

Managing your career as a business

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J. Emilio Flores for The New York Times - Janice Bryant Howroyd of Act 1 Personnel Services says employees should identify themselves with the job, not the company.

Employment experts have some advice for the many Americans either looking for work or fearing they soon will be: Consider yourself an entrepreneur — of your own working life.

The term entrepreneur is usually applied to people seeking to start their own small businesses. But those in the recruitment and employment industry say the uncertainty in the current economy means that workers need to think of their careers as their own small businesses.

"The lesson of today is that you're working for yourself," said Janice Bryant Howroyd, the founder and chief executive of Act 1 Personnel Services, a staffing and employment company. "Most people say they're giving their lives to the company, but it's more of a cooperative process. Companies have tasks to perform and you must put in your best effort and identify yourself with that job," she said.

Employment experts say they see a complex picture of changing job patterns as employers respond to hard times, global competition and fresh opportunities. So as companies and organizations are forced to be more innovative, they say, so must employees.

Jim Jonassen, head of Jim Jonassen & Associates Venture Search, noted the explosion of online employment sites and social media that have transformed the marketplace in recent years. "You used to be scared your boss would see your résumé on Monster.com," he said. "But today your boss's résumé is on LinkedIn along with your own."

Ms. Howroyd is an entrepreneur in the traditional sense. She said she left Tarboro, N.C., in 1976 to work for a brother-in-law's talent agency in Los Angeles and two years later started her own small employment firm. At the beginning, she said, she played off the fact that "I was a minority-owned business in two ways, as an African-American and a woman."

Through the years, Act 1 has grown past its original role as an employment agency. One division, Agile 1, for instance, supplies and, in some cases, employs people for other businesses. One of its clients is MetLife, the giant insurance company. Jeffrey Hebert, strategic sourcing consultant at MetLife, explained: "An operation may need a new person but not have the budget to hire this year. So we get somebody from an agency like Act 1, which handles that individual's payroll and benefits."

While flexibility helps businesses, it means that workers are not insulated from hard times and insecurity.

Mr. Jonassen, who has founded half a dozen software and personnel companies over two decades, said he and his latest firm suffered a dry period starting in the fall of 2008 when the high-technology start-ups that he recruits for stopped hiring and began laying off people. "The venture capital outfits that backed them had ordered these entrepreneurs to stop following their visionary plans and cut back to where they could make a small profit, by doing research for others in digital technology and other routine work," Mr. Jonassen said.

But, he said, "In July of this year, demand picked up for computer and mobile phone applications, and these entrepreneurs found they had cut too much." Now, he said, they are scrambling to hire skilled people, and his recruiting business is thriving.

Joy Chen followed her own entrepreneurial career path. Ms. Chen, with a master's degree in business administration from the Anderson School of Management at the University of California, Los Angeles, had been a deputy mayor of Los Angeles and then went to work for Heidrick & Struggles, the management search firm. She left to start her own recruiting firm, Chen Partners in 2007, just as the economy started to slow. Business was initially scarce, she said. "Many employers were even then hunkering down."

Then this year, Ms. Chen said, things changed. "Many companies noticed that after all the layoffs and uncertainty, skilled people were available at lower salary demands than in former years. And now business is very active." The lesson of the economy's ups and downs, she said, is that workers cannot let hard times or lower pay discourage them. "It's a change in the market, not a depreciation of who you are as a person."

Ms. Howroyd, whose Act 1 Group has grown in recent years as businesses have experimented with assembling staffs from a mix of full- and part-time employees, said she had noticed the same increase in demand. "We are growing this year," Ms. Howroyd said, because "employers now recognize that they must decide how best to manage staffing, whether with independent contractors, temporary or full-time employees."

Ms. Howroyd said temporary work used to be seen as a dead end but that that was not necessarily true anymore. "In the recent market, we see companies taking people on temporarily or as contract workers who could become full time when conditions improve," she said. "It's more flexible today and that's smart, rather than hiring people on and then letting them go."

Caris Diagnostics of Phoenix, which is also a client of Act 1, is a molecular testing company that employs cell biologists and skilled lab technicians. It does not routinely hire short-term help but occasionally needs to fulfill a special project, said Wendy Brown, the company's human resources manager. "So we contract for as many as 40 scientists for limited periods."

Scientists working as contract labor, part time, as needed — the old model of permanent positions and fixed employment has changed profoundly.

And workplaces will continue to do so, Mr. Jonassen predicted, because "recessions like this spawn entrepreneurs." In the downturn of aerospace-defense industries in the early '90s, he recalled, "many people had to rethink careers and become entrepreneurs." Today, because companies can be formed cheaply thanks to cloud computing and mobile communications, he said, "I think we'll see a new surge of entrepreneurs."

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