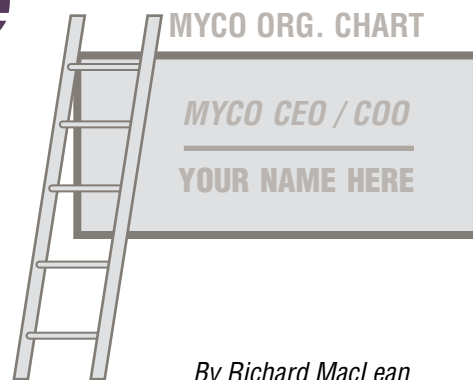


Sustainable Careers

*Preserving your career options
while protecting the environment*



By Richard MacLean

Environmental professionals are consumed by day-to-day tasks — just trying to keep their heads above the wastewater, so to speak.

Working hard to satisfy the needs of your organization can sidetrack you from long-term career development goals and leave you vulnerable, should you find yourself unemployed or seeking new opportunities elsewhere. Here is some practical advice to build personal security in today's uncertain job climate.

At the 2002 Annual Conference of the Academy of Certified Hazardous Materials Managers (ACHMM), there was “standing room only” at one of the sessions — the forum on professional development. Seeing this attentive audience reminded me just how serious “career sustainability” has become to environmental professionals. I was at the conference to present a paper on a related subject: the research underway at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and at Boston University School of Management. Managed by the Center for Environmental Innovation (CEI). The two research teams are examining (1) the “health” or career status of environmental, health and safety (EHS) professionals and (2) current staffing and organizational trends.¹

CEI research to date indicates that EHS professionals are undergoing a difficult transition period. Corporations and government agencies are facing a loss of their most experienced professionals due to retirement. For example, the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reports that 47 percent of their workforce will be eligible for retirement by 2005.² That may seem like good

news for new entrants, but companies continue to aggressively downsize EHS departments or “down skill” EHS jobs to lower paying positions. It is anyone's guess what shape EPA or state agencies will take in the future. For someone planning a lifetime career in the environmental profession, these are uncertain times.

Through the school of hard knocks I learned three critical rules for a sustainable career.

My father retired from the company he joined after his discharge from the army after World War II. My co-op jobs at Northeastern University and my first job after graduation with Shell Oil Company shattered any illusion that I would follow his model of career longevity with one company. I watched string after string of layoffs and reorganizations in companies that previously had never been touched with radical change. Through the school of hard knocks, I learned three critical rules for a sustainable career.

Rule 1 — Run Your Own Corporation

I do not mean this literally. I am suggesting that one needs to develop a certain mindset. Let's face it: you are on your own, working for yourself. You just happen to have a primary client called “Ajax Company” or the “State Department of Environmental Conservation.” If you expect to have a single, stable client for the rest of your career, you are betting against the odds. Even within government agencies where job security seems to

come with seniority, you still face constant administration changes and the ever present “boss from hell.” Yes, you may keep the job, but is it really worth the stress and resultant health impacts?

Having your “own company” mindset forces you to take greater responsibility for managing your own career and place less reliance on the organization's whims for using you to its advantage. I have seen far too many professionals relinquish their career responsibilities to the unchallenged control of an organization. It is time to create your own business plan.

Running your own corporation also puts into perspective the wisdom of giving a 150 percent effort to an organization that, in reality, can change overnight. I have heard hundreds of macho stories from individuals who work 60 plus hours each week and/or travel extensively, effectively ruining their family life and their health. Do not expect a reward at some distant time for these Herculean efforts, because in today's environment the manager making the promise may not be around to deliver on it. For that matter, there may not even be a company around at that point in the future. I know of many bitter and resentful people who made scores of personal sacrifices for the good of the organization, only to have nothing to show for it other than missing memories of their children growing up.

Stop making sacrifices for someone else's company, unless your company receives a clear and relatively short-term return (two years or less). Put the 150 percent effort into your family. Would one corporation make such sacrifices for

another corporation unless they were guaranteed a very high probability of return? No way. If they did, the board of directors would be considered negligent. If you are required to make these sacrifices, with no clear short-term reward in sight other than to keep the "present client," read on.

Rule 2 — Develop and Promote Your Corporation

Be in constant training for the next client assignment, no matter how secure you feel about the current one. Take advantage of every career development opportunity. Get and maintain professional certifications. Join national professional organizations and their local chapters; get out there and be active. Develop contacts on the outside. Present papers at conferences, write journal articles and fine-tune the skills you will need to advertise your corporation. Maintain an up-to-date marketing portfolio (i.e., an updated resume).

It also helps to have a good client list; in other words, work for organizations with good reputations. This not only enhances your marketing portfolio, but also expands your network of key relationships as described under Rule 3. If you expect to work closely with your client's corporate leadership, read business publications in addition to technical journals. I recently asked an audience how many of them routinely read the *Harvard Business Review*, the *Wall Street Journal* or *Fortune*. I was amazed; no one in the room.

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you are on your own,
working for yourself.**

It will take effort to promote your own company. If you give 150 percent to someone else's corporation, you are neglecting your own company's strategic plan.

Rule 3 — Put More Energy Into the Client Communication Department

Technical skills help, but they will not keep the current client or secure the next one. Many, if not most, EHS professionals are engineers or scientists who, by their very nature and training, can easily fall into the trap of becoming totally focused on accomplishing the task at hand. Don't. You may think that hard work allows you to hold onto that current client, but it probably has

a lot more to do with how well you fit into the organization and how well you are liked.

In real estate, it is location, location, location. In business and government, it is relationships, relationships, relationships. Put more energy into developing a robust contact network and your relationship with the management of your current client. This includes finding mentors and obtaining honest feedback. Knowing how to play a good round of golf or tennis can do wonders in terms of increasing the face time with management. Always be on the lookout for the client that has the best fit with your own corporate culture. Not only is the most satisfying work done for clients who have the same value set as your own, but they are also the ones most likely to recognize and reward your efforts.

Daniel Goleman, in his seminal work on "emotional intelligence," said as much: how smart you are and how hard you work are not the leading determinants of success. It is emotional intelligence in terms of self-awareness, altruism, personal motivation, empathy and the ability to love and be loved by friends, partners and family members.³ I'm sure that you know individuals who accomplish few tangible results but seem to excel at pleasing management and surviving even during the most severe cutbacks.

I am not suggesting that you become one of these individuals who are generally held in low regard by those that get the "real work" done. There is a balance, however, and how to affect that balance needs some careful consideration. Violently "rocking the boat" and upsetting everyone may get the job done, but it may also destroy your own company's ability to survive. It really helps to be kind, considerate and empathetic going up the organization, not just with management, but everyone. If you are working those 60 plus hour workweeks getting the job done, you may be incorrectly applying your own company's resources.

Bottom Line

If you are going to survive and prosper in the new generation workforce, you may need to undergo a fundamental re-assessment of your current relationship with your employer. These are fluid times, and the only constant is yourself, or what I call your personal corporation. Keeping your nose to the grindstone, or as the Australian's say "heads down, bums up," may

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be great for the organization that is paying you today, but it does not allow you much time to build your own sustainable future. Re-assess your priorities. Hard work is important, but do not lose sight of the criticality of client and contact relationships and for whom you are ultimately working — yourself and your corporate shareholders (i.e., your family). **EP**

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References

- ¹ For a description of these two projects, "Pulse of the Professions" and "Organizations in Transition," see the Center for Environmental Innovation Web site at www.enviro-innovate.org.
- ² Workforce Assessment Project, Office of Administration and Resources Management, U.S. EPA, May 1999, page 78.
- ³ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, Bantam Books, New York, 1995.