

Retooling Your Human Resource Career

by Valerie Frederickson, MS, CMP, and Bryan Power

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This article was coauthored by Bryan Power, Manager of Client Services, of Valerie Frederickson & Company and distributed as support material for the NCHRA Annual 2002 Conference break out session, "Re-tooling You HR Career After the Dot-Bomb," a panel discussion moderated by Valerie Frederickson, MS, CMP. Biographies of the moderator and the panel of HR Executives follow.

The dotcom bust and the ensuing economic depression have had a tremendous affect on both employees and investors alike, and the human resource community has been turned upside down. Now, as approximately another 10,000 dotcoms get ready to close their doors, laying off over 150,000 additional people, Hewlett Packard continues their merger with Compaq, and dozens of large companies restate their earnings and continue to lay-off employees, how can HR executives retool their careers and compete successfully for limited openings? For those who are still lucky enough to have jobs, you feel like you're earning your paycheck, and there's definitely no foosball table in sight. Companies are still hiring senior level HR specialists, like Directors of Compensation, but for those HR professionals who are unemployed dotcom generalists, it's an incredibly difficult time. One way to survive and actually thrive during the next few years is to focus on getting your HR career back on track.

The Company Perspective

The strategy of today is to get back to your core business before you go out of business. This can apply to individuals as well as companies. Corporations that are holding their own have circled back, and are focusing on making a profit. One good aspect of the tech boom was that most companies learned how to effectively do PR, meaning that name recognition is not a problem. Prospective clients often already know about vendor companies, but are not necessarily giving them any business. The challenge for companies now is to squeeze money out of their existing clients and prospects. The same could be said for many HR candidates in Silicon Valley. For companies, this means that sales executives who can actually sell are in demand. But companies are trying to figure out how few employees they need, and what they can do to make their existing employees successful. Training initiatives are on the upswing, training companies' sales executives are over quota, and companies are rehiring all the training professionals they let go a year ago. As John Brennan, Vice President of Human Resources at WindRiver says, "...building capability to produce equity results and solid financials, rather than hyped stock price, is now the primary job--which it should have been all along. HR people who become indispensable parts of that value chain will have successful careers at great companies."

Increased Selectivity

The hiring strategy during the boom was to bring in smart, energetic people who could innovate and collaborate their way through any lack of skills or experience. The pendulum has swung from "Hire at all costs" to "All the costs of hiring," as companies only fill positions to meet critical needs. Hiring managers are dragging. They're too tentative to increase headcount unless they are absolutely, completely sure that they are hiring the best candidate out there. When they do hire, they hire fewer. One of our larger clients reduced their open positions from 1400 to 37. When there are so few open positions, executives can afford to be extremely picky, and can demand

100% of skills they're looking for. During the boom, if a candidate had between 50-75% of the desired skill set, they could charm or sweet-talk their way through the back door. Candidates often state with bluster that if they could only get in front of the hiring manager, they could sell themselves. That simply isn't true anymore.

Employers no longer have the luxury of an extended learning curve for new employees, and instead need their new hires to make an immediate impact to the bottom line. This has had a limiting affect on who actually gets in the door. Conversely to what was common during the boom, it's now enormously difficult to land a job on "future potential". As corporations are now doing, candidates too need to focus on their core strengths and accomplishments. Those candidates who are best able to define their areas of expertise and accomplishments will be able to leverage themselves into a role that requires their skills.

Increased Sensitivity

Candidates can no longer get away with the dotcom attitude, "I've got multiple offers. What can you offer me?" Companies insist on emotional presence, mutual respect, and a level of commitment to the process up front, or they cut interviews short. They also want to know who you are. One of our clients really liked an HR candidate of ours because he had spent six years at the Indonesian Embassy studying the Cyblon and teaching himself Indonesian. That kind of dedication is rare. The interview process is now taking a lot longer because of the companies' pickiness, and because so many of the top executives are on the road as salespeople, trying to drum up business. And, to try to avoid the hiring mistakes of the last few years, companies are turning to a nightmarish form of consensus interviewing, where anyone, from the payroll clerk to the IS manager, can diss the candidate.

Employee Perspective

The rungs have been removed from the corporate ladder. HR Managers who were paid \$90,000 are now accepting HR Generalist positions at \$58,000. Formerly high paid contract recruiters are virtually unemployable. Companies are responsible for the title inflation that happened, even though they did it out of desperation. This title and pay inflation led to what DA Benton in her book "How To Think Like a CEO" calls Empty Suits. CEOs ended up being disappointed with the quality of the work of these Empty Suits, and of employees with inflated titles. This causes employees to feel cognitive dissidence. "They really wanted me, and paid me all this money and gave me a big title. Why do they hate me now?" The good news for employees is that now, companies only hire you to do something you can do well, allowing you to feel good about your performance, instead of feeling like you're at best treading water. We all deserve to have jobs where we are liked and loved and respected and it's a good fit. The good news of the economic downturn is that it gives us a chance to get back to that.

What Happened To the HR Person at Startups?

In almost every dotcom, there was a jack-of-all-trades HR professional, sometimes with generic titles like Office Manager or funny titles, Vice President of People and Culture. These workers came to epitomize the spontaneous, ready/fire/aim workplaces of the dotcoms and moved from company to company on a yearly or even quarterly basis. These employees were often described as the ideological startup material – part techie, part recruiter, part human resource professional. With the renewed emphasis on specific skills and expertise, these former HR Directors are virtually unemployable outside of a dotcom environment, and what value they brought to the profitability or even the compliance of the enterprise is murky, at best. While all the intangibles certainly may have been present – loyal, hard working, energetic, creative – the tangible results within their HR functional area are difficult to gauge, particularly so in a company that only had a lifespan of two or three years.

Advice: Focus on Core Abilities

Gary Albright is the Senior Director of Staffing at Veritas, and one of the most senior staffing executives in Silicon Valley. He suggests, "I think HR professionals need to ask themselves, "What is the value to company strategy and bottom line effectiveness of my activities?" Stop doing the things that don't support these objectives and start doing things that do. Ask yourself, "In a room of 30 candidates or 300 candidates, which job could I realistically get? How can I differentiate myself?" Be customer focused when you are applying for jobs- think about the hiring company's needs. Explore trends and transitions necessary to adapt. Look at Bridge Jobs and interim consulting assignments, even low level. A Bridge Job is a job that gets you from here to where you want to go. If you focus on developing your career and ignore the noise about how much money you won't be making, it will make you much more employable in the long run. Companies don't like job hoppers and in this economy they absolutely don't need to hire them. So if your resume reads like a job hopper you are really going to have a very tough time, and might need to greatly compromise on the job.

Compensation Adjustment

If you are out of work right now, you have to get real with the compensation issues. Some people will have to take serious pay cuts- especially those people who are still in their 20's. The reason why is because individuals in their 20's might have less than seven years on the job, have a greater likelihood to have been (over) recruited by dotcoms, and may have received the most title and pay inflation. It is not a valid excuse to say, "I cannot take that job because I have to pay my mortgage, or car payment." That perspective is irrelevant; compensation is all about what the market can bear. Those professionals in their 40's and 50's who have worked on average for five years per company should expect only a 10% or so decrease in pay because they have 20 years or more of solid, growth-oriented, adult maturation-oriented experience. But remember, when it comes to compensation you are not negotiating based on your previous salary level, but from zero. You have got to work up from there. This will allow you to be more pragmatic, not turn down opportunities to develop your career.

Serious, Not Sexy

Make a list of the least sexy, the least glamorous companies you can think of and pursue jobs at those companies. These companies would be very happy to hear from you, as they have been lonely for years. Think of companies like fruit and vegetable distributors, air conditioning companies, insurance companies, smaller companies with a couple hundred employees, and pursue those jobs. These are places that would be happy to have you, would pay you appropriately and will help you build your career.

What Internet?

The Internet has actually made it harder to get a job, not easier. Companies are now bogged down with hundreds of resumes. Plan your job search-related research and communications strategy as if the Internet never existed. It's really difficult for recruiters. We did a search recently for a Senior Director of Education and Leadership and received over 900 resumes by email. Our recruiter, a very ethical person, wanted to be able to reply to everyone, but with all these resumes pouring in, how could he possibly find the qualified ones and send out 900 emails? Job boards have only been in use for the last three or four years, but candidates and potential employers have been finding each other for centuries without them. Don't get too hung up whether or not your email was ever read. Focus on old-fashioned, personal, professional networking. Mass mailed resumes do not get read. In your resume, focus on accomplishments, not responsibilities. This is something anyone who has ever been through outplacement knows, but we do all get lazy. In this market, we cannot afford that. Be humble and realistic in your job search. Humility is the most

attractive trait in a senior executive. It can make someone want to hire you. And, if you are humble then you've got your ears and eyes open to what is going on in the business world, and will probably be a better contributor to the new company.

Summary: Time To Grow Up, Not Grow Rich

When you are looking for your next job, plan to stay around at least five years so that you do not end up like one young HR Representative we worked with who that said she had five years of experience in human resources when she didn't: she had five years of one-year of experience, because she had had five jobs in five years. There is a big difference between the two. People do their best work on the job starting in Year Four. You need to be on the job for at least three years to really get to know your team, to feel understood, to really collaborate and support each other, and to feel safe enough to take risks. We move through the Adult Maturation Process by risk taking. In order to find a place where you can work for five years or so, where you won't get fired and you won't quit, you need to change your part of the courting process. Develop emotional presence in the face of hiring skepticism. Take some time really getting in touch with what your skill sets are, what types of people you enjoy working with, what are your values. When evaluating jobs, ensure your needs and their needs are in alignment. You will have a lot higher success rate pursuing those jobs that are honestly and truly a good fit.

Touchy Feely Part

Be holistic: don't deny who you are. Stick to what you know how to do, what you can do well. This does not mean what you did during the dot boom, but before. Instead of coming across like a generalist that a lot of companies might hire, position yourself as a specialist that a few companies will be anxious to hire. De-neutralize your resume. Let your true self shine through. If your resume is blah, no one will not want to hire you, but no one will want to hire you either. Put everything back on your resume so that 20% of the hiring managers feel compelled to want you and 80% really don't. Remember, you only need one company to really want to hire you. So don't come across as vanilla ice cream, but Chunky Monkey or Cherry Garcia.

Speaker Biographies:

Valerie Frederickson, MS, CMP

CEO/Founder, Valerie Frederickson & Company

Valerie Frederickson, CEO of Valerie Frederickson & Company, is a leading human resource, executive search, and career management expert based in Silicon Valley. She consults to and places top executives in a variety of industries including high tech, software, wireless, real estate, insurance, and finance. Ms. Frederickson holds a Masters degree in counseling psychology with options in Adult and Career Development, and Marriage, Family, Child Counseling. She is a certified Career Management Practitioner, was made a Member of the Outplacement Institute in 1996, and was accepted into TEC (The Executive Committee) in 2002. She is also active with the Silicon Valley Chapter of the National Association of Corporate Directors. Ms. Frederickson is active with Holy Trinity Episcopal Parish in Menlo Park, the Junior League of Palo Alto*Mid Peninsula, and is a fundraiser for regional political campaigns.

Gary Albright

Senior Director of Staffing, Veritas

Gary Albright has over 24 years experience in Human Resources. He has been responsible for major initiatives in the areas of staffing, workforce development, and HR systems. He has held senior Human Resources positions at The Gap, Inc., Advanced Micro Devices, Cadence Design Systems, and is currently senior director of staffing at VERITAS, the leading provider of storage management software for data protection, application availability, and disaster recovery. He holds a Masters Degree in Political Science from the University of Florida and is currently on the executive committee of the board of directors of Project Hired, a not-for-profit organization whose mission is to assist people with disabilities find gainful employment.

Speaker Biographies: (continued)

John Brennan

Vice President of Human Resources, Wind River

John Brennan heads Wind River's human resources function with worldwide responsibilities for organizational development, succession planning, compensation, human resource information systems, staffing, employee communications, benefits and operations. Before joining Wind River in December 1999, Brennan served as Senior Vice President for Human Resources at Visa International. Brennan is involved in a variety of community activities, including serving on community and church boards, and coaching local athletic teams. He lives in Alameda with his wife, son and daughter. He enjoys spending time with this family, boating on the San Francisco Bay, bicycling, snow-skiing, classical music and antique cars.

Peggy Seabourn

Former Vice President of Human Resources, Pacific Stock Exchange

Peggy was most recently VPHR for the Pacific Stock Exchange where she was hired to create a new human resources function for the IT department and improve business results by addressing human resources needs. Her position with the Pacific Stock followed almost ten years as HR Director for the Fireman's Fund where Ms. Seabourne provided leadership for employee relations, organization development, training, recruiting and compensation and benefits administration. Ms. Seabourne is a past President, and Member of the Board of Directors for the Northern California Human Resources Association and a former District Director of the Society for Human Resources Management, and holds a BA, Labor Relations from San Francisco State University.