

# Surviving the Ups and Downs

In today's volatile marketplace, with many countries facing increasingly tougher economic conditions, companies are seeking to reduce expenditure and technical publications and marketing departments are targeted for downsizing and retrenchments. Many workers are concerned about their future at their company or in the market in general. Others may have experienced periods of layoffs and restructuring, leaving them feeling guilty at being left behind or having to adjust to new corporate structures, added workloads and further restrictions in salaries and benefits. Still others find themselves laid off from companies where they may have viewed their future as secure, forcing them to reexamine themselves and ask where it all went wrong.



In this climate of uncertainty, what can we do to enhance our feeling of security in the workplace and survive the ups and downs of a changing economy? This article provides some suggestions.

- Write out a road map
- Invest in continued education
- Keep in touch with the job market
- Network
- Be proactive – don't wait for the inevitable
- Use change as an opportunity for growth

## **Write out a road map**

In order to work towards long-term career goals, it is important that you plan ahead. A road map provides a visualization of where you see your career as going in the long-term, with visible milestones or objectives along the way. A road map also helps you deal with the ups and downs you currently face, by enabling you to focus on the big picture, or long-term perspective. A road map is similar to a business plan for a company. You use it to outline your current assets and develop a plan for expanding your skills.

When writing the road map, ask yourself the following questions?

- Why did you choose to enter this career and are you achieving what you set out to achieve?
- What essential skills and knowledge do you have?
- What are your relative advantages/strengths (when compared to other technical communicators)?
- What are your weaker areas, which could do with more development?
- Where do you see yourself as being in the next five years? How do you plan to achieve this? What are the obstacles in the way of your achieving your goals?

Think carefully about the answers to these questions and plan your road map accordingly. An example of a road map is included in the article "*Planning Your Career*".

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## *Invest in continued education*

Take any skill enhancement courses you can. Plan the future direction of your career and invest in continued education. Here are two suggestions:

- **Specialize.** Become an expert in a specific technology (such as PDF production or XML) that will make your skills in high demand. Your area of expertise could also be a specific field such as telecommunications, electronics, finance or pharmaceuticals.
- **Generalize.** Learn a wide range of skills that could be applied to many different jobs, to increase your employability. This could include expertise in MS Word, FrameMaker, RoboHelp, HTML and graphic utilities. However, rather than focusing on a specific tool, focus on the tasks that you are able to accomplish using the tool, which could be potentially transferred to another, similar tool.

## *Keep in touch with the job market*

Prepare yourself in advance for change. Don't wait for it to happen or allow your skills to become rusty or stagnate, because you feel complacent in your current position. Keep your eye on the job market, subscribe to online job servers and apply for interviews to hone your interviewing skills. Find out what skills are being sought by employees and what new technologies are becoming important in your field.

## *Network*

To enhance your security at work and in your career, cultivate a support network. Join online forums such as TECHWR-L, where technical communicators discuss the problems they are currently facing in their work environments and new technologies and trends in their field. Making use of these resources can help you foresee changes and plan ahead for the future.

Make use of your network of contacts and friends. Keep up to date with them and remind them that you are out there, through emails, postcards or on the phone. Someone you know may be the source of your next job.

Take an active part in your local STC chapter activities and contribute to your STC chapter. This increases your professional status and visibility, and offers the opportunity to learn new skills and to build up your network of contacts.

## *Be proactive – don't wait for the inevitable*

Often we know when changes are coming, and yet we bury our heads in the sand and ignore the signs. We allow change to happen to us, rather than taking control.

There are usually clear signs indicating when your company is planning a round of layoffs and if you are going to be targeted. Look out for the following:

- The company's profits were well-below the forecasted expectations for more than one quarter
- The shares in your company have spiraled downwards for the last few months and your company is short of cash
- There have been cutbacks in the development of products that you've been documenting

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- Your responsibilities or workload have gradually decreased over the past few months and you find yourself with too much spare time on your hands
- A new employee has been hired who has a skill set that is similar to your own
- You find that you no longer get enjoyment out of what you are doing, are not learning new skills, and arrive at work unmotivated
- You have a strained relationship with your supervisor

A combination of any of these signs should be a red light for you, indicating that the time has come for you to either take charge of your performance at your current workplace, or start seeking a new employer.

## *Use change as an opportunity*

Use change as an opportunity to learn new skills and try new things. If you are laid off, this could be the time to recharge your batteries, focus on other priorities in your life or continue your education.

Seek opportunities to widen your responsibilities at work, making yourself hard to replace. Use restructuring as an opportunity to request more responsibility – but don't wait for this to happen, put yourself forward, by either volunteering or asking for these tasks to be assigned to you.

Restructuring and layoffs within a company often leave surviving employees feeling disgruntled and guilty. You may have worked hard to build up a team atmosphere and close friendships with colleagues, only to see them go and find yourself being shunted off to a new department or working under a new manager. One way to deal with this is by keeping in contact with former colleagues, to see how they are doing and find out where they have gone, and to provide whatever support and encouragement you can. So rather than losing a friend, you gain a potential ally who can keep you in touch with trends in the market and may be the person to find you your next job.

Being made redundant can affect your self-esteem and leave you feeling burnt out and depressed. After all the time, effort and energy you put into a company, you were rewarded by being told that you were no longer of value. Although painful, change can be a rejuvenating experience, enabling you to regain lost energies and motivation. A fresh start at a new place, requiring that you learn new skills, is a growth factor that will enhance your career security and self-esteem in the long run. Change usually leads to better and more exiting things.

Let's be honest about the modern, open job market. There are very few life-long positions in our field, and companies survive and adapt to changes in the market place by being flexible, downsizing and expanding according to market demands, or pursuing new areas where profits can be maximized. Employee loyalty is purchased through salaries and benefits, and sometimes sharing in the profits or the running of the company.

Ours is a service-orientated profession and technical communicators are seldom considered as the core employees or assets of a business. When companies shrink, they shed many of the service and administrative employees that are not essential to their survival.

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To survive the ups and downs in our career, it is essential to understand this reality, and come to terms with it – either by honing your skills and keeping in touch with the job market, or by making your skills and value indispensable to your company.

## Conclusion

Change is an essential part of our modern economy and we need to adjust to it by planning for the future direction of our career, improving our skills through further education and expanding our network of friends and contacts, who can help us weather the ups and downs. By adopting a proactive approach and recognizing the signs of change, we can take charge of our future, rather than waiting for change to happen to us.

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