



Nia Davenport, CPA
 305 West Fourth Street
 Suite 2A
 Winston-Salem, NC 27101
 (336)331-5274
 ndavenport@davenportworld.com
 www.niadavenport.com

Nia Davenport

CPA

Can You Avoid a Layoff?



You may be a dedicated employee who has worked for the same employer for many years, yet you still may be susceptible to getting laid off. Sometimes getting laid off is inevitable, but rarely does a company lay off all of its workers. Usually, it retains those who are most valuable and offer the greatest benefit, sometimes at the least cost. Fortunately, there may be some things you can do to make the decision to lay you off a little harder.

Signs of impending layoff

It may not be obvious, but often there are signs that layoffs are looming. Try looking at your employer from the outside. Often, larger companies must file financial reports with the state and federal government securities offices. You may be able to glean some information on the financial health of your employer from these reports. For example, if the company has publicly traded stock, see if its price has dropped recently, especially compared to stock of similar companies that have not experienced the same downward trend. Are there rumors in the press or within the industry that your employer is involved in a sale or merger?

More often than not, the most telling source of information is what you hear and observe from within the company. What's the scuttlebutt around the water cooler? Have any key employees left the company recently? Have key management positions changed? Has your department undergone recent budget cuts? Are the bosses meeting behind closed doors more frequently than usual? Has the company proposed or implemented cuts in employee benefits, such as a reduction in employer contributions to employee health insurance or retirement plans? Have you recently received any negative feedback on your job performance or on the performance of your department? In addition to these potential warning signs, if there is a layoff in the offing, the Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act may require your company to provide 60 days notice to affected employees and local governments in advance of impending plant closings and "mass layoffs." Check with your state's Department of Labor for any notices filed by your employer.

Before protecting your job, protect yourself

In conjunction with trying to keep your job, be prepared to lose it. Think who you might rely on for a good reference. Document your accomplishments, goals attained, and any ideas you promoted. Have your resume updated and ready.

In addition, read your employee manual or other documentation to find out about severance policies, health and life insurance coverage, and retirement plans in which you participate. Is there a severance package; if so, do you qualify? Can you remain covered by your employer-sponsored health insurance? If you have company-provided life insurance, what happens to it if you get laid off? Are you vested in your retirement benefits? Can you roll over your defined benefit or pension plan to another employer's plan or to an IRA? Are you eligible for unemployment payments; if so, at what rate and for how long? You should have answers to these questions and review this information periodically.

Make yourself relevant on the job

Take a step back and evaluate your job performance. Honestly and objectively examine how well you do your job. Can you find ways where you could improve your output? Can you improve your skills on the job? What can you do better or faster?

One surefire way to separate yourself from the majority of your coworkers is to focus on work while you're on the job. Sounds simple, but it's easy to get distracted by activities unrelated to work. So instead of engaging in online shopping, gaming, and personal e-mails, try increasing your productivity by focusing your time on getting your assignments done. Especially if your employer is experiencing some difficulties, don't get distracted by gossip and long lunches. Rather, try to do more to improve your performance.

Tip: Don't be afraid of "showing up" your coworkers. Remember, if a layoff is in the offing, you're trying to stand out from other employees, not blend in with them. By the same token, try to be helpful and maintain a good working relationship with your coworkers.

Another way to stand out is by continuing your education. Demonstrate that you're trying to enhance your job skills by taking advanced courses, even if your employer isn't paying for them. But if your company offers tuition assistance or programs to defray education costs, take advantage of those opportunities.

Standing out also means making yourself as visible within the company as possible. Attend staff meetings and company events, even if they're not mandatory. Arrive on time and be prepared. Participate during staff meetings, even if it's to express support for someone else's idea or proposal.

You'll also get noticed if you volunteer for tasks and projects whenever you can. Let your boss know you're willing to assume more responsibilities and spend more time at your job. If your boss offers you extra tasks and responsibilities, seize that opportunity to separate yourself from the rest of the pack. And if there are no new assignments, come up with a project on your own. Make your boss look good. The more you know, the harder it will be to replace you.

And don't shy away from discretely communicating your accomplishments. Update your boss on progress you're making with a new task or project.

How you dress can leave a lasting impression as well. If you interviewed for your job, you probably dressed in a manner befitting the position to which you were applying. Thereafter, your attire may have become more casual. While overdressing isn't recommended, spruce up your wardrobe with some new work clothes. Look well-groomed and ready to work. Sometimes a change in your work attire gives your bosses the perception of a new, reenergized employee.

Another way to keep your job is by working in a department that's performing well. Depending on the size of your company, there may be some areas that are underperforming, while other sections are surging. Find out which departments are holding their own and which sections are lagging. If you're in an area that's performing up to par or better, now's not the time to ask for a change. But if you happen to work in an underperforming sector, try to be part of the solution and not the problem. Don't complain about what's not working; rather,



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try to figure out what you can do to enhance your department's performance. In addition, offer to spend time working with growth segments—even if on a voluntary basis. If jobs open up in a department that's prospering, consider making an internal move to that area if a position becomes available.

Finally, despite all your best efforts, if your boss tells you your job is on the chopping block, you may be able to keep your position by offering to take a pay cut or a reduction in hours. If the company really values your performance, it may be able to justify keeping you on at a reduced cost, allowing you to hang on until the company is in a better position to increase your pay or hours. Meanwhile, you can continue to work as you map out your strategy for a different job either with your current employer or with a new company.

If you get laid off anyway. . .

Were your efforts to keep your job worth it? Probably, yes. If nothing else, you're more marketable now, with greater skills, accomplishments, and maybe even more training and education. Your job performance should garner you some favorable recommendations and reference letters from your former employer to help you land that next job. And who knows, you might even be rehired by your former employer.

If you survive a layoff, you'll probably be asked to do more work over longer hours for the same pay. And you'll be asked to assume new duties. Show you're dedicated to your job by:

- ***Staying late or taking work home on occasion***
- ***Volunteering for projects whenever possible***
- ***Asking questions to clarify new assignments***
- ***Figuring out what tasks are most important***
- ***Prioritizing your work***

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