

Watching for Waste in Your Job

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Several years ago I was moving from one house to another, and I hired three day laborers from outside of a U-Haul branch, where I had rented a truck. One of the workers was a man with a strong European accent, who seemed very intense. He worked as fast as he could--practically running as he moved things out of my house and into the truck. He also frequently burst out in a paranoid type of shouting at the other two men, talking about how they needed to be more careful or they might scratch or dent a piece of furniture. In a nutshell, this man was trying to save me money by working faster and trying to prevent damage to the furniture. At the end of the day, I paid him much more than the other men. I also knew that I would hire this man again for any future work, given the chance. I appreciated that he wanted to save me money by working efficiently, and that he was willing to protect me. This is the same thing your employers are looking for.

In a tough economy there are many forces acting upon us, and most companies are forced to cut back. Businesses often start by cutting advertising and other non-essentials, such as company lunches and expense accounts. Finally, companies start looking towards your job. Employees cost lots of money, which means that eliminating jobs can save a company a substantial amount of money. This is why unemployment numbers rise whenever the economy gets tough.

I know the owner of an answering service, who also worked on phone systems during his spare time. I was speaking with him after September 11, 2001, when the U.S. economy was starting to slow down severely. I asked him about the status of his business. My estimate was that his answering service would be experiencing a dramatic slowdown due to the stress on the economy, believing that in a rough economy people would simply no longer have a use for answering services and would cut back.

"Are you kidding?" he said. "My business is going through the roof. Every business owner that walks by a [receptionist](#) and sees her filing her nails instead of working quickly realizes that's not money well spent. If he gets rid of her and transfers all of the calls to an answering service, he'll see savings very soon."

This is the sort of thing I have been seeing in companies across the country, as we go into another economic contraction. This has a real relevance to your job, and it is career advice you need to understand. It is the difference between people who survive in recessions, who do well and stay employed, and those who end up being cut.

I want to digress for a moment and share with you a quick image. If you have ever been to Germany and watched workers in factories, you know that it is an amazing sight. As you may be aware, German factory workers are among the highest (if not *the* highest) paid workers in the world. What is so interesting about German factory workers is the incredible intensity they bring to their work. They are so serious in their day-to-day work that the difference between them and the typical American factory line is staggering.

However, the Germans also charge more for their work.

When a recession is at hand, or when an industry is experiencing a contraction, companies very quickly look to start saving as much money as possible. They look around to see who is working hard and adding value, and who is not. When my parents were in their prime, working in the late 1960s through the 1980s, most people would join a company and stay there for their entire careers. The United States at some point grew very arrogant, and its manufacturing, agricultural, and [information technology](#) sectors were pretty well isolated from the rest of the world--and from serious competition. Other countries in Europe and Asia still had a lot of catching up to do, while this country was awash in wealth and major waste.

My grandfather used to say that you should only buy cars made on Friday because the men on the line were typically still hung over from the weekend on Tuesday. This is literally something people used to request when purchasing cars made in the United States. This is an indication of how *fat* the United States had allowed itself to become during this time period. It is hard to believe, but true.

My parents lived in a world in which it was almost impossible to get fired from a job. When you joined a company, you typically had major employment security. There was a ton of money going around the United States, and it was obviously just a different time and place.

With the Internet, [computer programming](#) can be done anywhere in the world. Phones can be answered anywhere in the world. Designs can be done anywhere in the world. Engineering can be done anywhere in the world. Legal work, incredibly, is now being done everywhere in the world. This country is no longer isolated from the rest; it is now forced to compete with people from areas of the world where there are drastically lower cost structures. Americans' jobs have become expendable in many respects.

This brings me to your career. In your job, you need to ensure that you are always providing as much value as possible. If you see waste occurring in your job, and you know the work you or others are doing can be done in a more efficient way, you need to point this out to your superiors. If you come to a realization that there is no way your employer can make money from the work you are doing, you should be concerned. This is not something that is in your best interest, especially when you think long-term.

In my career, I have seen plenty of people who have managed to constantly force themselves out of jobs. People who talk their bosses into one raise after another when times are good may find that, when the economy turns and the company realizes it can hire someone at half the cost, they will be out of a job. People who do not put in extra effort, or who create lots of waste in the company, may find themselves out of a job when a recession or restructuring hits. You need to ensure that you are always creating value--far more value than you are worth.

I once spoke with someone once who was telling me how everyone who did a certain type of [recruiting](#) received an annual

salary of \$80,000, plus a commission. When I did the math, I realized that it would be impossible for any recruiting company to make money while paying recruiters that much. Absolutely impossible! Why would any firm do that? However, assuming the firm did actually pay its recruiters that much money, it was certain that these would be some of the first jobs to go when times eventually got tough.

The people who become most impressive during downturns and who grow within companies are the people who point out cost-saving measures and capitalize on financial opportunities that benefit the company, not just themselves. I would encourage you to be one of these people. If you are a manager, you need to ask yourself if you can get more work done with fewer people. This will make your supervisors happy. If you are an extremely successful salesperson, you need to ask yourself if you can show other salespeople in your organization how to sell like you, and how to be more successful.

If you look around at your workplace, I'll bet you can see numerous ways you could increase efficiency and save your company money. This is exactly what your employer needs to see you doing.

Watching waste and being vigilant about efficiency impresses employers and justifies your continuing, successful role in the company.

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