

Advancing Your Career When Opportunities are Limited

Even if you feel fortunate to have retained your job during the recession, it may still seem that your career progress has stalled. With many professionals opting to stay in their current positions rather than retiring or seeking other opportunities, there may be fewer opportunities to advance. Or at least it may seem that way.

A cautious sense of optimism is influencing promotions and hiring to backfill positions at many companies, but keep in mind that even if the potential to receive a promotion or sizable raise is limited at the moment, you can still make professional gains and position yourself for advancement as business conditions improve. Here are some ways to fire up your career, even in the face of what may seem like professional inertia:

Challenge yourself to add more value. Especially when you've been in the same role for awhile, it's easy to become complacent and start to perform your work in a routine, sometimes less-than-thoughtful manner. Shake off this tendency by approaching your responsibilities with a fresh mindset. Aim to exceed others' expectations and add unexpected value to every project or task you assume. Even if you haven't been asked to do anything differently, you can probably find ways to improve your work product or processes. If your role entails creating financial reports, for instance, you might reconsider how you compile them, including analyzing their structure and content, to determine if there is a way to streamline the process or present data in a more insightful or reader-friendly way. By continually pushing yourself to find better ways to work without being prompted, you'll position yourself for positive recognition – and possibly an advancement opportunity – as conditions further improve.

Add to your knowledge base. Even if there doesn't seem to be an immediate financial incentive for pursuing new learning or earning an additional credential, this is an ideal time to shore up your career by acquiring new knowledge and enhancing your skills and abilities. Find an area where you can build much-needed expertise for your firm. For example, you might want to develop advanced Excel skills or become more knowledgeable about a new set of accounting rules. Expanding your knowledge base will enhance your job security in the short term and boost your career prospects and salary potential over the longer term.

Stick your neck out. Even if you perform your job extremely well, in an atmosphere where there may be fewer advancement opportunities you'll have a harder time getting noticed if you fail to take on challenging, high-visibility projects. And don't wait for someone to approach you with an assignment. Make it a point to be aware of new initiatives on the horizon or needs facing your team that no one has had the time or willingness to address. Not only will throwing your hat in the ring in this way enhance your reputation in the office and build your resume, but taking on a new challenge will stave off career boredom.

Ask for a title upgrade. As a result of job cuts and hiring and salary freezes, your job duties may have grown but not your pay. If this is the case, consider asking your boss for a new title that more accurately reflects the nature of your current role. For instance, if you've gradually taken on some controller duties, in addition to general accounting, you might ask to change your title to assistant controller. Although the more prestigious title may not come with a significant salary increase – and may not even be a new position per se – it is still a sign of career advancement, allowing you to gain professional clout and enhance your resume. Moreover, your boss may be in a much better position to embellish your title than to reward you with a hefty raise at this juncture.

Be proactive. When companies are under pressure, as many still are, bosses appreciate team members who are allies in helping them identify and avert problems. Be attentive to your manager's priorities and continually look for ways to support him or her and contribute innovative solutions. Anything you can do to aid your firm's performance – while also making your boss look good – is sure to improve your professional standing.

In a business environment that continues to perplex and challenge, advancement in position or salary may not be as predictable as it was in past years. But this doesn't mean your career has to shift into idle mode. Focus on building your skills, enhancing your current role and building your reputation within your firm. As business continues to rebound, you'll be ideally positioned for emerging opportunities at your current company or another.

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