



Career Anxiety in an “Uncertain” Economy **Douglas Garner, Partner, Smart Work | Network, Inc.**

Let's face reality. The US economy is in the “pits”. And many people have lost their jobs. Many others are wondering if they are next. If you are in the first group, please accept my condolences. If you are in the second, let me just say, it's too late to be worrying. I have seen, through more than 30 years of work experience, many of the booms and busts normal for our capitalistic business economy. However, I will admit, this one is far worse than many of us have seen before. It has the appearance, in a lot of ways, to the stories my parents and grandparents told me about The Great Depression.

During two of the downturns during my career, I was “let go” or “downsized”. I remember vividly, after the first episode, I was very despondent, very down on myself. I had a wife, who worked as a nurse, thank goodness, and a child. How would we get by on less than half of what we had before?

The first time I remember thinking, “Why me? I've been good. I've done everything they asked me to do. Why wasn't it somebody else?” Three months or so later I got another job pretty much doing the same thing I had done with the other company. But this company was more successful. They were expanding and needing somebody with just my set of skills and experience. I thought I was golden. I'd do everything my boss wanted me to do and everything would be better this time around. About a year and half later, the economy went soft in this industry too. That was the time I got “downsized”. Or was it “rightsized”? Whatever they said it was supposed to be a more humane way of telling me there was no money in the new budget for me.

I lived to tell about it.

Through the ups and downs of a business career, you see a lot of things. As I look back over all of my experiences, there were recurring themes. I think most professionals have similar themes when it comes to their careers. Maybe you can see some as you look back over your five, ten, fifteen or so years.

Until I went through a recent process of self directed career management, I never really thought about it much, but every job I had was a result of being in a certain place at a particular time, being viewed as a good “worker” by an important individual. (They were important because they may or may not hire me). Whenever I was faced with another move in my career it was because of somebody else. It wasn't until I began working for myself a few years ago that I finally realized that my career was really a random series of events that simply unfolded to me. And I made decisions based on what I knew (or had learned from my last assignment) was right for me at that present time. You know, criteria like a spouse, children, debt, geographic location, network of acquaintances, style or pace of work, boss, co-workers, company prestige, etc. In every case, if the hiring manager made me an offer I figured they must know what they were doing, and if they wanted me to work for them then I must be perfect for the job.

You see the recurring theme in all this was that I counted on everybody else to know what was right for me. WRONG! I was the only one responsible for my career. I never had taken the time until recently to look at all of the elements that made me who I was, and then what careers would help me find my life



mission and resulting passion for excellence. (I know, it sounds a little hokey but really, wouldn't you rather work at something that you really loved?) Throughout my career I used external criteria for success, not internal like what excites me, what do I really like spending time doing and do well. What drives me? What can I do to make a positive impact on the world, in an organization, etc.? Nobody ever suggested that I go through a career management process and take care of my own career. Really, manage my own life. Be a self manager.

Secondly, another recurring theme was that all of my jobs were variations of the first formal position that I had. I'm not talking about the high school job cleaning up the grounds of the amusement park. I did that for spending money. I'm referring to the first job where the Director of Personnel stopped me in the hallway and said, "Doug, Corporate is telling me we need to create a such and such position and it struck me you'd be pretty good at that. What do you think?" I said, "How much will it pay?" He said, "About 20% more than you are currently making." I said, "When do I start?"

From that position on, with different companies in different industries with different job titles, I basically did the same kind of work for 20 something years. Each time I got a different job it was because "we need a such and such and you look like you'd be pretty good at it". Each time it paid more money so I figured I must be moving up in my career. I must be successful. That's what everybody else is doing, right? Maybe you've had a similar experience, although you may have gone to school to study to be a such and such because your parents or somebody said "you'd be a very good such and such." or "You know, such and suches make very good money. That's what you should be." However, you need to get a diploma to be a VERY well paid such and such or nobody would even consider you for a job. "Hey, you need to go to (Blank) Tech. or (Blank) University. They've got a great football team and they could teach you how to be a such and such. And then you can really make the big bucks." Whatever your situation now, you can probably think of one or maybe two particular people in your life who suggested you do what you've been doing most of your career. Did you ever ask yourself how they knew so much, especially about you? Was it because they were older or made more money?

The recurring theme here is one of "type casting". You know, like that character in all of those movies. Maybe it's like Sylvester Stallone. He would never be asked to be the romantic lead opposite Renee Zellweger in 2001's Bridgett Jones' Diary. When you see him you think Rocky or Rambo. Now granted, he does a great Rambo but how have those parts restricted his artistic endeavors. OK, so he was only interested in the money, too, but how would my career have been different if Corporate hadn't told that Personnel Director that they had to hire a such and such or he hadn't really "seen" me as a such and such? And how many other offers or opportunities might I have had if I had sat down with somebody early on and talked about who I really was? And what if they had said "you know, based on what you've figured out about yourself, you might want to check out so and so instead of just such and such."

The final recurring theme is my measure of success. I referred to money or compensation as my main measure earlier. Also, it was important to me to work for a company that most people had heard of, not a start up or a company that made something that was hard to explain to my friends or acquaintances. Now of course I was not so shallow that it was just the size of my salary that was important. It was what it qualified me to borrow from the bank to buy, the "bling" of life, the status stuff. Now, don't get me wrong. I wasn't so vain that I bought the fancy car or the big house or the exotic vacation. After all, I was just a such and such and I could also be smug about being modest. It was



quite the dilemma looking back on it but even so I'm in a lot of debt now and I must have been successful, right?

The point is, nobody ever sat down with me to explore what success really looks like to me. What makes me feel really good about being a human being and it's not necessarily feeding the starving Armenians. And, by the way, sitting on top of all of that oil, they are not doing nearly as bad as they once were. No, I never really sat down and took the time to explore my values, my beliefs, what really gets me up in the morning other than the bill collectors. And now, looking back, I never really considered those elements of my life when considering career opportunities.

The bottom line is the bottom line

So, as I look around me and see this crummy business climate much as it looks from time to time, just in a variety of desperation, I'm thinking about all of the young and middle aged workers that might find themselves in the same boat I was frequently during my career. Those times when I said "I've got to keep this job because I've got bills to pay and I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have this job." Or, "I've been a such and such for my entire career and that's all I know how to do." For those of you who are this fearful or anxious about what the future holds for you, maybe this is a good time to explore your recurring themes in your work history. Take stock of the pluses and minuses and do a little self directed career managing. You are the main responsible person for your life and your career. Believe me, I learned the hard way, you can't trust your most important decisions to friends and family.

I look at all of the headlines and all of the help that our Federal, State and Local officials are attempting to provide and realize nobody is going to help you like you need to help yourself. They can provide resources but you have to make the effort, to seize the opportunities.

People seeking new opportunities in the new economy will find them. People seeking a return to the good old days of Y2K will be sorely disappointed. We're not going back there. Those jobs don't exist anymore and won't be recreated in the future. This is the time about which you'll tell stories to your grandchildren or your children will tell their grandchildren. "Back at the turn of the century everybody had their own car or lived miles away from where they worked or worked in a company with another 50,000 employees or flew on jet airplanes to see the grandparents on the other side of the country." Or "That's when your great grandparents started their own business." Or "It was back in 2010 when your great grandmother (grandfather) decided to become a"

As Charles Dickens began A Tale of Two Cities, "It was the best of times. It was the worst of times." You have the power to determine which it will be for you.

Another great writer as well as business man, Peter Drucker, wrote "The best way to predict the future is to create it!"

What do you predict about your future? You're right!

Contact us if you want to take a bold move into the future. Doug@Smartworknetwork.com