

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Scary Things

By Douglas E. Welch

As we approach Halloween, it might pay to reflect on some of the scary things you could be facing in your career in the coming months. Although some of these thoughts might make you more scared than a 3-year-old on All Hallows Eve, you should always remember that, with a little planning and preparation, you won't suffer any more than the usual post-trick-or-treat sugar hangover.

Working for Yourself

Regardless of what high-tech position you hold or what company you work for, you must always think that you are working for yourself. This means that you must constantly be thinking about a variety of work-related and life-related issues.

First, you should be doing everything in your power to create your own retirement plan. As we have seen in the last few months, 401k plans are not the retirement panacea they were once thought to be. Just like your career, retirement planning is up to you.

Next, are you doing everything you can to improve your work position, garner raises and promotions, and grow your way into a more comfortable place at your company? If not, why not? Being dissatisfied in your current job is a sign that you need to take some other step.

If you find that you hate your job, it is time to look elsewhere. I would also add that, in the vein of working for yourself, you should always be looking for a new position. Minimally, you should be watching for areas of specialization, or entirely new careers that interest you. You don't want to have to start from scratch if something untoward should occur to your career plans. In these days of workplace turmoil, you need to think in terms of having several careers in your life, not just several jobs.

Even if you are working full time in a traditional corporate job, you will want to develop your own collection of friends, computer partners, mentors and even clients. Unless your work agreement explicitly prohibits "moonlighting" (and sometimes, even if it does), you will want to surround yourself with people who can help you when you decide to change jobs or start a new career.

You can join professional societies or user groups, or you can simply start collecting interesting people. Per-

haps you know someone who wants to start her own company. Maybe you can work for her in the evenings on an "as-needed" basis. Often, you will find neighbors or relatives that need a bit of high-tech help.

Whatever the source, you need to be in contact with people who can help you when the dreaded specter appears on the horizon, as it almost assuredly will: *layoff!*

Boo!

There is very little that strikes more fear into a high-tech worker's heart than any discussion of layoffs. This seems rather odd to me, considering the frequency of layoffs in today's economy. Layoffs occur nearly every business day, but people seem to ignore the reports—in hopes, perhaps, that the specter won't come looking for them.

We all like to think we are indispensable to our company, but it should be clear to everyone by now that no one is safe from the loss of their job. Regardless of the fact that you might work for a huge company, or one with a killer new technology, or one that has promised no layoffs (get real!), you are always in danger of losing your job. Every single moment of every single day. By accepting this fact, and preparing for it, you can reduce your exposure, your fear, and perhaps even find a way to a new career.

If you are working for yourself, as described above, layoffs simply won't be as scary. Taking control of your life by actively seeking out opportunities to better your position should be your single focus each and every day. This doesn't mean you have to steal time away from your employer, or somehow cheat your company to help yourself. It simply means that you need to be aware of your current career position, and constantly be open to new ideas, new people and, possibly, new jobs.

Sure, a layoff will still be stressful and depressing, but if you have a clear view of what you want and where you are, you will be more capable of dealing with the stress. Instead of spending weeks trying to work your way through a layoff, you will be prepared to move forward with your job search after a few days of R&R. To you, a layoff will be simply a chance to try something new, not a threat to your career and livelihood.

If you start working on your high-tech career today, you might find that the tempting Halloween candy will be the scariest thing you have to face this month. □