

How to career ahead in a recession

Difficult economic times can present candidates with an opportunity to further their careers – provided they show the skills for adapting to change, writes **Jackie Switzer**

WAITING for the downturn to end and the good jobs to appear is a risky strategy. Equally, moving on is harder, with fewer jobs on offer – along with the risk of being “last in and first out”. Yet for those who want to further their careers, this is a time for identifying your opportunities.

“Being resilient is the key,” says Flora MacDonald, senior talent management consultant with Right Management.

“Use the downturn to show how you managed change and kept others focused. When people are being made redundant, those left behind don’t feel so lucky – particularly if they are surrounded by empty desks and the parting shots of leaving colleagues telling them they’ll be busy as they will be doing their work, too.”

Arvinder Dhesi, group talent director at Aviva, agrees. He says that the current economic situation is ideal for showing which key members of staff can “control their responses to events” even if they cannot control the events themselves.

“When assessing people, my shorthand is to ask, ‘What do they do when they don’t know what to do?’” he says.

“Some people will come to a halt, wait to be given an answer or look for the instruction book. Others will be curious, accept the situation is different and try things out.”

Those managers and executives who can respond in this way are the ones who will find a recession is an ideal time to further their careers.

Bill Barry, a senior executive coach who also coaches the UK Olympic team, adds: “I coached the rower Alan Campbell for the Beijing Olympics. Eight weeks before the event, he needed a knee operation and then had five weeks resting. He didn’t get a medal but he did get into the final.”

“A recession is to a business what an injury is to an athlete. We needed to think about how he could get through this and be competitive. When something was taken away from him, he became stronger mentally and physically. You need to learn from a recession and think of it as a way to develop your strengths.”

Andrew Hill, director for talent management at HR consultancy Chuinto, says the first step is to “look for opportunities in your company – maybe suggest doing work that would usually be done by consultants to build your skill set”.

Claire McCartney, CIPD adviser for resourcing and talent planning, agrees: “In the current climate, companies are less likely to bring in fresh talent than to think of ways to get their own people to take on new tasks,” she says. “This



Fighting back: Alan Campbell, front, overcame injury to compete in the Olympics. Beating a recession requires a similar attitude, says coach Bill Barry

CASE STUDY

PAUL MYLET was promoted from head of group actuarial developments to group actuarial director at Aviva in March this year.

He says: “In the lead-up to my promotion, I delivered a large project during the financial crisis and stayed focused. Aviva places high value on the ability to

overcome obstacles and to be resilient under pressure. To progress your career in a recession, you have to keep the bigger picture in mind and think about how your work fits the overall direction of the company. “Also, if you have an opinion, be prepared to express it and defend it. You need to do your day job but

you also need to surprise people with new perspectives.

“Stay in touch with your network in the company. Aviva focuses on internal rather than external recruitment, so there can be more flexibility in existing structures to get internal moves. Also, be positive, as concern and doubt can be contagious during a recession.”

means you are likely to get more exposure to the top levels of your organisation and also the chance to get your teeth into highly visible projects.

“It is more about attitude than qualifications: they are looking for evidence of potential. You need to be clear about what you can offer and have innovative ideas to ensure you get noticed.”

MacDonald adds: “Being proactive is essential. This requires moving outside your comfort zone. When opportunities are plentiful, you can be passive but now you need to be more proactive. You need to manage your reputation to network and influence key people.”

First, it is useful to take time out, she advises, and “reflect on who is able to

influence your career, and start to think what you can offer to add value”.

Barry comments: “It is competitive so you need to be clear about your strengths, and in today’s market it makes sense to play to your strengths rather than always think about your weaknesses. You should understand any weakness then work to correct it – but strengths are the key.”

McCartney suggests: “Don’t demand money as organisations can’t respond and it is a mistake to think progression is purely financial. If asked to shorten your hours, think of ways to use the time to do interesting stuff that will broaden your skills.”

“You need to be flexible and think

about what you want as well as what the organisation needs,” adds MacDonald. “At the moment, you may not get your perfect job and you may need to be flexible around your skills.”

“It may mean realising that you enjoy only three-and-a-half days out of five in your job as you are having to do work you thought you had left behind. To keep motivated, set yourself a one-year plan to broaden your skills, keep employed and be more employable at the end of it.”

“Don’t think about getting a more senior role as the only way to progress. You need to think more broadly about how you develop yourself.”

Hill says: “Broaden your horizons

and don’t look just for jobs with your current job title. There are a lot of new disciplines, so read the job descriptions and work out how you could fit them.”

Being visible and ensuring people know what you do are important and MacDonald says: “Definitely don’t keep your head down to be safe and just carry on with the work. It can be uncomfortable but think of how you can volunteer for other roles.”

“And don’t assume that what you do doesn’t add value. Talk to people in your organisation about how you would like to progress.”

Planning your career is important and Barry says: “Never ask for promotion without a strong business case that shows you understand your company’s interests and how you will drive them forward.”

“Companies know where they want to be in three years’ time and you need to match this. Also, you need to think about who to present your case to – it could be your boss but it could be HR or your boss’s boss.”

Increasing your skill set is good advice but Hill says: “People are good at getting a skill set linked to their role but all work is to do with people and leading them. By putting these skills into practice, you will know what you are capable of in helping to manage yourself and others.”

Dhesi says: “Most achievements are done through a team, so claiming you achieved something entirely alone can raise a red flag. We look for people who share the credit.”

McCartney adds: “The latest CIPD employee survey shows that there is a real lack of trust in senior leadership, which is not surprising when people are not being consulted or kept informed. Senior people need to think about how they communicate with their teams and reassure them. If you can develop this skill and motivate teams, it will get you noticed.”

TEN TOP TIPS

1. Be focused and concentrate so you can quickly adapt to any changes.
2. Be visible and make sure the people who make decisions know you and what you do.
3. Be proactive and look for opportunities to do more challenging work that will increase your visibility and skills.
4. Play to your strengths – if you have skills, qualifications or experience that would make a

difference in a downturn look for ways to use them.

5. Try to define progress more broadly than an immediate pay rise – think three to five years ahead.
6. Keep healthy and keep your energy levels up – lethargy or gloom will make it hard to succeed.
7. Network in your company – aim to make one new contact a week and ensure some of them are decision-makers or influential.
8. Work out your personal business

9. Work on your people skills – leading and working through a downturn is hard and the better you are at it, the easier it will be to lead and support others.
10. Be open-minded – consider all possible ways to progress. You may need to take a sideways step to move forward in the long term.