

## CHAPTER 35

# SURVIVING LAYOFFS, CORPORATE TAKEOVERS, MERGERS, SHUTDOWNS, AND REDUCTIONS IN WORK FORCE

Corporate takeovers, mergers, shutdowns, and reductions in work force are hazards for engineers' careers. For successful career development you must know how to deal with and survive these career damaging events. Your goal is not only to minimize the damage to your career, but in fact to walk away with a career advancement opportunity.

In this chapter, we will explore how you can do just that. First, we discuss what happens during takeovers, mergers, shutdowns, and work force reductions. Next, we provide guidelines to help you assess how much at risk you are of losing your present job. Sometimes layoffs come without warning. Learn what to do immediately should this happen and what to continue to do to successfully survive.

### **UNDERSTANDING WHAT HAPPENS DURING TAKEOVERS, MERGERS, SHUTDOWNS, AND WORKFORCE REDUCTIONS**

Lack of knowledge about future events during takeovers, mergers, shutdowns, and workforce reductions creates additional anxiety and fear. This additional anxiety and fear can work against you. It can cloud your judgment and paralyze you, preventing you from taking action at times. If you are aware of the sequence of events that normally occur during takeovers, mergers, and workforce reductions, it should help reduce the anxiety and fear, since you will know what is coming next.

With a lower anxiety level and knowledge of the sequence of events, you are better prepared to plan your next move and take appropriate action ahead of time. Let's first summarize some of the common events that occur in companies during a takeover, merger, shutdown, or work force reduction.

The first indicators that trouble is on the horizon are declining profits and stock value. If the profits continue to fall, most companies will not be able to stay in business, so management has to take some type of action to turn the trend around. In response to profit and stock value problems most companies will announce a series of predictable actions to be carried out. These actions are usually identified as cost cutting measures and reorganization.

► **Career Tip.** Monitor your company's stock price and earnings/profit statements as an indicator of possible troubles ahead.

The cost cutting measures will include phasing out old product lines that are no longer profitable, or reorganizing to help reduce costs and streamline the company. Often the corporate staff is cut as a cost saving move; a hiring freeze may be announced. The company will reorganize to eliminate duplication of effort. For example, combining stockrooms to have only one, or combining multiple data centers into a single one, one lab instead of two, and so on.

If profits still continue to fall, it is on to the next level. This may include reduction of workforce through early retirement incentives or elimination of part-time and temporary help where possible. Usually, at this stage the poorest performers are laid off.

If the profits still continue to fall or the company's markets decline, then it is on to the next level of trimming. The work force is rated and totem rankings are made. Those on the bottom of the totems become candidates for the next round of work force reductions. Managers will often protect those who have been loyal to them. This may not result in saving the best people—only the favorites. Upper management is aware of this practice and usually takes steps to counteract it. Such as, upper management will reorganize the departments and assign new supervisors who are not interested in loyalty but only in doing whatever it takes to turn the company around. If this means laying people off, then so be it. These hatchet men, as they are sometimes referred to, quickly cut the unwanted help with little attention to what has happened in the past. It is easier for them to do this since they have no personal ties with the employees they must supervise.

► **Career Tip.** Sudden changes in management may be an indication your company is headed for bad times.

If your supervisor should be suddenly replaced during one of the reorganizations, you have your work cut out for you. It is almost like starting a new job.

You must start all over to prove yourself to the new supervisor. This will take time and effort, so start immediately. If you recognize this early, and start immediately, you will be able to prove your worth to the new supervisor in a shorter time and hopefully, keep your name off the layoff list. Ignoring the fact that your supervisor has changed and assuming your past record is in good standing is not what is going to help you keep your position. When your supervisor changes, it is like the clock has been reset and everyone starts over.

The best thing you can do is react as though you just started a new job. You need to interview with your new supervisor. Take time to sit down, one-on-one, and discuss what your accomplishments were in the past and the value you bring to the group. Provide a copy of your resume and show your portfolio. Do not assume your supervisor will automatically do research and review your personnel file.

If the profits continue to fall, this process of reorganizing and cutting continues until the company either becomes profitable or folds. The company morale will cycle up and down with each wave of layoffs. Each time there is a layoff announcement the morale usually dips to another low. Everyone is worried and the efficiency of the organization can, at times, slow down. Workers are talking about who will be the next to get laid off and no one seems interested in their work. The best thing you can do is keep your efficiency up and do not participate in the hallway discussions about who will be the next to go. Your time is better spent on your work and your backup plans.

► **Career Tip.** Use your time and energy wisely by developing backup plans.

Soon after the layoffs have been completed, and those laid off depart, the morale will start to climb again. The hopes and expectations are that the profits will increase and the layoffs will stop. Try not to cycle up and down with each wave of layoffs and reorganization. These are very tough conditions to work under. If you are going through this and feel you cannot handle it, then get professional help. Often companies will have counselors and psychologists on hand to help people deal with stress [1]. If your company has a psychologist available, seek out this help if you need it. Sometimes just being able to talk to someone can be a tremendous benefit. They are trained professionals who can help you. Use this company benefit if it is available to you.

During company mergers several different events may occur. The first step toward a merger is the preparation of a statement of net technical worth by the company executives. This is simply a sales brochure describing all the valuable assets and contracts the company possesses. Next action is the big announcement that company officials have decided to merge or sell controlling interests to other companies to remain profitable. At this point the company is literally up for sale. Those companies interested in purchasing

your company now take tours of the facilities to see for themselves the assets of the company. The tour groups will include bankers, lawyers, executives and in some cases engineers from other companies to help assess the company's technical worth.

After the tours comes the big announcement: the company has been sold and there will be a merger if the Federal Trade Commission approves the sale. During this time many people from the purchasing company will tour your facilities and interview selected people to determine what stays and what doesn't. Then the big day arrives and the sale has been approved by the FTC, and an official takeover is announced.

From this point on, one of four things can occur. The first and least damaging is that the name on the building is changed, a few people are let go, and the operation stays pretty much intact. The second is that major reorganizations will occur. There is a major influx of people from the new parent company to teach everyone how things will be done in the future and there are a large number of layoffs. Those people getting laid off are usually the ones the parent company determined, through interviews, are not needed. They may not be needed because the parent company already has people doing their jobs and would not utilize their skills.

If you are selected for an interview make sure the interview goes both ways. Not only tell the new parent company about your skills but make sure you find out if they need your skills or already have a department doing the same operations. This will give you insight as to whether your department and you will survive the merger.

► **Career Tip.** Interview the new company to determine if you will fit into their business plans.

The third thing that can occur is the company is dissected. This means the company's operations will be cut up and separated. The new parent company will usually transfer parts or operations of the acquired company to other locations. Operations may be transferred to other states where they will be used to support or strengthen existing operations in the new parent company. If this occurs you may be asked to move to the new facility if you wish to keep your job.

The fourth and final thing that may occur is complete shutdown. In this case, the new parent company lays everyone off and closes the doors. This occurs usually for two main reasons. One reason is that the assets of the company are more valuable than the engineering work. For instance, the land may be more valuable than the building or the products it produces. The new company can make a quick profit by shutting everything down, letting everyone go, and selling the land. Another reason is that a competitor has bought out the company to get its contracts. The new owners can handle the contracts with its existing facilities and do not need the acquired facilities or

people. Therefore they simply transfer the contracts and shut down the company, letting everyone go.

The steps I have described have been generalized and simplified. The actual events that occur will vary from company to company and situation to situation. Usually, it follows the sequence that has been described. Hopefully, these descriptions are enough to make you aware, allowing you to make better decisions about your future.

Now that you understand the steps that occur, let's look at some guidelines you can use to determine if you are at risk of losing your job.

### **ARE YOU AT RISK OF LOSING YOUR JOB?**

The first step to successfully surviving is to determine if you are at risk of losing your present job [2]. Once you have determined the risk involved then you can develop a plan and react appropriately to ensure your continued employment. To help you in determining how much you may be at risk in your present job situation, I have come up with the following list of questions. Please keep count of the number of times you respond with a "yes" answer as you read the questions.

1. Does your company have high debt and low cash flow?
2. Has management already tried an early retirement workforce reduction effort?
3. Is there a hiring freeze on at your division?
4. Has your company merged with another that duplicates your work?
5. Has your supervisor or their supervisor been laid off?
6. Is the health of your industry poor? Are people ordering less of your company's products?
7. Has your management announced cost cutting measures to be implemented?
8. Is your supervisor constantly revising the department workload forecast for upper management to review?
9. Have there already been layoffs at your plant or division?
10. Are you on the lower portion of the employee totem?
11. Is your supervisor or program manager forecasting an end to a contract with no replacement?
12. Are more layoffs forecasted for the division?
13. Did you receive a below average rating on your last employee appraisal?
14. Has your supervisor announced there will be a layoff in the group?
15. Has the marketing department stopped advertising your product?
16. Is there a plan to phase out the product line you are working on?

17. Has the company announced a loss for the last quarter?
18. Is your supervisor meeting with the personnel department on a steady basis?
19. Is your supervisor's door always shut when meeting with the personnel manager?
20. Are other departments doing the work that you normally do?
21. Are you not getting invited to meetings that you normally used to attend?
22. Has the building maintenance department stopped working on your area?
23. Is your supervisor forecasting a workforce reduction?
24. Is your equipment being transferred to other groups or divisions?
25. Has your supervisor's secretary suddenly stopped talking about the workforce reduction to you or anyone else?
26. Are there several people in your group doing exactly the same work?
27. Are there several people in your group at exactly the same level?
28. Are you the highest paid senior person in your group and can lower-level employees perform the same work?
29. Are you the most junior person in the group with the least experience?
30. Do you have poor relations with your supervisor?
31. Are you doing "make work" assignments that do not really contribute to the company's profit line? (For example, writing procedures, manuals, or standards.)
32. Was your company bought out by another in the last six months?
33. Have you lost interest in your job?

If you have answered yes more than 20 times, then you probably are at great risk of losing your job. The chances are excellent that you may be part of the next workforce reduction. You should be on what the military calls red alert.

If you have answered yes 10 to 20 times, you should be on yellow alert. There is a fair-to-good chance you may be next in line for layoff. Both red and yellow alerts indicate you should be taking aggressive steps to ensure your employment in the future.

If you answered yes less than 10 times, then chances are you are not in immediate danger of being laid off, but you should still at the very least, continue to monitor the situation.

What should you be doing if you are on red or yellow alert? Get busy! The first thing you need to do is some investigating to determine how much you are at risk, and there is no better place to start than your supervisor's office. Simply reserve some time on their schedule and have a serious talk with them.

Start out by clearly identifying that you are concerned about your future with the company. If your supervisor stops you right there and lets you know

that you are not in trouble, it is a good sign. Get them to expand on why they think you are not in trouble. Have they been told their department will not be affected by cutbacks? Does the workload indicate enough work? Have they spoken to their supervisor about the layoffs and who they will affect?

If your supervisor leads you to believe that workforce reductions are coming, ask straightforwardly, “am I on the layoff list?” Usually they will have one of two answers: “No” or “I am not allowed to share that information with you.” Each answer tells you what you need to know. The first answer possibly indicates you are not in danger for now, the second answer says your name may be considered.

► **Career Tip.** Probe your supervisor if you are unsure about your future in the company.

Probe further; do not leave without a clear understanding of exactly how they feel things are going. However, sometimes supervisors themselves do not know because they will also be part of the workforce reduction. Upper management may not be sharing workforce reduction plans since they need supervisors to keep functioning until the end comes. In certain cases, supervisors may also fear that if they say anything, it could throw the entire group into chaos. They quickly conclude that it’s best to be silent until the end comes. In any case, once you leave the office you still have further investigating to do.

Utilize your other contacts in the company to find out what might be going on. Check with your mentors. Do they know anything that they can share with you? Visit with the group accountant and pick up a copy of the workload forecast for your group. Is she forecasting fewer employees in the months ahead? What are the grade levels that will be cut? How about the last totem taken? Is there any chance of finding out where you stood on it? If you were on the bottom for your grade level, then it is likely that you are being considered for layoff. Again, visit the program manager on your project. Do they consider you critical to the program? If you have been identified as critical to the success of a project, you are usually not laid off.

Tap your social connections in the company for any information they have. Can you tap any other social contacts you made in the company? Perhaps people on the committees you served on? Often they will share things with you. In any case, if you hear something, check the source of it and do not take it for granted. Rumors get started and circulate around the company very easily.

► **Career Tip.** Tap into your social network at work. Sometimes other employees in different departments hear and share information.

One upper-level manager started the latest rumor sign-up sheet outside his office. He simply put up a blank sheet of paper and told the employees to write down the latest rumor they heard and he would tell them if it was true. He did this during a merger that was going on with another division. Within days he had over 30 rumors that ranged the spectrum from everyone getting fired to raises for everyone since the merger was going well. The truth of the matter was that nearly every rumor was just that, a rumor not based on any fact. For something as serious as your employment make sure you double check and get verification from multiple sources before you act on rumors.

The ultimate objective of all this research is to come to a conclusion about your future employment with the company. To help you better understand where you stand, gather all the information together and write it down. Diagram what you know; list the positives and list the negatives. If the negatives clearly outnumber the positives this will tell you something and aid you with your decision. The conclusion must be based on facts and then you must decide to either stay and take your chances or start looking for a new job. Only you can make this decision.

If making a decision like this frightens you, you can take some comfort in knowing that you are not alone. Everyone is frightened when it comes to making a decision as big as this. Most of us do not want to leave a company we have worked years for or to change jobs and start all over. The thought of it is very frightening. However, you must decide to do one or the other. If you ignore the situation, you are setting yourself up for a worse failure by letting others control your career. By choosing one course or the other you are taking control of your career and you are determining your outcome. You will fare significantly better if you are in control. Let us now look at some actions you should take when you choose one versus the other.

## **MINIMIZING YOUR CHANCES FOR LAYOFF**

If you feel the risk of being laid off is small, and you decide to stay with your present employer, don't think you can sit back and relax. You must work toward minimizing your chances for being laid off in the future. There are actions you can take to minimize your chances for being laid off [3,4]. Taking these actions will not automatically guarantee you will be immune from future layoffs. They should, however, help reduce the chances.

The first action is to critically evaluate your recent performance. Are you meeting deadlines? Has your work been above average? Are you getting good visibility with your supervisor and the managers? If you are not getting good visibility then you should change your work habits. If it requires that you put in extra effort, commit yourself and just do it. It doesn't hurt to put in extra effort if it results in job security. Showing up for work early and leaving late will also help. Volunteering for extra assignments so that you become critical to the company is another action.



► **Career Tip.** Critically evaluate your performance and get feedback from your supervisor.

During workforce reduction everyone is on edge due to the uncertainty. As a result, people are nervous and tend to easily end up in arguments. Don't start any shouting matches. The last thing you need is your coworker or supervisor thinking how difficult it is to work with you and how you will not listen to reason.

Make sure your work is the best it can be. Remember, it will be compared with others in your group. Spending a few extra minutes making sure your work is neat, organized, and clearly communicated, is absolutely essential. Do not leave anything half done—carry it to completion. Before you present it to your supervisor, try to think of questions or criticism that he or she may have, based on other works you have done. Anticipate these things and have answers ready. Don't present problems without solutions. Supervisors are looking for engineers who are willing to work on the problems, not complain about them.

Make sure you get credit for all your work. Often engineers will help other engineers at the expense of not getting their own work done. This is not a bad thing to do, but I recommend at this point you don't help others out unless your supervisor knows about it. To help others at the expense of not getting your own work done, is career limiting to start with. Doing this during a merger or workforce reduction can be fatal to your career. I'm not saying not to help other engineers out; everyone needs help from time to time. What I am saying is, if you are going to put in the extra effort to help someone, make sure you also put in the extra effort to tell your supervisor. During workforce reductions your supervisor must decide who to keep and who to let go. They will make this decision based on your visible and demonstrated performance. It is essential to make sure all your work is visible to them.

► **Career Tip.** Don't present problems without solutions and get credit for all your work.

If your group is going through a workforce reduction but other parts of the company are strong, try to transfer to another group. Get busy reading the company job ads. Maybe, there is another group that could use your talents. To help you find out about other jobs, talk to your contacts, your mentors, and anyone else who might know about openings in other divisions. Typically, the personnel department is doing this before you even learn about it. Most companies try to transfer people to other groups rather than lay them off. Often you will be notified by your supervisor that you are being transferred to another group. Cooperate and make the move if it is a good one. But make sure you check into everything that is involved before you commit to moving.

## MAKING BACKUP PLANS JUST IN CASE YOU LOSE YOUR JOB

Even if you decide to stay, you should develop some backup plans just in case things quickly take a turn for the worst [5]. This should not be foreign to you since all good engineers make backup plans in case their work encounters unexpected problems. This is commonly called *contingency planning*.

The first thing your contingency plan should include is updating your resume. Obtain several books on how to write a resume. Start reading and start updating your resume. Refer to Chapters 39–43 in the book on how to write resumes and conducting interviews resulting in job offers.

Second, start looking through job ads outside your company. You do not need to respond to them but clip and save them in a folder for future reference. If you are considering making a move to a new location, contact the major newspapers in that area and order the Sunday paper with all the job listings and job fairs. Clip the job ads from trade journals and go online to search for jobs.

Third, identify any coworkers or previous supervisors in your company you might get a letter of recommendation from. These may be people with whom you worked in the past who have complimented your work and might be willing to write a good recommendation letter. You need not contact them but at least make a list. In the future, if you suddenly need a letter of recommendation you will know who to talk to. If you feel comfortable enough about contacting them, you might ask, “In the future, if I ever need a letter of recommendation would you write one for me?” If they respond with a yes, you’re all set. If they respond with “no,” then you know who to stay away from.

Fourth, start a portfolio of your work and awards. Put into a binder any photographs of significant projects you have worked on. Awards and certificates are also good to include. You can think of this as a scrapbook of your accomplishments. My personal experience has shown this to be one of the most valuable interviewing tools. Most people I’ve shown my portfolio to have told me that I was the best prepared candidate they ever interviewed. The portfolio clearly showed all my experience, something that I found extremely difficult to do with words. To quote a very old saying, “One picture is worth a thousand words.” See Chapter 41 on how to assemble your portfolio.

► **Career Tip.** Being well prepared is the best contingency planning you can do.

If you make the decision to leave, since you feel the risk is too great in staying, then you must start immediately preparing yourself to leave. This will not be easy, since you may be constantly fighting back the temptation to stay. I found

myself minimizing the risk and telling myself, “They would never lay me off; I’m too important to the project.” I quickly found out how wrong I was when the company downsized by 50% and I was part of it. Making the decision to leave will be frightening, but let’s look at how you can make the transition easier.

## **WHAT TO DO IF YOU DECIDE TO LEAVE THE COMPANY**

The first steps to follow once you have decided to leave are very similar to the ones recommended for backup plans. First, start your portfolio. Gather all the photographs, impressive diagrams, and awards that you have. Organize them into an impressive portfolio that tells a story of your work and your accomplishments. Next, search out people who might provide you with good letters of recommendation. Approach these people if you can and get them to write a letter. A suggestion I have is to write down what you feel would be important for them to say in the letter. Give them a copy of the list and ask if they might highlight the things you have come up with, since you will be stressing those skills in your resume. It’s also good to give them the freedom to add others if they think of any.

Before we move on, I would like to share two very interesting observations with you. The first has to do with your ability to find a new job. It is a well-known fact that it is easier to find a job if you already have a job. This would indicate that if you feel that you are going to be laid off, the best chances for finding a new job would be while you are still working. So if you find yourself in this position, take immediate action!

The second observation has to do with the timing of your departure. If you leave before you are laid off, you give up any severance package that you are entitled to. These severance packages can be very significant. For instance, some companies offer up to two weeks severance pay for each year of service. If you have been at a company for 15 years, this means you should be entitled to six months of pay when you leave. Based on this, the optimum time to interview is before you are laid off and the optimum time to start the new position is within a few days after you have been laid off. If you can time everything just right you can walk away from one company, receive a bonus, and start at the new company with a raise.

One engineer I know started interviewing before he was laid off and found a new job. He timed it so that he started the new job just two weeks after he was laid off. Since he was laid off, he received a severance package of several months of pay. With the new position, he received a slight pay increase. To summarize, that year he received an extra paid two-week vacation and banked a two-month severance pay package as a bonus for going out and finding a new job. Not only that, the new job was closer to his home and less of a commute for him. Now that is really surviving a layoff! If you have trouble getting started once you have made the decision to leave,

simply think of it as getting yourself a well-deserved bonus. This should help you keep going!

**LAID OFF, WHAT'S NEXT?**

If you are laid off, the question becomes what should you do. Before we can discuss what your best actions will be, you must first understand what you are going through. When you are laid off, fired, or let go, workforce reductions and downsizing become personal and overwhelming. Normally, no one is prepared for the shock. I was totally numb and felt paralyzed with shock when it happened to me. Luckily, a company counselor was at hand and she sat with us the first few hours after we were notified to help us get through it [6].

Losing your job will result in a grief reaction. This reaction will be similar to the grief reaction that a person experiences when losing a loved one. Your loss may be the loss of self worth, the loss of coworkers, the loss of security, or the loss of responsibility. You will be experiencing some or all of the following emotions:

Anger	Guilt
Depression	Fear
Bargaining	Denial

There is no set order in which you will experience these emotions. You may move from one emotion to another with no set pattern. The goal is to recognize them, accept the situation, and move on to more constructive activities as soon as possible. Even after you have reached acceptance, you will continue to re-experience these emotions from time to time.

The important thing to recognize is that you will be under great stress and you need to take action to effectively deal with the stress if you are to successfully survive. Some effective ways in dealing with the stress include:

- Re-establish a routine in your life (such as the time you wake up and go to bed)
- Develop and utilize a support system (family, friends, counselors)
- Exercise regularly
- Eat regular, balanced meals
- Reward yourself with enjoyable activities
- Get plenty of rest
- Talk to others; share your feelings with family, friends, and counselors

Similarly, there are things you should not be doing that will hurt your progress and ability to accept reality and move on. These include:

- Excessive use of alcohol
- Blaming people (your coworkers or family)
- Running away from or ignoring the situation
- Working on something to the point of exhaustion

You now need to stay alert and deal with problems as they occur in order for you to survive. More than likely there will be other stresses occurring in your life at the same time. These may include the death of a loved one, divorce or separation, injury, marriage or financial problems, children leaving home or change in residence, just to name a few. Dealing with a layoff is extremely tough; dealing with a layoff as well as other stress can be devastating. Your goal is to reach acceptance and move on to constructive actions that will lead to a new job opportunity [7].

If you are laid off you need to keep a level head and immediately take action. Normally, when you are laid off you are given a termination date that may range anywhere from one day to two weeks or more. Immediately upon learning of your termination, you need to start taking the following actions before you leave the company for good. These actions will be hard to do, but to successfully survive, you must. They usually involve your supervisor or personnel department.

First, make sure you will get your vacation pay. You are entitled to it, you have earned it, you deserve it [8,9]. Next, find out if there is a severance package. Most companies offer a severance package based on years of service. If nothing is offered, then start bargaining. You will need this money to support yourself until you have found a new job.

Next, you need to make sure your vested rights in profit sharing and/or pension still stand and the money you have accumulated is not affected by the layoff. Contact your personnel department immediately and discuss with them how to handle your account. Do not bypass this; it could end up costing you money if you mistakenly withdraw from your IRA or other plans.

► **Career Tip.** If you are laid off, obtain extensions on your benefits and apply for state benefits if you have too.

Get an extension on your medical insurance. Most companies will offer you the opportunity to continue your medical and dental benefits, but you will have to pay for it personally. Take the coverage; it is usually the best coverage available. If the company does not offer an extension on your benefits, then contact your health insurance carrier directly. They often have plans available for people who have lost their jobs due to layoffs, but, again, you will have to pay for it personally. The monthly premiums may seem expensive compared to what you were paying, since you are without an income. But with no insurance coverage you will be wiped out if a major medical emergency occurs to you or one of your family members.

You will be experiencing an overwhelming amount of self-doubt, pain, and anger. Put those feelings aside; you still have more work to do before you leave. Because of this self-doubt and anger you may not want to be around your coworkers or even talk with them. The best thing you can do, however, is just the opposite. Tell everyone of your situation. Now is the time to utilize your contacts—every contact you have made over the years, if possible. Leave no stone unturned, as they say. Contact everyone and anyone in the company who may have a job lead for you. Do not let your ego get in the way and become a roadblock to an even more successful job. Don't be afraid to ask for names; it is surprising how people will open up and help you once they are aware of your situation.

You may find that some people will help you simply to bolster their own egos. It provides them with an opportunity to show off who they know and how important they are in the industry. Others may help you because they have been in the same situation themselves and know how hard it is. Whatever the case, let them help you. If it gets you a job, isn't it worth it?

When someone gives you a lead make sure you get all the information you can about the opportunity. Who is the person doing the hiring? What kind of help are they looking for? What is the salary? You need to ask these questions for two reasons. First, you have to determine if this is a good lead for you. Often people will provide you with leads that are not what you are really interested in. If you blindly start chasing every lead without finding out how good they are, you will be wasting precious time. Second, if it is a good lead you will want to go to the interview as well prepared as you can. You will know in advance what they are looking for. This allows you to emphasize the skills you have that match the job requirements. This is always a plus in your favor during an interview.

When someone provides you with a lead, always check with the person giving you the lead to see if it is all right to mention their name. Their answer to this question will help you qualify the lead. If they only heard about it through the grapevine and have no direct contact with the person doing the hiring, then you know this is a long shot. However, if they personally know and are good friends with the person doing the hiring, then you know this is a good lead to follow up on immediately.

Who should be the first person you start asking for leads? Perhaps the same person who just laid you off. He or she may even offer to furnish you with some job leads; if not, ask. From your supervisor it is on to your close coworkers, mentors, and any other contacts you have within the company. You do not know where the lead that lands you a new job will come from. Therefore you have to contact everyone.

As you search around the company, be sure to ask key people, including your former supervisor, for letters of recommendation. You should ask several people for letters; not everyone you ask will get around to writing one. In any case, do not walk out of the company without at least three letters of recommendation. Sit in their office and wait for them to write it if you have

to. You need to be persistent because the chances of getting a letter of recommendation decrease significantly once you walk out the door.

If you remain calm and follow these steps you could leave the company with several hot job leads and several letters of recommendation; this is very important. The leads will provide you with hope that other opportunities do exist and provide something for you to look forward to. If you are lucky the job leads could result in a new job opportunity, but do not pin all your hopes on them. The letters of recommendation will help bolster your sagging ego when you read how much people thought of your work. This prep work will establish a foundation from which to start your new job search.

► **Career Tip.** Don't burn bridges when you leave. Leave on a positive and upbeat note.

If you feel up to it, visit with old coworkers and friends to say goodbye one last time. Spending some time saying goodbye is good for you. With everyone wishing you good luck, it helps you to start moving on. It also prepares you mentally for the changes that are to occur. Take the time to say goodbye. Please remember these may be the same people your future employers will be contacting. It is of no value to leave on a bad note.

Coping with coworkers or friends who have been laid off can also be very difficult if you are not the one laid off. Show care and respect to those who are loosing their job. Look for ways to help and be supportive by being there even if it's just to be a listening ear. Stay with them while they pack up their desk and office. Don't say things like "Don't Worry" as this minimizes their feelings. Be positive and up about how talented they are and surely will find something else, it is only going to be a matter of time.

Cleaning out your desk will be very hard to do. Before you leave make sure you take any material that could be of use to you at a future job. If you are unsure as to what you can take, check with your supervisor. Do not take any proprietary information with you; this is industrial espionage. It is punishable by fines and prison terms.

Where should you be headed when you walk out the door? To either the company sponsored job placement center, an employment agency, or someplace where you can work on your resume and make phone calls on the leads you have. You have now successfully made the transition to the job search phase.

## PROTECTING YOURSELF WHILE JOB SEARCHING

The job search phase can last anywhere from a month to over a year. During this time you must take steps to protect yourself [7–9]. The first step is to establish a new financial budget. Determine the minimum amount you can

live on and start cutting your expenses immediately. Determine how long you can survive before you will deplete your savings. This will give you a deadline by which you must have a new job. Sometimes a deadline is an excellent motivator.

Lock up your credit cards immediately and start to make minimum payments wherever possible. Eliminate or delay any payments you can. Sometimes you can write a company in advance and notify them that you cannot make the monthly payments but you plan to make a certain amount. Conserve energy whenever possible. Delay purchases on clothing and anything that is not absolutely essential. You may even consider selling a few things if you have to.

After being gainfully employed you are entitled to unemployment benefits. Go immediately to the unemployment office and register for your benefits. It may take several weeks before you receive anything, so do it immediately.

Is there any part-time consulting or part-time jobs that you might be able to obtain? This will provide you with some income and still give you time to do some job searching.

A final note with regard to discussing the bad news of losing your job with family members. The best thing you can do is tell them immediately. You will need your friends and family for support in the days ahead. Give them the opportunity to help you. Let them know exactly what happened; explain that it may be a while before you get another job, so you are counting on their support and cooperation. You cannot effectively look for another job and hide what you are doing at the same time. Other companies will be calling you at home, so it will only be a matter of time before the family finds out.

## **SUMMARY**

Successfully surviving takeovers, mergers, and workforce reductions requires you to be alert and actively assessing the situation. You must first determine if you are in danger of being laid off. Assess the warning signs. If there is danger, at what stage are events and how much of a danger do they pose to you?

If you are in danger you must make the decision to stay or move on. If you decide to stay, then you must take action immediately to secure your position as well as develop backup plans, just in case. If you decide to leave then you need to get busy looking for new job opportunities.

If you are laid off you will experience the grief reaction. This reaction will be similar to the experience of losing a loved one. You will be experiencing anger, guilt, depression, denial, and fear. To successfully survive you must recognize these feelings, deal with them, and move on to acceptance and more constructive activities. Before you leave the company, you must go into a high



energy state of making sure you get all your benefits, any letters of recommendations you can, and a list of potential job leads.

Once you leave, you must continue in your high energy state. You need to take an inventory of your skills and interests. After completing these inventories it is on to resume writing, job searching, and interviewing. To successfully survive you will need to make use of all your resources. These include friends, family members, professional contacts, and employment agencies, to name a few. You will not know where your next job will be coming from. Therefore, you need to leave no stone unturned in your job search. If you are doing things right, your job search will hopefully require you to sort and prioritize all your opportunities.

Have you identified any career actions you want to take as a result of reading this chapter? If so, please make sure to capture these ideas before you forget by recording them in the notes section at the back of the book.

## ASSIGNMENTS AND DISCUSSION TOPICS

- 1 What are some of the warning signs that your job may be in danger?
- 2 What is the sequence of events during a takeover?
- 3 When is it better to stay than to leave? When is it better to leave than stay?
- 4 What is the grief reaction?
- 5 What makes a good letter of recommendation?
- 6 Does your supervisor always know what is going on?
- 7 Name two things you must do before leaving the company for the last time.

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