

Leaving On Your Terms

Parting company can be more bearable if you negotiate in advance for what you want

By Karyl Innis

You've had it at work. You aren't going to take it one more day. Tomorrow you plan to walk into your boss's office and say, "I quit."

True, you don't have another job yet, but you don't expect that to be much of a problem. And compared to the satisfaction of walking out, that's a minor distraction. You just want out!

But wait a minute. Don't quit—just yet. Think first about what you need to leave successfully and be prepared to ask for it.

Some corporate employees fleetingly enjoy quitting abruptly but leave their employers carrying only a final paycheck and a dubious reference.

Others garner transition pay, good references, extended health insurance benefits, outplacement services, company car purchases, country club membership conversions and a host of other intangible benefits by negotiating effectively when they part company with their employers.

A senior marketing executive with a major New York-based book retailer received generous severance benefits because he carefully planned and negotiated his exit. The executive says he decided to leave when the company's focus changed from "bricks and mortar stores to Internet commerce business" and he felt he might eventually be terminated.

Ms. Innis is chairman and chief executive officer of The Innis Company, a Dallas-based human-resource consulting firm.

"That's not my world," he says, "and increasingly the marketing issues and questions surrounding the company had to do with avenues of business that I didn't feel comfortable with. I said, 'Why don't you actively begin a search now and give me a long transition time and a severance package and we'll call it a day?'"

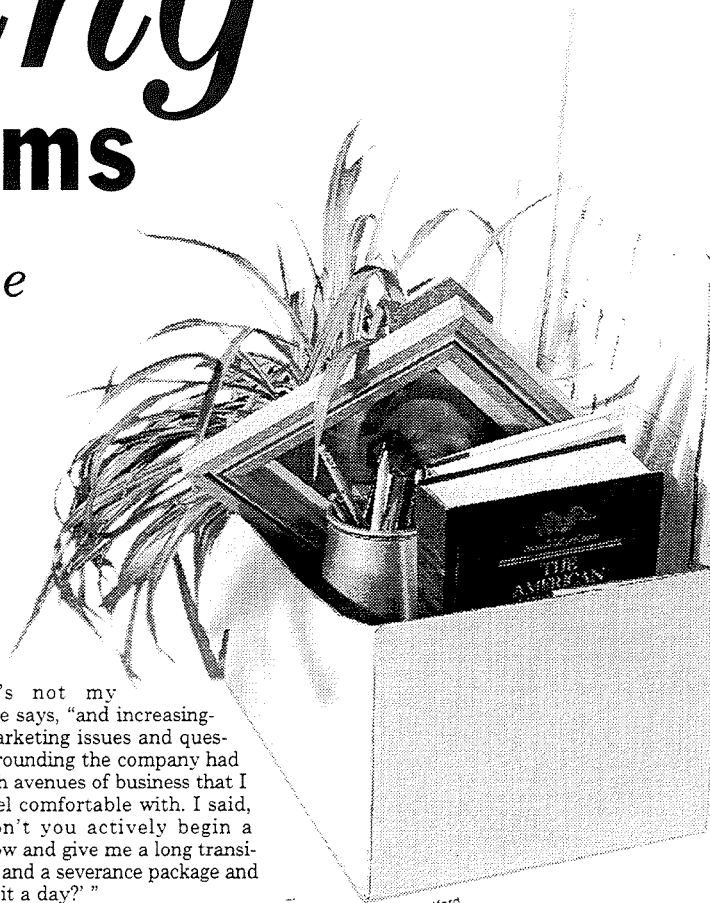
The 46-year-old executive says company managers were surprised when he approached them about leaving because they hadn't seen the company's future direction as clearly as he had. "It hadn't occurred to them that my job might not work out, and part of the next period of time was letting the idea soak in," he says.

The company had no established severance policies for such circumstances, so he proposed a package. When he left last October after a four-month transition, he had negotiated terms that included staying on the payroll and receiving full pension and health benefits and the right to receive and exercise stock options for a year. He also established how the company would describe him to prospective employers.

If you're considering leaving without securing another opportunity first, consider carefully how you'll handle your departure. Significant compensation and your reputation are at stake.

What to Consider

Negotiating about yourself, your worth and your values may feel awkward, but with preparation and thoughtful self-examination, you can make the process easier. Ask yourself these questions: *(over please)*



Keith Bedford

* **Why do I want to leave?** Is it my fault? Her fault? Their fault? No one's fault? Often there's culpability on both sides. If there is, higher-ups may feel guilty, giving you room to maneuver.

* **What do I really want?** Do you need the security of another few months' health insurance? Or do you just want to buy your PC from the company at a reduced price? Knowing the company's policy and past practices can help you shape a realistic answer to this question.

The marketing executive didn't receive payment for outplacement benefits, possibly because he didn't adhere to the company's previous practices about outplacement. Instead of asking his employer to assign him to an outplacement firm, he hired a firm near his home and asked the company to pay the fee and it declined. "If I had it to do over again, I would ask to be assigned to the company's firm," he says. "That's the only thing I would do differently."

* **What problems will occur because of my leaving?** Will work pile up? Extra costs be incurred? Projects fall behind? You may gain leverage to nego-

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tiating additional separation benefits in return for easing these problems.

Negotiating Your Separation

When you have answered the preceding questions, you're ready to negotiate your separation. Following these steps can help:

1. Make an appointment with the appropriate person. Begin the conversation by saying, "I have something serious to discuss with you."
2. Briefly state the problems and concerns you've identified. Allow yourself only two or three sentences to "vent" any dissatisfaction. State your desire to "find a way to leave the company gracefully and comfortably for all concerned."
3. Outline no more than two problems that your leav-

ing will create and your intention to work with your manager and others to mitigate them.

4. Identify your personal concerns about leaving. Deciding what you want in advance will help at this point. Do you need references? More money? Extended health insurance?

5. Suggest what you're willing to do in return for the enhanced benefit(s). Are you willing to answer questions by phone for three months? Review project proposals on Saturday mornings? Promise not to recruit employees away from the firm? There's a long list of possibilities.

6. Agree on the terms of your exit or to meet again later that day to discuss final terms.

7. Decide how your separation will be announced and what will be said to prospective employers. Determine when your departure will be publicized and by whom. The marketing executive who negotiated his exit wanted the company to provide a positive employment reference, "so I sat down with the principal of the company and discussed what would be said," he says.

8. Put your resignation in writing, along with the terms you and your manager negotiated concerning your exit. List these on a separate page referencing your resignation.

One of these steps are easy, but the satisfaction of leaving gracefully will stay with you forever.

What You May Hear

Your manager's reaction to your announcement may vary dramatically. Be prepared for any of the following four answers:

* "OK, let's agree on terms." This is the response you want, so establish a time later that day to work out the details. Use the intervening time to clarify what you want and how you can ease the transition for your employer.

* "OK, you can leave today." You may not have wanted to depart so quickly, but you still can ask for what you want and suggest ways you can assist during this sudden change.

* "OK, but I can't change any benefits for you." While this isn't the response you'd hoped for, you're no worse off than if you'd just quit.

* "OK, I understand your concerns; how can I help you stay?" Your manager may not be aware of your frustrations. Now's the time to state specifically what you need to have changed in order for you to stay. Say that your decision isn't a ploy to impose change, but that you would consider staying if such changes occurred.

Don't be surprised by any of these responses. Decide ahead of time what you really want and don't quit without trying to negotiate a better exit for yourself. ■

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