

Career Strategies in Uncertain Times

Comments prepared by Amy Lindgren of Prototype Career Service for students and staff at Century College, April 20, 2009. This version provided for use by the College, with attribution to Amy Lindgren and Prototype Career Service. Permission granted for use, with limited editing for space.

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Hello. Thank you so much for coming to this session on Career Strategies in Uncertain Times. And thank you especially to Carrie Hageman, your career services director here at Century College, for organizing this session and inviting me to talk with you.

A quick question before we start – how many of you are here at Century to get started on a new career path, maybe after a layoff or some other change in your work life? That's good to know. You're making a good choice to get more training under your belt.

In fact, that's one of the key strategies people use when the economy is uncertain. It's a time-honored tradition to return to school for a new skill set or certification, partly as a way to strengthen your marketability, and partly as a good way to spend the time while you wait for the economy to improve. When hiring is strong, people don't feel as much of a need to return to school. So in an odd way, recessions have a way of making us a bit smarter as a working population.

I want to share some information this afternoon on a few key points related to career strategies in uncertain times, then I'm going to stop and take questions from you. I want to be sure that we're covering the information you most need, so be thinking about anything from general career ideas you'd like to hear to specific job search advice for a situation you're facing now.

### *Skill Building and Accreditations*

First, let's look at the question of skill building and accreditations for job seekers today. If you've had a chance to read my column over the past few years, you'll know that I have a love-hate relationship with higher education. I love formal learning programs for their own sake, and I very much want people to continue learning. I have a bachelor's degree that took me 7 years to achieve and I think that might make me value it more. Without the background in all the liberal arts that I studied, I don't think I'd be as effective as a columnist or career counselor. I really needed to learn philosophy and history and math and science to get grounded in the world.

But I think that education should be a very individual thing and I do not like the cookie cutter approach that sometimes passes for career advice. In particular, I don't like the idea of getting degrees out of a generalized sense of anxiety – the idea that today's college degrees are a baseline, like a high school diploma has been in the past, for example, or that a certain certification will be needed to compete because “all employers” require it. I think that's nonsense, to be honest. Being an employer myself, and having held more than 50 jobs before I started my company, I can tell you that there is no such thing as “all employers.” Some say they require degrees, but hire people without them. Some say nothing, but seem extremely selective in their hiring practices.

Here is my advice on this point: Take the training that will teach you the skills or information that you want to have. If you are not interested in the subject, you won't do well in the program anyway, so it doesn't matter how “hot” the field is. If you are interested, you will find employment even in the tightest market.

So think carefully about how you want to spend your precious time and money and brain cells and then do the very best you can in the program that you choose.

### ***Networking and Profile-Raising***

Now the reality is that you will want to get employed after, or even while you take this training program. Theoretically, you will want to be employed in the field that you are studying.

This is where networking and profile-raising come into play. You already know this, but just to be sure – you need to do more than simply study hard and get good grades to succeed in the job market. To be honest, you don't actually need to do that at all – lots of people with pretty average or poor grades manage to get great jobs. How do they do that?

They network and they may be active in internships or clubs while they're in school. And they raise their profile so that they are known in their fields.

Here are a few specific tips, to give you something to think about on this topic:

1. An internship is going to count more in an employer's mind than an A in an academic class. So if you have the choice of getting an A, or of getting a B but also having time for an internship...I hate to say it, but cut back on your studies slightly to make room for that internship.
2. Contacts made by attending a professional association or conference in your field will count more than activities in school clubs. The ideal is to do both, so you can have the leadership experience in the school club – but if you can only do one, you need to get yourself out where you can be seen by people in your field.
3. A published article on your subject or a presentation at a conference will earn you many, many points in terms of profile raising.
4. Any job you have while you're in training is fine, but a low-level job related to your field will usually be a better choice strategically than a higher-level job in an unrelated field.

### ***Balancing Long- and Short-term Career Goals***

Which brings us to the question of balance when you're building a long-term career while trying to resolve short-term problems. You may very well have to work in jobs that are not connected to your career goals, or stop out of work altogether while you tend to family matters or health issues. That's okay. That's just life. But you want to keep your eye on the prize, which means staying on track with your goals.

There are lots of steps you can do for this, but here's one easy one to remember: Write down your career goal and put it somewhere prominent, like on your computer or dashboard or refrigerator. Then, each time you have a decision to make, such as a job offer to accept or turn down, ask yourself: Will this bring me closer or further from my goals? If the answer is further away, ask yourself: What is my plan for getting back on track? Without that plan in place when you accept the offer, you should probably assume that you are in fact, changing course. Which is fine – it's just better to know that's what you're doing.

### ***Changing Careers***

Which brings us to the whole issue of changing careers, in uncertain times or any time. Of course, there are zillions of books and articles and blogs devoted to this very topic, so I won't go deeply into the issue here.

But one of the questions I hear most frequently when things are tough is this: Is this a good time to change careers, or would I be better to wait until things are more stable in the economy?

And my answer is always, Hmmm. That depends.

That's not very satisfying, but it's the most honest answer possible. What it mostly depends on is not the economy, believe it or not. You can make a terrific career change in a bad economy, and a disastrous one in a good economy. Career changes should always

be based more on your own interests and skills, your long-term goals, and your personal circumstances than on the broader economy.

Here's what I can say with some certainty: If you don't like your work now, and you can afford the disruption to your income at this time, then this is a wonderful time to change careers. Because the general rule I follow is that the sooner a good change is made, the longer you will have to enjoy the new, good thing. Why put off your happiness?

But if you are not able to make this change now, then the next best – indeed, the necessary – thing to do is to prepare for it in slow-motion. Take just one class instead of an entire degree. Volunteer in the new field one Saturday a month instead of taking a full internship. Look for assignments in your current career that are most like the work you want to go to.

About the only wrong answer, regardless of the economy, is to do nothing. That's the path that traps you into a life that no longer fits you. It's better to make a move and adjust your course as you go – the risk isn't as great as you think, and the rewards are almost better than you imagine. Good luck, and congratulations on having already started on your new path by being students here at Century.