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Pump Up Your Employment Potential
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By: *Kaul, Pamela*

Use savvy career-management skills to meet the challenge of getting the right job.

There is no shortage of opportunity in this shifting career landscape, but finding the right opportunity requires savvy career-management skills. Here's how you can prepare yourself for rewarding positions at the highest level, then remain at the top of your game.

Know your unique value. What is it that you do that is so unusual, so unique to you that an organization will need you and want to hire you? Be able to succinctly define this with appropriate examples. For instance, if you have a strong track record of developing people, how do you do it? What behaviors do you look for in others? What skills and competencies do you use to develop them? How do you motivate them? How do you evaluate their contributions?

Be conscious of the legacy you leave behind. Learn to share your knowledge and experience with others. Engage in coaching rather than controlling behaviors. Search committees are understandably concerned about the depth of knowledge in an organization, so they may ask, "What have you done to share your success and learning with others?" This is also a key question for moving up in an organization, as it sets expectations of collective learning and transfer of best practice.

Emphasize soft skills in your interview presentations. Effective communication, consensus building, teamwork, and listening have at times been underrated skills but now are considered essential to the success of any leader. Be able to describe how you work with staff, volunteers, and stakeholders. Cite examples of what you do to build consensus and resolve conflicts. Find out how others view your leadership style. How does your perceived behavior affect your team, your board, and your organization? Too often people get hired for what they know and fired for who they are.

Develop transferable skills. Sometimes not having the niche experience can be an advantage. If you have a passion for the issues of a particular organization and can demonstrate a creative approach to solving problems or a fresh approach to seizing opportunities, you can win the job offer. It's all about transferable skills and your ability to relate your talents to the specific needs of the organization.

Learn situational leadership. Understand that the transitional nature of complex organizational systems often requires different skills and behaviors at various stages of an organization's development. To illustrate, what happens when a person who is successful in one organization crosses the street to join another organization and fails? Often the same leadership skills and behaviors that worked successfully in one organization fail in another because the second organization is in a different stage of growth than the first and requires different leadership methods.

Never underestimate the impact of corporate culture. When interviewing, try to meet with staff before

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accepting a job. What are their expectations of a new executive? What are the entrenched ways of doing business? Who are the power figures in the organization-among staff, leaders, past presidents? And what about the members of the search committee? Consider who is not in the room-and why. Since "lack of a cultural fit" between the CEO and the association is often a reason for the CEO's untimely departure, take the time to assess your cultural style as well as the recruiting organization's. The "Lead Well Culture Assessor," created by Don Blohowiak of the Lead Well Institute, identifies the key components that shape an organizational culture. It is available for you to complete online and at no charge at www.leadwell.com/survey.

Develop a positive hunger for change. Interviewers and search committees look for evidence of change in a candidate's background. If you have been in an organization for a long time, learn to identify and speak to your role in motivating change. What relationships, programs, or activities are better, faster, cheaper, or more effective as a result of your leadership? If interviewers and search committee members say they want change, ask what the change might look like to them. Make sure they know that in the interest of leading change, some unpopular decisions may have to be made.

Learn the classic elevator speech. If you ran into powerful members of your dream organization and had three floors to sell them on your abilities, how would you present your background? This scenario is similar to the customary opening of the search committee interview. In three to five minutes you need to describe yourself and your background in such a way that the interviewers want to hear more. Your message must be factual, personable, and enthusiastic.

Know what you don't know about finance. Many, many CEOs lose their jobs because they do not fully understand the accounting methods and practices of their associations. Most executives readily claim to read and understand financial statements, but do you really know what to look for? What is not disclosed on the statement?

Pursue an information technology (IT) strategy. As authors Michael Earl and David Feeny note in the Winter 2000 issue of *Sloan Management Review*, "Information technology has evolved beyond the role of mere infrastructure in support of business strategy. In more and more industries today, IT is the business strategy." With the vast number of strategic issues that are triggered by or have consequences for IT, CEOs must neither avoid IT strategy nor delegate it to others. Learn how to proactively address IT issues and opportunities from a CEO's perspective. Engage your IT team and executive staff team in a collaborative discussion about your e-commerce opportunities, rather than simply reacting to problems.

Be politically astute, and stay in touch. It is widely recognized that a CEO must nurture strategic alliances and maintain a variety of relationships-with staff, leaders (both past and present), competitors, vendors, and other stakeholders. However, preoccupation with the care and feeding of so many is often so politically intense that the CEO loses touch with business, failing to address issues and to take the risks necessary to advance the association. John Sherlock, CAE, Chief Operating Officer of the Personal Communications Industry Association, Alexandria, Virginia, explores these issues in a soon-to-be-published dissertation entitled "Learning in a Professional Context: An Exploration of Nonprofit Association CEOs' Learning Experiences." The study considers the learning experiences of 12 CEOs of nonprofit organizations and concludes that CEO learning is affected in profound ways by the need for self-preservation and keeping one's job in a politically charged environment. The dissertation will be published in May 2000 by Bell & Howell and will be available on the Web at www.lib.umi.com.

Repackage yourself every few years. In *Repacking Your Bags: Lighten Your Load for the Rest of Your Life* (1995, Berrett-Koehler), authors Richard J. Leider and David A. Shapiro suggest taking a good look at what you're carrying and why. An honest, periodic examination of your career can help you establish targeted goals and a more focused mindset. Through a process of self-reflection, reevaluation, and reinvention, assess whether your skills, behaviors, and relationships still advance your career or simply drag you down. Learn to unpack, or leave behind, those traits that no longer add value or contribute to your personal and professional growth. Then repack your lifestyle, resume, and interview presentations with new skill sets, experiences, and behaviors that reflect what you've learned and what is needed in your targeted marketplace. This requires the discipline to know what to leave behind and the self-awareness to know what to add and when to make a change.

Pamela Kaul is president, *Association Strategies, Inc.*, Alexandria, Virginia. E-mail: pakaul@aol.com.

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The ASAE Building, 1575 I St. NW, Washington, DC 20005, P. 888.950.2723, F. 202.371.8315 or P. 202.371.0940 (in Washington, DC)

Marriott Learning Complex, The Ronald Reagan Building & International Trade Center
1300 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20004, P. 202.326.9550, F. 202.326.0999

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