

Why Taking a Lesser Job Can Harm Your Career

Working in a position you're completely overqualified for can erode your self-esteem and complicate your job search

BY TAUNEE BESSON

Editor's Note: This month columnist Taunee Besson addresses a common job-hunting problem. If you have a question or concern about your job search or career, send it to Ms. Besson at the National Business Employment Weekly, P.O. Box 300, Princeton, N.J. 08543-0300. All names are kept confidential. Although she can't answer all letters personally, she will address commonly mentioned concerns in her column.

Question: The management and international trade consulting business I started is on the verge of bankruptcy following the loss of my major account and the theft of all my operating and personal funds. At 45 years old, I've decided to rejoin mainstream corporate America. I'm certainly not the only person to fall on hard times after a successful career, not the only self-employed consultant who's had to scramble up trees to escape the barks of creditors and not the only one who's had to seek a new career with limited time and finances.

At this point, I'm willing to secure income by any means, including flipping hamburgers if it comes to that. However, my resume and references are inappropriate for the short-term jobs available to me. Employers will justifiably consider me to be overqualified for such positions. Suspecting that I'll only be there for a few weeks, prospective employers won't want to train me. It will be ego-bruising to be rejected for a menial job at a business I know I could run more efficiently than my interviewer's boss.

Furthermore, it could mean professional suicide to use clients as references for a position with a small boutique, restaurant or used-car dealer when I may need them later as references for a major corporation. I may even want to call on them again as clients when I'm finally able to pick up the pieces of my business life. I'm afraid I'll ruin my professional reputation by doing whatever it takes to pay the bills until my finances improve.

How can I overcome these obstacles and survive until I find a better job?

Ms. Besson, an NBEW bimonthly columnist, is president of Career Dimensions, a Dallas-based firm specializing in career development and job search programs for professionals and corporations.

Answer: They say a person's true essence manifests itself in adversity. Winning is easy; losing takes guts. Most professionals eventually will suffer a career crisis, so you're absolutely right that you're not alone.

Don't let secondary concerns about dealing with references and suspicious prospective employers confuse the issue. Creativity and tenacity made you successful when the path was straight and smooth; the true crux of your dilemma is whether you'll be able to use those same qualities now that the path is bumpy and tortuous.

A Poor Quick-Fix

While selling used cars or working in a boutique may be tempting short-term solutions, they're fraught with negative long-term consequences.

For example, imagine how flipping burgers will affect your self-esteem. As a hamburger-flipper, it

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may become increasingly difficult for you to see yourself as a high-powered trade consultant. Eventually, you may actually begin to believe that burger-flipping is all you can do.

Once you've substantially lowered your career sights, it becomes harder to readjust them to prior expectations. Jim, a middle manager in a high-tech firm, was laid off during a company downsizing. Because he had a daughter in college, a son in high school and few liquid assets, he accepted the first decent job offer he received. For the past five years, he's been an engineer with little hope of promotion but has stayed with the company because it's secure.

Meanwhile, his family is struggling to maintain its former lifestyle and Jim has lost hope that he'll ever regain his career momentum. Both his self-esteem and his network have dried up.

Also consider how working as, say, a used-car salesperson will appear in resumes and interviews. Unless you use a functional format, this job will be right at the top where your most impressive achievements should be.

Besides, it's not particularly easy to find a lower-level job that pays a livable income with a good employer. Many people mistakenly believe that it's easier to find a lower-level job than one that matches their qualifications. But savvy managers want people who will stay more than a few weeks. You can hardly blame them for being wary of your motives. And if you're consistently rejected for jobs because you're overqualified, you may start to wonder, "Am I so worthless that I can't even get hired to sell used cars on commission?"

Frequently, you can't earn enough in such jobs to begin to pay your bills anyway. Even though you're working, you may find yourself deeper and deeper in debt. Then, if you're putting in long hours, you may have trouble finding the time to pursue a better position.

You say you want to rejoin mainstream corporate America. Let's look at some realistic "mainstream" options that will use your skills and pay you what you're worth:

- **Executive-level temporary work.** A growing number of firms nationwide specialize in placing professionals with companies that need expert assistance until a permanent replacement is found, or support during short-term projects. These interim placement firms can't help everyone, and many are swamped with resumes, but it's another alternative for displaced executives. And given the increasing interest in international trade, this could be an excellent career bridge for you. (For a directory of interim placement firms, send \$5 to Kennedy Publications, Templeton Road, Fitzwilliam, N.H. 03447.)
- **Work at a consulting firm that has an international department.** This is an excellent way to

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Lesser job

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earn a steady paycheck, maintain and expand your network, increase your expertise and work on diverse projects. The experience may help if you start a business again. It also looks great on your resume. To be sure, consulting jobs aren't easy to land, but have you tried?

- **Teach non-credit international trade courses for a local college or university.** It may not pay as well as consulting, but it can provide invaluable exposure and career credibility. Executive-level students may even hire you to do consulting work for their companies.
- **Contract work with city governments or local chambers of commerce.** Many large cities have marketing divisions that employ people to organize trade missions and develop new business for local corporations.
- **International business management.** Many companies that want to expand their global market share or initiate business outside the U.S. lack necessary internal expertise. You could help them achieve these goals.
- **Work for former clients.** They already know what you can do. They may appreciate having full-time access to your expertise.

Use your creativity to think of other alternatives that won't devastate your career and self-esteem. Brainstorm with friends. Talk with people you trust about your dilemma. You may be surprised at their genuine concern and helpful ideas.

Financial Remedies

Also take an objective look at your finances. You can't undo the damage already done, but there are ways you can improve your relationship with creditors.

For instance, you could try asking friends or relatives for a loan. Sign a promissory note to show that you're serious about repaying them.

And since most creditors don't want to foreclose on your home or repossess your car, you may be able to convince them to restructure your debt.

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Regular small monthly payments (interest only, perhaps) will show them you can be trusted. If Donald Trump can do it, so can you.

You should also seek help from a nonprofit consumer credit agency. They're pros at dealing with financial crunches.

If you're still determined to get a job just to tide you over, think flexibility and head for a temporary-help agency. You may not earn consulting-level fees, but there are plenty of jobs available that pay \$10 an hour or more.

Lower-level temporary jobs have many advantages over permanent ones. For one thing, temp jobs are pretty easy to get. Many professionals perform temp work during career transitions so being over-

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qualified isn't a problem. Also, employers don't expect a long-term commitment.

There are plenty of temp jobs besides typing, filing and reception work. Many agencies specialize in such areas as convention business, accounting or data processing. Best of all, you can work flexible hours for an interesting variety of employers.

If you need references for a temporary position, use people other than clients who know you well, such as friends, clergy or colleagues from volunteer work. Save client references for jobs in international business.

To become a successful trade consultant took wits and courage. Use those qualities now to hone your survival skills. Later, you'll be able to use what you learn from coping with this crisis to pursue even greater career success. ●