



Published in the NYPOST print and online 8-28-2006

Resides on the web at

http://www.nypost.com/atwork/to_leave__or_not_to_leave__atwork_virginia_backaitis.htm

TO LEAVE, OR NOT TO LEAVE?

By VIRGINIA BACKAITIS

'YOU'RE changing jobs again?' your mother says. She wrings her hands as she speaks. "Where will you be working this month?" your father ribs.

He smiles, but there's concern on his face. This is the second time in eight months you've stopped by to update your contact info on their phones and in their e-mail address books.

"You're supposed to congratulate me on my new position," you remind them. You were in such a great mood before you walked in the door. Your buddies had been all high-fives and handshakes when you told them your news. "Be happy for me," you say. "I'm just worried you're going to get labeled as a job frog," says your mom. "Job hopper," you say. "And I'm not one of those."

Your reassurance doesn't seem to bring much comfort. Should you remind her that this is your fifth, not your 25th, job change in 16 years and that your salary and levels of responsibility have grown with each role?

"We're just worried about your stability," says your dad.

"I'm not," you say, but on the way home you begin to wonder. Could the rules of employment have changed that much since your parents' day?

"You bet," sings a whole world of recruiters. No one is promising to reward you with a sunny pension and a retirement Rolex in exchange for your unwavering loyalty, are they? So now that the expectation of lifelong employment at a single company has gone the way of the manual typewriter, and holding numerous jobs in the course of a career is the norm, what are the rules? When should you stay? When should you go? What are the dangers of appearing too stagnant or too noncommittal?

Todd Noebel, senior recruiter at Wachovia Securities, suggests taking a look at "the evolving dynamic of loyalty between company and employee. It's becoming more and more rare to see someone spend 15 or 20 years with one company. Neither side really expects it anymore."

Why? "Companies need to be nimble in deploying talent to execute on business drivers, and employees are taking more and more control on managing their careers," he says.

In simpler, and perhaps colder, terms the rule is: "I (the company) use you (as long as I need you); and you (the employee) use me (as long as I pay you well, help you upgrade your portfolio of skills, and/or support your lifestyle choices). Either one of us can bail on the other, at any time, for any reason; and because we've stated it upfront there shouldn't be any hard feelings."

Don't believe it? Take a look at your last offer letter. Chances are that in between the warm and fuzzy stuff at its beginning and end it says something like this: "If you accept our offer of employment, you will be an employee-at-will, meaning that either you or the company may terminate our relationship at any time for any reason, with or without cause." And while most employers and employees generally adhere to more courteous disciplines (severance packages and resignation periods), neither has to.

LIKE A ROLLING STONE

So now that it's clear the responsibility for managing your career is in your own hands, let's look at some profiles and some do's and don'ts in order to empower you with some tools.

Let's start with Showboat Sean. To the untrained eye, he seems like a recruiter's dream. Not only does he have his dark gray suit, crisp white shirt and polished shoes ready to go at all times, he's also got stories to tell and experience to sell, and his interview skills are proven. If a company needs a job done, Showboat's up for the challenge. He'll rally the troops, map out solutions and burn the midnight oil week in and week out until the mission's accomplished.

As soon as it is, Showboat will want a promotion, a raise and another highly visible project. If his current employer doesn't provide that quickly, he'll get out his top hat and cane and start singing to their competitors, "I did it for them, so I can do it for you, and because I know what they've got, I can make yours faster and better."

Sounds like Showboat's got a good rap, doesn't it? That is, until you hear from the dozen or more recruiters interviewed for this article.

Though the definition of "job hopper" varies by "time, industry, context and the opinion of the hiring manager," according to seasoned recruiter Simon Meth, "employers value stability."

And it's not only stability they value, according to executive recruiter Paula Renick, but commitment.

"If you move every two years, that means you probably haven't stayed long enough to own something or to effectuate results," she says.

So while the occasional one- or two-year stint is tolerated in some professions, a repetitive pattern spells "Danger! Do Not Hire" in nearly all.

"Longevity is very important to a physician's career, for example," says recruiter Kelley Hekowczyk. "They should stay in their positions for at least three to five years to not sound off any alarms to future employers."

The same is true for government workers, employees of defense contractors, and for strategy and policy-makers, who need to spend time learning about their corporate cultures before generating any returns.

If you've already left too many jobs too quickly, can a nonchronological resume (one that doesn't clearly reveal your dates of employment) win you an interview?

Probably not. Most recruiters hate them, and some won't even read them. Instead, get clear on the reasons behind each move; if your skills are right for the job, most employers will let you present a case for why this time things will be different.

Remember, "it's a pattern of growth and progression that offers a compelling story of accomplishment," says Noebel.

THE RISK-FREE POOL

Does this mean that Showboat Sean with his Plug 'n' Play rap has no one to sell his skills to? Absolutely not. Recruiter Jaymie Myers suggests guys like Showboat become consultants.

"There's a natural end date to the assignment," she says. "You can leave and remain professional."

And if, amid his heroics, Showboat decides to settle down, he can investigate employment opportunities with one of his client firms. Unlike most job seekers, he'll be a known commodity, so the risk will be minimal.

On the opposite end of the spectrum sits Comfy Carl, who won't change jobs unless his back is against the wall. "If it's not broken, why replace it?" is Carl's attitude about not only his job but also new ideas, processes and technologies brought into the workplace. "Here today, gone tomorrow," he snickers about the "overpaid" trailblazers his company brings in to make changes.

What Carl may not realize is that he's flat-lining in his career, and that if his company gets acquired or goes out of business, or if a change in its structure eliminates his role, his severance package may have to keep him comfy for quite a long time.

"Employers like to see individuals with diverse backgrounds," says David Carvajal of TheLadders.com, a leading job board. He recommends "four or five jobs in 20 years, each with a broader range of experience or a higher rung up the ladder."

Renick concurs. "It's hard to sell a candidate who's risk averse," she says.

There are nonmonetary advantages to changing jobs as well. You get to see the world from more than one mountaintop and gather experiences and best practices from a variety of cultures.

STRIKING A BALANCE

What to do if you're ready to shed your cement shoes? The first thing is to learn to listen.

"After awhile, some employees become hard of hearing, so they miss the sound of opportunity when it comes knocking," says Jim Varriale, the president of QUANTster.com, the quantitative finance job market daily.

Once your ears are attuned, get out and interview even if the job may not seem perfect. There's probably a gap between what you know and what you need to know, and you may be able to start bridging it from your current position.

Now, chances are you're neither a Showboat Sean nor a Comfy Carl, but there are lessons to glean from each. You have to go to grow, but you should stay long enough to harvest the fruits of your efforts. Write that balancing act into your job description.

And should your parents, or anyone else, question whether you've thought your move through, show them your answers to the questions in the box below.

Before you CHANGE jobs, ask yourself:

- * Will I be acquiring skills or experience that I'm not able to get in my current position?
- * Am I joining an organization that I can picture working for over the next two to eight years?
- * If something happens to the new job, will I be better equipped to find my next job as a result of this move?
- * Am I reluctant to leave because the coffee cart at my new company may not sell Red Bull?
- * Have I learned 80 percent or more of what there is to learn in my current job?
- * Have I quit making suggestions because they're never accepted or implemented?
- * Do I have to wait for someone to die or retire before I get promoted?
- * Will I get paid more?
- * If not, will I be doing something I've always wanted to do?
- * Based on my career goals, is this a logical step?
- * Am I reluctant to change jobs because I'll have to take a new subway or learn a new traffic pattern?
- * Have I exhausted my options of moving internally?
- * Does the cleaning service think I'm a mannequin?

If you gave more yes than no answers, it's probably time to move on. If you said no to all or nearly all of these questions and you're thinking about leaving your current position, check your employee ID badge; does it say Reckless Ralph?