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WHAT TO DO IF A HEADHUNTER CALLS

Always take time to talk, no matter how happy you are in your job. Things change, so think of your career as a mobile business.

Your office phone rings and it's a big trophy headhunter asking if you'd be interested in a job in your favorite part of the country that pays a pile more than you make now. How flattering! Talk about angels from heaven, particularly given your recent run-in with your boss. On the other hand, *his* boss just stopped by to talk about your great idea, which *she* likes. But what if she comes back and overhears this conversation? There goes this career, you Benedict Arnold! You'll have to move whether you want to or not! So you decide to play it safe. Sorry, you tell the headhunter, I'm really happy here (let the boss overhear that!). I'm not interested. Goodbye.

Wronnnng answer!

The first of three rules is never say never to headhunters. Business is changing so fast that the job you love may be entirely different tomorrow. So always talk to them.

Second, get your resume into the search firm's databank. This way the searchers and their clients will know you.

Third, and most important: You have to actively manage your career. You can't count on your employer to do it for you.

Each one of the ten recruiters I interviewed for this column made that last point forcefully. Hobson Brown, chief of Russell Reynolds, put it this way: "Everybody has to think of himself as sort of a mobile business." Or listen to Dale Winston of Battalia Winston International. Says she: "You have to ask yourself, 'What am I going to be doing at this company next year?' If it's the same as last year, it's time to jump. There ain't no such thing anymore as cradle-to-grave executives."

ALL THIS MEANS that smart people no longer play hard to get. So if that first call comes at an inconvenient moment and directly into your office, since many recruiters have inside phone directories-arrange to return the call later. It's too early to let your boss know you're being courted.

If you are happy where you are, tell the headhunter so and offer to suggest other candidates. That keeps your lines open, and the recruiter will appreciate your candor. He will probably call you back during future searches-one of which may produce just the job you want when you want it. Remember, you're already on his preferred list. Most headhunters narrow down their list of candidates before making these calls. By the time you hear about a \$250,000-a-year job as a manufacturing VP, say, a recruiter has likely cut his candidates to 15 or 20.

If you're among the increasing number of executives willing to consider an immediate job change, keep your resume updated -and handy. One U.S. manager based in London faxed his to the headhunter over his PC in the midst of that first surprise phone call. That told the recruiter not only that his quarry was well prepared but also that he knew how to use today's technology. If during the first interview you can find out the name of the outfit with a job to fill, you can score an even bigger point if you pull up information about the company from your desktop database and refer to it in your conversation.

Most searchers try to keep the identity of their client secret in the early stages, but they still want to know how computer literate you are. Expect questions like "How do you write your letters and memos?" One troglodyte killed his chances forever by replying, "I call my gal in to dictate."

Headhunters also commonly ask what you do for fun. Poor answer: "I like to watch basketball on TV." Fair answer: "I like to take my kids to basketball games." Great answer: "I play basketball three times a week."

So HOW DO YOU GET ON the recruiter's most-wanted list? You have to get in a position where you run something, where you can show demonstrable results. If you can't make the next step up, you have to agitate for your company to move you around to new jobs-the trendy term is "broadbanding" but don't get stuck too long. Jack Clarey of Andrews & Clarey says three years on GE's elite traveling audit staff is too little, five years is too much, four years is about right. If your boss won't promote you or give you a new job, you can tell him that other people want you. If he comes up with a career booster, consider it. But don't lead a headhunter on just to win a pay raise. It might work but could hurt you long term, with your boss-and the recruiter, who'll feel burned.

You can gain visibility-and phone calls when you become known in your industry. Gary Knisely of Johnson Smith & Knisely Accord recommends that you build a list of 25 competitors, suppliers, stock analysts, management consultants, and former colleagues, and call them every three or six months to say hello or discuss work issues. Get active in professional groups. Searching, for a general counsel for a health care company, Clarey went to a list of those who attended a National Health Lawyers Association seminar.

Sorry, but becoming active in charities and community affairs doesn't count for much in this bottom-line era. Says recruiter Pendleton James: "No client has ever told me, 'I want a good community person.'"