

Mind Your Step as You Go

By

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It pays to leave graciously in a tight job market, writes David Wilson.

Everyone has dreamt of quitting a job in a spectacular fashion.

Forced to toe the line to get paid each week, we comfort ourselves with daydreams in which we tell the boss to "take the job and shove it" and march out in a triumphant huff.

The popularity of resignation fantasies was recently shown when a Sydney advertising agency established a Quit In Style website (quitinstyle.com).

After a call for submissions, the site was inundated with quitting fantasies ranging from leaving maggots in the boss's desk drawer to rearranging office keyboards to spell out expletives. Other ideas included anarchically reprogramming the company on-hold music and spray-painting up-yours symbols on walls. Generation-Y employees were, perhaps unsurprisingly, among the most enthusiastic contributors.

But while it's fun to dream, even in good economic times abusing your boss on the way out is a bad idea. It burns bridges and leaves you either with a unusable reference or a blank spot on your CV. In a tight job market, where your reputation is going to help you land your next job, going out with an unpleasant bang makes even less sense.

If you want to get ahead it's smart to leave with grace, regardless of how relieved you are to be going.

Career transition coach and author Paul Gordon says in terms of your future employment, it's not how you start a job but how you finish that counts. "Remember: this city has about two degrees of separation," he says. "Those you leave may work with you again."

Organisational psychologist Christopher Shen agrees and warns exiting gracefully is more challenging than many people realise. Even if you're leaving a job you've loved, those you leave behind can take your resignation the wrong way.

"Very often, managers feel a sense of rejection or that they have failed in being able to retain an employee," Shen says.

The feeling of failure is all the more acute if you were a good performer. If you think you may one day want to return or are just after a great reference, it's important to convey the message that your motive for leaving is to broaden horizons and develop skills. Shen says it's probably not in your best interests to start taking potshots at staff members who rubbed you the wrong way or mouthing off about how unappreciated you were.

Instead, try to convey gratitude and appreciation for the opportunity to have worked for the firm. Suggest you are leaving purely for a reason beyond the manager's control and imply you will always look back on management fondly and would like to keep in touch.

"The messages of appreciation and deference resonate with the manager's need to maintain good public relations and a good perception in the marketplace of their name," Shen says.

He sums up the secret of leaving as a mix of tact, deference and guile underpinned by "sincere courtesy".

Geoff Officer, the chief executive of career management and transition consultancy The Donington Group, says while it's tempting to cast bosses who berate us as devils, chances are they are just doing their job.

It's wise to remember this on the way out.

Officer says how you act when you leave speaks volumes about your values and professionalism. Think about how you would want to be treated. Try to treat your manager the same way.

He says if you think there are aspects of the organisation that could be better, it's a good idea to deliver this message rationally. Prepare a list of your reasons for leaving so you can give your employer useful feedback.

You should also endeavour to give as much notice as possible. If your contract stipulates a certain period, honour that clause.

Leave detailed handover notes to help your successor. Or, if possible, undertake a face-to-face handover with them.

If you go on good terms, that will boost your chances of winning positive references. "You never know - your former employer might one day be your client or customer, so make sure you leave a positive impression," Officer says.

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Based in Melbourne, Australia, Christopher Shen Consulting brings organisational psychology solutions to workplaces, helping people become stronger leaders and teams become better performers.

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