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Don't Burn Career Bridges

By Marilyn Kennedy Melia

Hunting for a job is tough work. Why add to the pain by reconnecting with the company that pink-slipped you or strongly suggested a "voluntary" retirement?

If you set lingering bitterness aside, your old company may someday extend a sweet offer: Do you want to come back?

Most employers are open to rehiring workers, say human resources professionals. In fact, recruiters routinely consider former employees. "They are known commodities to a company, there's not the vetting process," says Coy Renick, president of The Renick Group, a Roanoke, Va., recruiting firm.

The rehire practice is common enough that there's even a term -- boomerang workers -- to describe rehires.

Downsizing has been so severe this recession, that companies will dramatically ramp up hiring when conditions improve, and they may be amenable to rehiring, says Jeff Wittenberg, a partner at recruiter Kaye/Bassman International Corp. in Plano, Texas.

One option

Yes, companies have rehired after recessions, but "who knows what this recovery will look like when it comes?" says New York City career counselor Roy Cohen. "It's good to include your former company in your search, but certainly don't focus on that to the exclusion of other opportunities," he says.

Besides, "sometimes companies use a recession as an excuse to release people who were not top performers," Cohen says.

Still, he concedes that this time layoffs have been so wide and deep that "companies have really cut into the muscle, letting valuable people go."

Bridge back

Anyone who had consistently good performance reviews can assume they were part of the muscle, says Renick.





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In addition, the way employees exit a company influences their chances of a return invitation. Those who provided 30 days' notice when they left voluntarily, as well as a considerate resignation letter, are keeping a door open, says Renick.

Pink-slipped workers who leave the impression that they blame the economy, not their employer, for their misfortune also may have left a return door open, Renick says.

Good company?

Progressive employers who realize they may need their workers again, "will handle all communications leading up to and including the separation in such a manner that the employees will feel as whole as they possibly can," Wittenberg says.

It's understandable, he adds, that workers wouldn't want to return to a callous employer who didn't soften the blow with severance, outplacement or other services.

I'm interested

Assuming you do want to include your former company in your job prospecting, make a call to the human resources manager, telling him you'd like to be considered for rehire when positions open, Renick says.

"Most HR managers are extroverted and won't mind a call," says Renick, who worked as vice president for human resources for a furniture manufacturer before turning to recruiting.

Connecting with your former boss -- by e-mail or perhaps by phone -- can also be a good strategy. "Although don't bypass HR," Renick says, "because they generally don't like people going around them."

Pest control

With any connection, the aim is to sound like an in-the-know veteran of the business, not a desperate job seeker, says Cohen.

If you see news about the company, that could be a reason to call or e-mail your old boss, Renick says.

And those who exited as early retirees have the added option of complaining about boredom in their new life of leisure. "You may even want to volunteer for a project," says Cohen. "And that could lead to a paying (stint) later."





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Online networks

One other, perhaps subtler way, to get your former company to remember you is to participate in an online network.

Many larger employers -- those with more than 5,000 workers -- have established "alumni networks," which are social networking Web sites. One key motivation for employers to start these networks is to have a source to mine former workers, should they have staffing needs, says Kate Lukach, a spokeswoman for SelectMinds, a New York firm that has started networks for about 60 companies.

At the beginning of this year, for example, Hewitt Associates, a Lincolnshire, Ill., benefits consulting firm, decided to start such a network. So far in 2009, Hewitt has taken on about 1,000 new hires, with 50 being former workers, says Erin Peterson, head of global talent acquisition at Hewitt.

If your old employer doesn't have a specific alumni network, simply "Google" your company's name, says Peterson. "A lot of (former workers) have started networks on their own," she says. Another option, she adds, is to look for networks spawned at the social media site LinkedIn.

