and annoying the QA guys?

HR I think so.

Boss Well we don't need that sort of aggravation. Put him on the list.

HR How about this one, he is ranked poorly, hasn't been promoted for ages.

Boss No, I remember him, proud of his work. Always has a smile and loves what he does. I asked him once if he wanted to be promoted and he laughed and said 'boss, why would I want to give up a job I enjoy for more stress and less money?'

HR Less money?

Boss Yea, would no longer get shift allowance and overtime.

HR How about these five?

Boss Don't know them. Put them on the list.

HR (after a quick calculation) That gets us to 8%, only 7% to go.

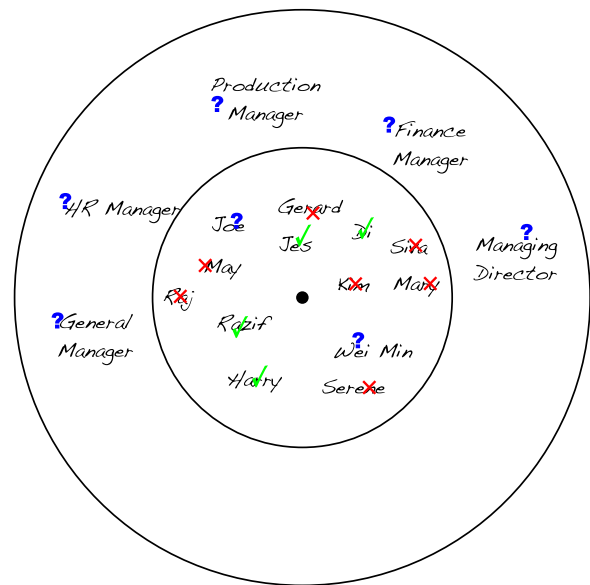


Figure 1: Our Workplace Relationships

And on the conversation goes.

Unknown to Kim, he was in the group of five. The ones the boss said, "Don't know them. Put them on the list."

Making The Tough Call

This conversation between used three important phrases:

- "I don't know them"
- "I know them"
- "I need them"

Need, Know, Don't Know. Surviving depends on your answer to these questions. If the people who matter like you and need you, your job is more secure. If the people who matter don't know you, your job and career is at risk.

We can look at this through two important concepts: relationship and reputation.

Place a dot in the middle of a piece of paper. This is you. Around that dot draw two concentric circles. One at least twice as large as the other. In the smaller

one write down the names of all the people you interact with at work, and especially the people who are important to your success. Most people will have 20-30 names in this list.

Outside the smaller circle and inside the larger one write down the names of all the people who could effect your job and career but you don't know directly.

Now time for some honesty.

1. Quality of your Relationships

Consider all the names in the inside circle.

Imagine another person was talking with one of the people inside the smaller circle and during the conversation they made a negative comment about you.

For each name:

- If you think the person would defend you and support you, place a tick.
- If you think the person would stay silent or agree, place a cross.
- If you don't know, place a question mark.

What have you discovered?

With the names in the inside circle ask the question, “what do you think my reputation is?”

2. *Quality of your Reputation*

Consider the group in the outer circle. These are the people who will effect your career and you won't even know. On this list, who are the important people who effect your career, your job is to be seen.

So how to be seen?

- Say hello to the boss and address him or her by name
- Ask the boss a good question (positive and business focused) about the business.
- Smile
- Get involved and do a good job in a committee - Annual Dinner and Dance committee, health and safety committee, recreation club, employee feedback, quality circle, process improvement group.
- Suggest an idea

Be Special

After the shock had worn off, Kim's wife asked, “What happened? You have worked hard for eight years, never had more than a couple of sick days, been to training. Why you? You're a good employee.”

“They didn't really say why, they just mentioned that the company had hit bad times and they were really sorry but some people had to go.”

Kim's wife was slightly exasperated, “but don't they need good employees like you?”

Great question. How about you, are you a “good employee”, do they “need you”?

Are you special to them or common and not as necessary?

You are special.

Your DNA, you fingerprints, your iris, your face. All these are completely unique. We are completely unique.

You also happen to be very common.

Just one of a couple of billion humans that inhabit the planet. We all eat, sleep, move, live and die in pretty much the same way. Yes, pretty common.

So what are you, common or special?

It's really a question of perspective, common or special to who?

You are very special to yourself. You are the only 'you' you have. To the rest of the world you are common and unremarkable. Unless of course you make yourself special.

One boss, many employees.

The boss is special to you, but you are common to the boss. Unless, of course, we can make ourselves special.

Earlier we made the point that relationship is important. This is not the point here. Being special is not about the boss, so put aside thoughts of having to kowtow to the boss and make coffee or her favourite kueh lapis¹. Think about what the boss needs to achieve or consider your boss's customers.

If you are special to them, you are special to your boss.

To appreciate what special is all about let's make sure we really understand what it's not.

1. Special is not holding your boss hostage.

The special do not hold the company hostage. Those people are eventually let go. They under-

¹*Multilayered Cake* A popular treat in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. A steamed cake with 10 to 20 individually cooked layers. A treat which is tedious to make but delightful to eat.

stand the dynamic of the company, customers and the future and they make that happen.

2. Special is not the “must haves”

If you ever have a chance to read a job specification you will see it is usually made up of mandatory and discretionary components. The “must have” and the “nice to have”.

Under “must have” will be the characteristics that are required for someone to do the job. A pilot must know how to fly a plane, a doctor must be certified to practice medicine, a carpenter must have their ticket.

This continues when you start work. In general you are expected to turn up for work, get your job done, work hard, follow the law, respect your fellow workers and the boss and so on.

“Must have” gets you the job in the first place and keeps you in a job. Ensure you have a tick in the must have box. The must have doesn’t make you special.

This is the mistake that Kim’s wife made. She took the “must have” as special.

3. Special is not the “nice to have”

In addition to the “must have” is the “nice to have”. These are the attitudes, behaviours and skills that make you a strong fit for your job and your company.

These are actually quite hard to define. That is why companies resort to describing them using cliches such as proactive, good communicator, innovative and so on. They don’t know what they want either.

You will lose your job if you don’t have the “nice to have”. Unfortunately they won’t necessarily allow you to keep your job.

Have a look at table Understanding the Nice to Have (on page 6). Which one are you?

Having the “nice to have” also doesn’t make you special. It will tilt the odds in your favour.

The Special are Unique

The Special can do things that those people in the must have and the nice to have can not do.

I have worked with lots of special people. What a group!

- Some were bizarrely intelligent, most were normal
- Some were highly creative, most just had good ideas every so often
- Some were in senior positions, many were in junior positions
- Some were great and fluent communicators, some were just good communicators
- They came from many countries and educational backgrounds

As diverse as they all were, they all shared three key characteristics:

1. They had a overwhelming “**can-do**” attitude.
2. They were, and wanted to be, the **best** at what they did
3. What they did always mattered to our **customers**.

To be special, you have to decide where you are going to be special. Start with what matter’s to your company’s customers and discover how you can make a difference there.

Who is Managing Your Career?

Kim and his wife were still talking. After a period of silence Kim exclaimed, “It’s just not fair. I did everything they asked of me. Now because the company is having a difficult time I have been put out of a job. How about all the others? Why are they still employed? Why did the company choose me?”

Table 1: Understanding the Nice to Have

What they don't want	What they do want
Someone they have to spoon feed	Someone who can work things out for themselves
Someone who needs to be prodded into action	Someone who sees what needs to be done and does it
A complainer	A quiet worker
Costs the company money	Helps the company make money
Irrelevant to the company's customers	A benefit to the company's customers
A problem to management	Creates solutions for management
A difficult person to be around	A nice person to be around

If you have been awake you will have noticed that the responsibility for the first two areas, be known and be special, was firmly placed on your shoulders.

“Hey you did! That’s not fair!”

“Where is the company’s responsibility?”

Reality Moment

The company’s first concern is its own survival and its own prosperity. It has to be that way. That is the only way it can be in a position to give its employees jobs, pay, benefits, career and status.

Managers and the company are often called on the make decisions between staff. In a downturn, should the company have to drop jobs, it will be making decisions between staff. The ones out of form will be asked to go. When times are good and the company is looking for people for more specialised training and career advancement, there are more staff than openings. The company has to make a decision.

It’s the company’s job to make those decisions. It is your job to be proactive and get in form so the decisions go your way.

Companies only survive and prosper through their customers and so the most valuable employees are proactive in serving the company’s customers. If you want to know where to be proactive, then consider your answer to the question:

How does what you do **benefit** your company’s **cus-**

tomers?

The most common answer is a slightly confused look. “Huh? I do what my boss tells me to do.” We turn up and ask, “what do you want me to do boss?” From that moment on the boss has the initiative. This is a good approach for protecting your job. It is a weak approach to protecting your career. What happens when you get a new boss or you become that boss?

How does what you do **benefit** your company’s **customers?**

To develop your career get to a place where you have an answer to that question.

Secondly, always be searching for a better answer.

Be proactive. The first step is with you.

Be New, Renew

It’s not how good you are, it’s how good you want to be.

Constantly Reinvent Yourself

Can you remember that day, many years ago, when you first started work? Can you remember the excitement, the feeling of apprehension and uncertainty, the eagerness to do a good job?

How long did it take to loose it?

The ultimate career and job killer is lack of passion.

Survive and Win

Boredom.

Where does that spark that smile, that twinkle that makes you an interesting person come from?

Passion.

Where does the desire to build positive work relationships and reputation come from?

Passion.

Where does the drive to be special come from?

Passion.

Do a job that you enjoy and care about and these things are easy.

1. Stop and make a list of all the new things you learnt on your job in the past month. These may be skills, something about the company, a new customer or a process.

How many items are on the list?

2. How many times during the past month have you started a task when you didn't really know how to do it? Make a list.

How many items are on the list?

3. What parts of your job do you wish you could improve and be better? Make a list?

How many items are on the list?

Look at your three lists, if you have lots of items, then you are most likely new and renewed.

People are passionate when they are learning and growing.

1. How much of your job is easy predictable, within your capabilities?

Passionate people have a job full of challenge.

2. Just how good do you want to be at your job?

If the answer is just to survive then you will be stuck and on the outer.

3. If the boss was looking for someone to take on a challenge, to do something new, something which had to be successful, would the boss pick you?

Business is constantly changing. The skills that worked yesterday won't work tomorrow. Nothing more passion sapping than being in a job you are mis-trained and mis-fit for. Be new, renew your passion.

So What Do I Do Again?

To survive and win, to protect and advance our career in a recession we need to be in top form.

1. Be Known

Companies are all about people. Staff with the best people skills win and in particular the quality of relationship must come first. Move from "I don't know you" to "I know you" to "I need you".

2. Be Special

Everyone has the "must have" and many have the "nice to have". These are not enough. To secure our position we need to be special and unique.

3. Be Proactive

The company has a responsibility to look after their employees, and that includes you. If you leave everything to them then you will miss out. It's your job, your career, *you* manage it. Actively look after your own interests.

The best way to manage your career is to get your focus in the right area, on customers.

4. Be New and Renew

If you are not growing you are dying. Protect our passion through learning and renewing.