

The Mercury News

Starting the Year Off Right

By Sherri Eng
San Jose Mercury News
December 31, 1997

1. Align your values and your job.

Do you love your job? Or do you consider it a necessary evil that you must contend with in order to pay the mortgage? Finding work you love doing could make your professional life much more pleasant. Once you've identified what makes you tick, finding opportunities to do that work becomes much easier. Selling yourself to an employer becomes more effective, and "the contribution you make becomes one of real excellence, because you're operating from your genuine passion," said Kitty Wilson, director of ProMatch, a non-profit career center in Sunnyvale.

There are a lot of terms for this effort of identifying professional passion: Jim Kouzes of the Tom Peters Learning Group calls this "finding your voice." So find your voice and live a happier, more fulfilling work life.

2. Do some soul-searching.

Think about where you want to be in your career in five years and decide what you need to get there, such as a new job or more skills. Consider your current company's reputation, growth potential and how that may affect your growth potential.

While being introspective about your career, consider these very important questions:

- What do I like most about my job? What do I like the least?
- If I could switch jobs with three people, who would I choose and why?
- What experiences might expand my skills in a direction that feels right for me?
- Ten years from now, how will I judge whether I've been successful?

Also try to track upcoming industry trends. Looming changes may seem ominous, but acknowledging the eventuality of these events will help you prepare for the future, said Marianne Adoradio, a career counselor in San Jose.

3. Network, network, network.

Career counselors point out that the best way to find a new job is through personal contacts. That means that expanding your network is vitally important to the professional life. Start out by listing every person in your network. Include business colleagues as well as friends, fellow club

and church members and your kids' friends' parents.

Evaluate your contact list and decide whom to add in 1998. Scout out people who hold senior jobs in your organization, those who earn a living doing work you'd like to do, those who can help you fine-tune your career goals, those who could be a new friend or a potential mentor.

If you're looking for ways to expand your network, drop in on a local meeting of a professional organization. You never know, your fellow member at the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers could be your next boss. Participating in professional associations is also a great way to learn more about your industry.

4. Take a risk.

“Many people regret lacking the courage or discipline to excel. Go with that start-up company, take that challenging new job, start your own business, raise your quota, fire your worst customers and get away from the bad boss,” said [Valerie Frederickson](#), a career consultant in Menlo Park. Even if your new direction doesn't pan out, the new experience is bound to teach you a lot about yourself.

5. Go back to school.

It's obvious that to keep up with this fast-paced valley, today's workers must be continuous learners. There are plenty of places that offer classes, workshops and seminars where you can expand your skills and broaden your knowledge. Check out San Jose State University's Professional Development Center (408-985-7578) and the University of California-Santa Cruz Extension Program (408-342-0160) as well as local community colleges. Your own company's training department is likely to offer courses on computer and management skills. And don't forget to look into your employer's educational assistance program -- you could get a free ride if your employer reimburses tuition.

6. Diversify your experience.

The changing marketplace means that the job of an engineer, for example, may involve product development as well as straight programming. Don't pigeonhole yourself into a job that could become obsolete. Learn about other fields related to yours. Someone who has spent many years working at a hardware company, for instance, should consider investigating software, Internet or peripherals companies, says Lola Gerstenberger, a career counselor with The Lundquist Group in Santa Clara.

"These companies will give them complementary and yet decidedly different skills and experience," she said.

Volunteering inside and outside of your company is a great way to tap other skills and explore other interests. Stepping up to take on an internal project will impress your boss as well as give you valuable experience. Volunteering in the community is also an excellent way of testing the waters of a new profession while doing public good.

7. Investigate companies you'd like to work for.

Select and thoroughly research one company per month. You can obtain information about the company by reading trade publications, scanning its Web site and reading its annual report, among other resources. Also, try to set up one informational interview a month. This will help you remain self-sufficient in your career.

"You are the ultimate free agent and must continue to scan the marketplace to ensure your skills are appropriate for the market and know which companies you can easily move into," said Bill Hoyt, senior vice president of deRecat and Associates, an outplacement firm in Cupertino.

8. Benchmark your skills.

Career security in the future will depend more on your aligning your skills and knowledge with your profession than it will with your current work environment, said Betsy Collard, director of strategic development at the Career Action Center in Cupertino. To determine whether your skills are up to snuff, you first must take a detailed inventory of which ones you possess. Are you a good communicator? Do your strengths lay in technical know-how?

Next, write down five professional accomplishments that you were proud of in 1997. Detail how you helped your company meet its goals. Note what value you added to your company and its customers.

9. Update your résumé.

Many companies use sophisticated software programs to scan in résumés. So, whether you submit a résumé on paper or electronically, make sure that it can be easily scanned. Don't forget to include buzzwords and catch phrases in your résumé that will be picked up by the computer.

Make sure you are specific in describing what you did at each of your previous jobs. For example, instead of saying that you worked as a programmer for a high-tech company, explain in detail what projects you worked on and what platform, language and systems you used.

10. Don't let technology pass you by.

Computers are ubiquitous in the valley. Still, many people don't know which end of a floppy goes into the disk drive. Even if you're not working in a high-tech business, do yourself a favor and become computer-literate. Learn word processing, database and spreadsheet programs.

These days, e-mail is almost as widely used as voicemail. So, get connected and jump on the Net. As well as using e-mail for business correspondences, you can surf the World Wide Web to check out potential employers and their latest job listings. You'll also find many sites that offer advice on how to manage your career or find a new job. (Use a search engine, such as Yahoo!, to track down career-related sites.)

