

Fall Back: Navigating Life Now: Stand Out at Work, Wherever You May Be

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FULL TEXT

It used to be a straightforward exercise to answer the career question asked by bosses: "Where do you see yourself in five years?"

Before Covid-19, responses were shaped by career aspirations and personal achievements and a general sense of how the next two or three years might play out. As the pandemic drags on, many professionals are struggling to visualize their career arc, says Lindsey Pollak, author of "Recalculating: Navigate Your Career Through the Changing World of Work."

"We're in the messy middle of this. Don't believe anyone who tells you they know how this is going to turn out. We all thought we knew, and then the Delta variant changed all of it," she says, adding the worst thing to do this fall is nothing. "Get out of your head and onto your to-do list."

For those of us feeling professionally, well, meh, Ms. Pollak urges some rerouting. She likens the thought process to driving: What would a GPS navigation system do if the driver missed a turn or found themselves in unanticipated traffic? The driver still has a destination in mind, but may need to consider alternate routes, she says, adding that career paths are no different.

The Wall Street Journal spoke with a dozen career coaches, CEOs and professionals about winning promotions and pay raises right now and standing out at work instead of just hanging on.

Don't Fade Into the Background

It is up to you to stay on your boss's radar, whether in an office, working from home or juggling a hybrid schedule, says Alexandra Samuel, co-author of "Remote, Inc.: How to Thrive at Work. . . Wherever You Are."

"Nobody wants a five-page email every day or even every week," Ms. Samuel says. "Send an email at the end of the day, to your boss, or the team, that says 'I made good progress today.'"

Another tactic outside of using Zoom time is finding ways to directly connect with higher-ups after a meeting, says Steve Cadigan, author of "Workquake: Embracing the Aftershocks of Covid-19 to Create a Better Workplace."

"Zoom sometimes isn't best. Don't overcommunicate. Don't dominate the Zoom call," he says. "Listen. And if you want to stand out, try to follow up [one-on-one] after your Zoom meeting with questions or ideas."

What people miss as some offices stay closed – and as hybrid work schedules keep co-workers out of the building on the same day – is the chance to interact, collaborate, seek out stretch assignments and build allies across an organization, Ms. Samuel says. Critical face time can be replicated with virtual cocktail parties or game nights online, but she suggests saving those for winter and getting outdoors for in-person meetups while the weather's still favorable.

Don't Assume Good Work Gets Noticed

Look at people who are getting promoted in your organization and note the skills, qualities and characteristics they display, says Aimee Cohen, a career coach in Minneapolis.

"How do they show up? How do they conduct themselves?" she asks. "What you need to ask yourself is, 'What do they all have in common? And what do I need to have to get there?'"

The big mistake people make is assuming great work will speak for itself. "Do a really good job, and magically somebody is just going to notice? That is not how it works," she says.

Do Control What You Can

The enormous upheaval of the Covid-19 era has made some wary about what's next, Ms. Pollak says. People are anticipating painful transitions this fall as they adopt hybrid work schedules, wrestle with complex child-care situations and navigate lingering health concerns, she adds.

One good antidote: Control what you can.

"How do I even do anything when I'm so nervous and depressed and I'm just languishing?" she says people ask her. She suggests taking an online course to gain a new skill or listening to a career podcast for fresh ideas. Employees can take advantage of training that their companies offer or call their university career office to ask what hiring connections can be made for alumni.

"Anyone can do that, but very few people do," Ms. Pollak says, adding she has never seen so many people who want to quit their jobs.

Do Consider All Your Options

Robin Solow says she felt stagnant but was too worried about stability to look for new jobs before she was laid off during the pandemic. After 13 years in a human-resources role at a fashion brand, her instinct was to find a new position in fashion so the learning curve wouldn't be too steep.

Fashion was hard hit by Covid-19, so Ms. Solow had to pivot. She landed a job at a commercial real-estate company in 2020 and took a few months to hit her stride, she says.

"I did a lot of homework and listening. I made sure that I went into the office when it was open so that I was around people, so that I could hear what they were talking about, even though I had the opportunity to work fully remote," she says.

The career shake-up changed her appetite for risk. A few months ago, a former fashion colleague reached out with another job offer and Ms. Solow made another leap.

"I realized that staying comfortable doesn't always mean staying happy," she says. "There's no reason to stay in a job where you feel stuck."

Credit: By Kathryn Dill and Aiyana Ishmael

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