

At Work:

A job for school is an educated risk

By Lindsey Novak
Tribune Media

Q: I'm in my mid-30s and have been in the work force for 18 years. I recently took the plunge and quit my job to go back to school full-time for a master's degree in management information systems. I can complete my degree in one and a half years by going full-time, compared to the four years it would take me going part-time at night. I had balanced going to night school for my bachelor's degree in public accounting with my job, family life and social life for so long I couldn't continue living like that.

What are employers' likely perceptions of someone who is leaving the work force to complete a master's degree?

A: Furthering your education is never a waste of time if it's in your area of interest and it's what you want to do rather than what you think you should do. People leave jobs to return to school at all ages, as I'm sure you saw at night school. Your areas of interest are practical and very marketable. As for your age, on your return to the work force, you will still be in your mid-30s.

POTENTIAL EMPLOYER EXPOSES WORKER'S JOB SEARCH

Q: I've been selling commission on a commission-us-draw arrangement for several years. Due to changes in the market place, the majority of my business is gone and it has been difficult to complete from a cost position. Although the owner has tried to be optimistic, he stopped my draw and I have been put on commission only. I sent out many resumes, including one to a friendly competitor. That company contacted the sales manager and owner of my company without first calling or interviewing me regarding the position. The owner of my company befame quite upset with me and I feel my position is in jeopardy. Isn't there a code of ethics that a company must follow regarding contacting current employers?

A: There are several issues here. First, your boss is naive to think you would not look for a job after stopping your draw in a slow market. Talk to him about your new financial arrangement and ask if he thinks the loss of sales are caused by your performance or by demand drying up. He may have been faced with either stopping your draw or letting you go.

Second, a draw is not meant to be a salary. Commissions should be equal and normally exceed a draw. Unless a product requires long-term developing of clients to complete sales, a company can only carry a salesperson for a short period of time when he stops bringing in business. It's likely that your company's competitors will want the same straight commission arrangement if your loss of business is due solely to the industry slowing down.

Third, an employer calling your current employer without your permission is unprofessional and unethical, regardless of

whether the two owners know each other, which may be the case in such a tight-circle industry.

When you "shotgun" resumes to companies, state clearly: "I'm your cover letter that your job search is confidential."

Unfortunately, this doesn't mean that all employers will respect your request, as there are always a few bad apples in every bush. Having problems on the job? Write to Lindsey Novak in care of Tribune Media Services, Inc., 435 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 1600, Chicago, Ill. 60611. She can also be contacted at AtWorkbyLN@aol.com.

Potholes in the road to work-at-home success

By Alice Bredin
Tribune Media

For years I have encouraged my husband to start a home-based business, and now he has. He finally found a great idea, his job and set up an office upstairs from mine.

So far, so good. He likes the lifestyle change because even though he is working very hard, he has more time to exercise and we spend more time together than when he left the house for work at 7:30 a.m. and returned at 7 p.m. Also, for the first time in a long time, he is learning a lot from his work. The irony is, I am learning a lot in the process too.

I am learning by getting a reminder of the challenges of starting up a home-based business.

While I am very familiar with the start-up process, seeing him go through all of the steps demonstrates to me how many pitfalls exist in the start-up phase.

Luckily, Stu has avoided making any fatal mistakes and has probably made less than his share of inevitable errors so far. Whenever he does stumble, I remind him that mistakes are part of running a business and he should get used to it.

To help you avoid some of the potholes in the road to establishing a business, Stu has said it's OK to share his mistakes.

• Spending money on an idea before it is formed. Most business ideas evolve significantly from their first incarnation. Stu's was no exception. He devised an idea last spring, and

the business he runs today is an offshoot of that idea. His mistake was spending money on focus groups to investigate his original idea. A better approach would have been to first spend a few months investigating the market to ensure the idea was sound.

• A tendency to have too many face-to-face meetings. Because of his extensive corporate work experience, my husband has a tendency to want to schedule meetings. His natural instinct is to meet all vendors face-to-face and to set up other appointments. Gradually he has learned that when you work at home, most meetings require you to travel outside of the office. These meetings are extremely time consuming, and he has already become more ruthless

with his time.

Wanting to incorporate too early. Luckily, we averted this one. Stu incorporated only last week now that his company direction is established and focused. He wanted to incorporate in spring, which would most likely have been a waste of money because his idea and company name have changed since then.

• Printing stationary before his incorporation was final. He was very thorough in his investigation of trademarks to determine if the name he wanted was available nationally. He also did some local searches to see if any other New York companies were operating under the name he chose.

Having gotten the clear from several sources, Stu had his stationery printed while his incorporation was still in process.

Unfortunately, a small company in upstate New York is incorporated using the name he just spent \$2,000 printing on his stationery.

• Spending too much time at his desk. Stu has already adopted some classic work-at-home tendencies. After dinner he often heads for the office, and weekend days are often designated for work time.

• Wanting to overuse an attorney. Having come from an environment in which he had legal resources at his fingertips, Stu wants to use the services of his attorney frequently. I have told him stories of how legal bills add up quickly and have encouraged him to use the attorney's time sparingly and do so as much as

possible himself until his cash flow is positive.

Like any other home-based business owner, Stu's minor foibles don't mean he won't be successful or that he is not cut out to be a home-based entrepreneur. It just means that, like any other entrepreneur, he will make many mistakes, learn from some of them and hopefully have fun along the way.

Alice Bredin is author of the "Virtual Office Survival Handbook" (John Wiley & Sons) and host of The American Express Small Business Exchange Web site <http://www.americanexpress.com/smallbusiness>. You can write to her at Tribune Media Services, 435 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60611, or e-mail her at BredinA@aol.com.

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AN AWARD winning by manufacturer in the Plymouth area is looking for a full time position.

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Duties include monthly financial reporting and analysis, cash management, payroll processing, accounts receivable, accounts payable, general ledger, and financial statements. Must have a minimum of 5 years experience in accounting and financial reporting. Salary commensurate with experience. Send resume to: **APARTMENT MANAGER COUPLE**, 248-352-3800.

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