

2010, The Year of the Focused Survivor

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A common phenomenon among survivors of near-death experiences is a never-before-felt clarity of life. Survivors become more focused and purposeful with their lives, and are more aware of the path they need to take to achieve their goals. Some survivors say that they feel like their brains were permanently altered and that, as a result, they can tap into mental resources previously beyond their reach.

Many employers feel much the same way, as they look at 2010. The past year, for many of us, was one that we want to forget. We started 2009, feeling that the grasp we had on our businesses was firm enough to see us through anything the economy could throw our way. Of course, at the beginning of 2009, we believed that we were staring at the bottom of the economic downturn. The subsequent months took many of us closer to a bottom that kept sinking.

We cut costs, and in some unfortunate cases, staff. We delayed growth. We tapped our credit. Most of all, we got smarter about how we run our businesses. We looked more closely at our expenditures, and we examined the value that our employees brought to our businesses. In cases where the values of our employees didn't outweigh the expenses associated with their employment, we were forced to release the employee or restructure the job and compensation to bring the value in line.

Savvy businesses have employed these tactics and stand ready to prosper in 2010, The Year of the Survivor. These survivors have emerged from the down economy smarter and leaner than ever, and those who want to work for them would do well to understand the following trends that we're seeing.

Employers will not consider applicants who apply for jobs beyond their proven abilities. Now is not the time to reach up for a job. Employers want to see relevant experience, experience levels, and most all, a history of success. It's not that employers don't appreciate your confidence and ambition; they just don't want to gamble that your abilities justify your ambition. They are waiting for the candidate who meets all of their needs to walk through the door. Focus your efforts on jobs for which your qualifications are obvious and then make sure that your resume and interview presence portray these obvious qualifications.

Employers are more thorough in their hiring process. Many employers, especially if they have been forced to reduce their workforces, are looking as intently for reasons to discard a candidate as they are for reasons to hire the candidate. All of the old axioms still apply: be on time, be attentive, and be prepared and considerate. When economic times are better and talent is more difficult to find, interviewers are more lenient on interview gaffes. Now, if you are going to be unprepared to ask pertinent questions, you might as well show up drunk, because you're not going any further.

Employers are minimizing their financial risk in hiring. An employer is considering hiring you for one simple reason: he believes that you will add to his business's capacity

at a reasonable cost. He is also thinking about an exit strategy should hiring you prove to be a bad decision. Expect more incentive-laden offers and tighter probationary periods, as employers hedge their bets. They don't want you to fail, but they also don't want the failure of their hires to cause their businesses to fail.

Just because this is an employer-driven job market, doesn't mean employers can be lax when pursuing candidates for their positions, especially higher level candidates that are still difficult to find and even more difficult to move. Though these candidates, also survivors in their own right, are more receptive to competing offers, often because of uncertainty within their own companies, they too are more skeptical and methodical during the hiring process than before. To be successful in the competitive market for top talent, employers should be aware of the following trends we see in today's candidates.

Candidates want assurance that their next job isn't just a few lines on their resumes.

They are absolutely terrified that, like so many others in the past year or two, they will find themselves unemployed because they made an ill timed or poorly considered job change. Employers need to be prepared to discuss their company's strengths, such as longevity and success in the market, and average tenure among their employees. If there are problems with any of these factors, employers must have solid explanations and action plans in order to make a candidate feel like their chance to succeed and remain employed with a strong employer is greater than average.

Candidates have also had a rough time of it for the past couple of years. Though most businesses have gone through or are going through the most difficult time in their history, many hiring managers expect to find candidates who never missed a beat. While these candidates certainly exist, many outstanding candidates have also fallen on hard times, many times, not of their making. This is particularly true of sales candidates. Perhaps, as in the case of some permanent placement recruiters like those who work for my business, the market for their products or services has dried up. Perhaps, they are the victims of bad decision-making by management. Hiring authorities must be mindful of these possibilities and do their best to sort out the reasons behind falling performance, so they don't pass on candidates who have simply suffered in the down economy.

Candidates are already jumpy, and a misstep during the hiring process will send them running. We talk about common mistakes that candidates make in interviewing situations, but employers also make mistakes that cost them great candidates. Candidates don't need to be reminded of the competitiveness of today's markets, but some employers go overboard in painting a difficult picture or act indifferent to the potential a candidate represents to their bottom line. Even worse, sloppy attention to detail, such as inconsistent revenue projections or shaky commission plans, can make an otherwise eager new employee a competitor who will never again consider working for your company. Smart companies have to avoid these mistakes now, more than ever.

Just like 2009 and all the years before that, 2010 will come and go, and the business climate will continue changing. Top employers and top talent must continue to monitor the climate and adjust themselves accordingly. Just like some of those hokey reality shows, survivors will band together to make themselves strong in the face of adversity.