

The Secret Job Search

Employed and looking? How to do it responsibly and successfully. BY GAIL GOLDEN

COMMON WISDOM SAYS it's easier to land a new job while you're still employed. Potential employers won't be wondering why you left your last position. And unemployment saps both confidence and energy, making it harder to present yourself with poise and enthusiasm. But looking for a new job while working full time is both risky and complicated. It's hard to balance your current job responsibilities with the demands of a serious job search. You run the risk that your current employer will find out and penalize you. At times the process can feel very cloak-and-dagger. Here are some best practices for managing the challenge – and some common pitfalls.

KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK Even though you have one foot out the door, continue to do your best in your current job. It's the right thing to do. Even if you're dissatisfied, you owe the company your best work as long as they're paying you. Besides, it maintains your self-esteem as a high-achieving individual who honors her commitments. Slacking off will call attention to you just when you're trying to fly under the radar. And if you don't find another job right away, your inferior performance may lead to unpleasant consequences. Who knows – you may even change your mind and decide you want to stay. So keep on giving your best. This also means no job hunting during your work hours. Use your own time for your job search – before or after work, breaks, lunch hours, personal days.

DON'T TELL YOUR CO-WORKERS Most of us have friends at work. It's natural to want to share your decision to look for another job and the progress of your search. Don't. Every person you tell increases the risk that the news will leak out to people you're not ready to inform.

DON'T USE YOUR WORK TELEPHONE OR EMAIL Many employers track your web surfing and your e-mails, even if you're dumping the history of your Web site visits and deleting personal e-mails. Don't ever use your employer's computer to visit job boards, or send or receive job-search-related e-mails. Similarly, employers can monitor your phone calls. Use a personal email account at home and your cell phone. Never use the company fax machine or letterhead.

PAY YOUR OWN WAY Use your own paper, printer, stamps, et cetera. It's dishonest to use company resources for your job search.



PROTECT YOUR ON-LINE RESUMES You don't want your current employers to find your resume when conducting their own searches. Only post on job sites where you can keep your employer and contact information confidential. Many large sites have confidentiality settings to block parts of your resume or to prevent particular companies from seeing it. Or use a generic company name ("prestigious public relations firm") and job title. Include only your private email address and cell phone number.

GET REFERENCES Savvy job-hunters collect references all the time. Then when you initiate a confidential job search, you have a ready-made list of names you can provide. Use the people who know you best. Prospective employers understand you can't use your current employer as a job reference if your search is confidential.

WATCH HOW YOU DRESS Part of smart job hunting is making it is easy for the interviewer to picture you in the role. That often means dressing more formally than your typical work garb. If you normally dress in cargo pants, showing up in a classic suit will require an explanation. It's best to do a quick change away from the office.

BE SMART IN THE INTERVIEW Tell the truth if the interviewer asks whether your current employer knows about your search. Ask that they not contact your current boss. Never trash your current employer. Offer an intelligent reason why you're seeking a change – looking for a broader scope of responsibility, another job would be a better fit for my skills, et cetera.

WHEN TO TELL YOUR SUPERVISOR Until you're ready to resign, don't tell your supervisor about your search. It will put your career on hold and may even lead to termination. Only tell your supervisor if your move is expected (you're moving or graduating), you need their recommendation or you're confident they might help you find work.

WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU RESIGN When you give notice, be prepared for a number of possible responses. Your boss may be angry at you for your "disloyalty." Or she may be supportive and understanding. You may be asked to leave immediately, or to stay on longer (usually not a good idea). If at all possible, leave on good terms. Moving on with dignity will position you well as you enter your new job. n