

Depression in the Workplace

Globe and Mail Problem Solving Column

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Susan Pinker

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Dear Susan:

After a 16 year career in information technology, my position with a big company ended when the requirements had been met and I had literally worked myself out of the job. Recently, mine was selected out of three thousand applications as one of the most likely candidates for a contract and was then told that I was the best of those. Given the blizzard of resumes companies get when publicizing a job, how do I get mine out of the pile next time and in front of the person who needs to see it?

Lost in the Crowd

Dear Lost:

You're asking the wrong question. Instead of blitzing advertised job vacancies with your e-resumé, hoping yours will speak to an overwhelmed recruiter, target the job that speaks to you and your skills only. Find a problem that only you can solve. Then, ask this question: Who in the organization is responsible for getting that done? That's the person you need to engage.

This is not networking. Contacting your friends, bank manager and dentist to say you're looking for work is useless unless you're ready to settle for just any job, says technology head-hunter David Perry from Perry Martel International in Ottawa, who agreed that job-hunting, even in the technology world, is more about people skills and problem-solving than it is about technical wizardry. He recounted a tale of looking for a candidate with a specific background. He had one week to find Mr. or Ms. Right before the client placed an ad. On the seventh day, while he was interviewing a prime suspect, the client went ahead with advertising. By noon the company had received 900 resumé's. By the time the candidate was hired at 3 pm, they'd received 1900. "Where most candidates go wrong is responding to an ad in

the paper when they don't have the ten requirements for the job. Then don't apply! It's just annoying," said Perry, who remarked that the successful candidate had just the right qualifications and was willing to relocate. A survey he conducted for the Canadian Advanced Technology Alliance in 2003 confirmed that 97 percent of technology executives said that target marketing is the way to find the right job. One percent said that networking worked.

So how do you get to be interviewed while 2000 candidates cool their heels? When you find the person in the company who has a problem that only you can solve, engage them on a human level. "Tell me what's in it for me? How are you going to make me money, save me money or increase my efficiency?" says Perry of the questions you should ask.

Targeting a unique niche what I did several years ago when I was at a bewildering juncture between bored and burnt-out. I spent a year of breakfasts scanning this very paper for the perfect job before heading off to work I disliked. The paper had become the best part of my work day, when suddenly I had an epiphany. My perfect job was not in an ad but in the newspaper itself.

Dear Susan:

One of my colleagues is in the midst of what looks like a nervous breakdown. She comes into work looking sad, cries often, shakes and trembles and generally looks miserable. She is getting everybody down, not to mention being inefficient at her job right now. She does not report directly to me but I wonder if I should tell her to take a leave of absence before the rest of us break down too.

Silent Witness

Dear Silent Witness:

A major depressive episode isn't catchy, which is a good thing or we'd have an epidemic that would make SARS look like a Halloween party. Almost ten percent of the population is clinically depressed at any time, and lots of them, either in denial or terrified of the stigma, don't take time off from work. They just keep showing up and spinning their wheels in a phenomenon called presenteeism, a term coined by Lancaster University management professor Cary Cooper, to describe people who appear at work when they are too ill or stressed to do much of it. Within a single year between 3 and 5 percent of employees at work are presentees suffering a

major depressive episode, said Dr William Gnam, a psychiatrist and economist at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. This is a crowd roughly the size of the population of Manitoba. And that doesn't count the depressed people who take a leave of absence to recover.

So this is not a small blip, and it is only now beginning to be studied in earnest. One study published last fall by Harvard epidemiologist and psychiatrist Philip Wang and his colleagues, showed that of seven chronic conditions (including arthritis, back pain and asthma), major depression was the only one consistently tied to loss of focus and productivity at work. The study's 286 mostly middle-aged female airline reservation and customer service agents had been identified by a questionnaire as suffering from depressive symptoms. They were given pagers, and when these rang at random moments, the employees reported on their moods and their ability to concentrate. The authors found the effect of their untreated depression on their on-the-job performance to be twice as large as if they had been absent. In other words, working at 50 or 60 percent effectiveness over time is twice as costly for an employer as when someone misses work entirely, say to be treated for their illness. We're talking cold hard cash here. Human suffering and the impact on colleagues wasn't measured.

What we don't know yet is if there are benefits to staying at work while depressed, say both Dr. Gnam and Dr. Wang, and whether your workplace is evolved and up-to-date enough not to punish her long term for taking time off. Instead of recommending a leave of absence, sit down privately with this colleague, offer moral support and point her in the direction of a trusted family physician or psychiatrist who will follow up. Offer to call. If there is an employee assistance program at your workplace, give her the telephone number and while you're at it, a few web addresses about mental health (<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/depression.cfm>, www.mentalhealthroundtable.ca, <http://www.cmha.ca>). And explain that depression is not a character flaw but a disease. There may well be an epidemic of depression at work, but unlike SARS, it's not contagious and no one should be able to say they knew nothing about it.

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