

Finding a senior-level executive job in troubled times

By Tucker Mays and Bob Sloane

A Primer For The Out-Of-Work

Whatever the reason – a weak economy, industry consolidation or corporate downsizing – losing a job has always been one of the most emotionally challenging experiences in life. It is a loss of one's identity and can disrupt and, in some cases, destroy family relationships. It is an unstructured and disorienting time, which many find extremely difficult to handle.

Senior level executives face the most difficult challenge of all, as they compete with thousands of highly qualified candidates for the few top-level opportunities available. During our six years counseling senior executives in transition, we have determined that there are seven major challenges in executive management job search:

Being out of work – The first challenge is the experience of being out of a job. For many, this means not having the prestige, the income, and a stimulating place to work every day. We first advise executives to seek interim executive assignments, a fast-growing employment sector for CEOs, CFOs and CIOs. Board memberships offer rewarding experiences and good contact opportunities. Seeking out consulting assignments can be another worthwhile approach, particularly if this can keep one "current" in a particular field. Most important, recognize that seeking a job requires a "full-time job" dedication every day.

Age – If you are approaching 50 or have passed this milestone, your age is now a challenge in job search. While you can't change the calendar or the day you were born, you can do something about how you come across to people: how you dress, your fitness level, posture, and most important, your attitude. You need to overcome the belief that after a certain age your energy level declines and the perception that you are not

as "current" in the field as younger counterparts. This requires that you get past the downtrodden, negative outlook on life to be positive and upbeat, to exude energy.

Focus – While it is good to have alternatives, the problem for many senior executives is that they have trouble arriving at a clear, accurate and realistic awareness of what they do best and which companies honestly need them at this later stage of their career. Your challenge is to have the discipline to focus quickly on what you really want and to go after only those opportunities that fit. Time is not on your side for two reasons. First, the time you are not working can limit your marketability, and second, the opportunity cost of wasting time pursuing unproductive leads is substantial.

Positioning – Every successful marketer uses the highly important principle of positioning in marketing brands, products and services. Positioning, the art of creating a distinctive identity for a product or service, is essential to creating demand in a highly competitive marketplace. It is also critical for an executive in job search. As in the marketing of products, you need to identify what distinguishes and sets you apart from others. Every successful brand has a unique identity. What is yours?

Job-hopping – The best way to explain short job tenures is to be honest and positive about the reasons for termination. It is important to explain each job change in the context of a well-considered career plan. Valid reasons for leaving a company are a merger that led to the elimination of your position, you reached the end of the learning curve, you had no further chance of promotions, or the job description and/or requirements changed.

The "eclectic" career path – Many executives have worked in a variety of industries and positions, which can suggest inconsistency and poor career decisions. The most effective way to overcome this chal-



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lenge is to communicate the "common threads" of your career path, during which you have successfully applied your talents across a variety of companies and/or industries, thus demonstrating a high degree of diversity and adaptability. This becomes a strength instead of a liability.

Playing in a smaller sandbox – Many senior executives have enjoyed steady career growth in large corporations. But often it must be acknowledged that the big corporation may no longer need you, particularly when a strong cadre of younger, succession-minded executives is being nurtured. Being comfortable with the idea of working in smaller, less bureaucratic, faster-

moving companies can be the best way of getting your next job. Smaller companies are normally less concerned with some of the challenges we have addressed.

Finding a good job can be difficult for senior managers in transition. By recognizing the toughest hurdles to overcome and by quickly and effectively conducting a well-focused, realistic and energetic search, top level executives will be far better prepared to find their opportunity of choice in a reasonable time period.

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