

right, not of an alien abduction, but of a corporate buyout.

I was young, and shaken, but I found a new job. Then, a couple of years later, just three weeks into yet another new post, I found a note on my desk on the first morning back after New Year's that summoned everyone to meet the president in the lobby at 10 a.m. As I joined my puzzled colleagues, I knew in my now-cynical gut that he wasn't planning to surprise us with paper hats and noisemakers. We were out on our butts.

A similar scenario played out twice more over my career, and I now work in my pyjamas in my own basement. "Job security" is an oxymoron to me, and self-employment feels far more secure than any full-time job. Statistics Canada reports that five percent of workers, or about a million people, are permanently laid off each year as a result of plant closings, corporate mergers and the like – even in good times, when the economy is undergoing major shifts – and I'm loath to join that crowd for round five. But if I ever do yield to the lure of the steady paycheque again, I hope I'll recognize the signals that say, "Keep your bags packed."

So does Clara Porter*, 28, who was a marketing manager for a home improvement manufacturer in southern Ontario, until she was laid off last year. "It had never crossed my mind that it would actually happen," says Porter, about the executive manager summoning staff to a meeting. Fifty percent of the company was targeted for layoffs.

In retrospect, she admits, she should have seen it coming. A manager had been moved to head office and his assistant let go; key people who'd resigned were not being replaced. Then whole departments were outsourced to India. Next, spending on marketing cam-

*Name has been changed.



The other L-word

Layoffs. Stats suggest that one million Canadians will be laid off this year. How to look for the signs, and what to do when it happens.

by Cynthia Brouse

It felt like an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. After hunting for something in the basement of the narrow old five-storey building where I was working at my first real job, I walked upstairs and found the whole place deserted, including reception. Searching for my co-workers, moving up the back stairway one empty floor at a time, I began to wonder if I'd been ab-

ducted by aliens and returned after hours, my memory wiped.

Finally I arrived at the top storey and flung open the exit door. A soft collective gasp went up as I found myself almost nose-to-back with the president of the company, who was addressing an assembly of the entire staff. As I scurried past him to join my co-workers, it dawned on me that I was about to become a victim all

Warning signs can be subtle: Your usual assignments are given to others, your desk gets moved to a less attractive location, your supervisor stops looking you in the eye.

paigns was put on hold. Rumours that the cost-cutting was meant to attract a buyer began to circulate. “I remember someone who’d been through a layoff saying, ‘Oh, this feels familiar,’” recalls Porter.

There are other warning signs to watch for, adds Joanne Wells, senior consultant at the HR firm Robertson Surette in Halifax: You notice a lot of closed-door meetings; managers seem to be trying to hide tears, anger and long faces (and I thought my last boss was simply moping about his personal life). Or sometimes it’s a little like a bad relationship: You sense a lack of commitment. When one department I worked for got a year’s worth of excuses for why we couldn’t have our own business cards, we began to suspect we weren’t being seen as long-term material.

What if the axe is aimed at you and only you? You don’t necessarily have had to commit what Anne Howard, a Calgary-based HR consultant, calls one of the Major Sins: a serious policy violation, sexual harassment, racial discrimination or a bone-headed move that cost the company big-time bucks. Sometimes, in HR-speak, you may simply be perceived as a “poor fit.” But fortunately it is possible to detect the axe falling before it actually lands on your neck.

We’ve all heard the stories of the

poor sap who found his own job advertised, or of the worker who wondered why her computer log-in or pass-key suddenly didn’t work. Usually the clues are more subtle. Maybe you notice that other employees get quiet or appear to change the subject when you walk into the room. They may know something you don’t. You

might even be moved to a less attractive location, or right across from your boss (so she can keep an eye on you). Or worse, says Joanne Wells, your supervisor won’t look you in the eye or answer your emails. “The boss is thinking, ‘I’ve terminated them in my mind and this person no longer exists.’”

Is information you need to do your job properly being withheld? Look out. Or perhaps management won’t sign off on your projects, or your usual assignments are being given to others, and you’re stuck twiddling your thumbs. It also doesn’t bode well if you haven’t done any knowledge or skills development in a long time – which, in today’s world, says Anne Howard, is more than a year.

If this lack of attention is accompanied by a little too much attention from the human resources department, it may be time to worry – especially if an HR rep shows up at meetings between you and your boss. It’s possible that a file is being created to back up a case for getting rid of you.

Howard hastens to add that “any one of these signs in isolation may not be an indication that you’re on your way out.” The existence of several, however, should make you nervous.

But the truth is, signs or not, you never quite believe you’ll lose your >

BE PREPARED:

1. Maintain your resumé, and keep track of on-the-job accomplishments – in a folder at home.
2. Keep your knowledge and skills current, and build new ones: “Today’s world changes so fast, you don’t really have the luxury of staying good at just one thing,” says Anne Howard, a Calgary-based HR consultant.
3. If your job isn’t going well, be proactive and talk to your boss about how to make it work.
4. Be flexible and creative – enough to move to a new department, location or organization, or even take a demotion.

AFTER THE PINK SLIP:

1. Know your rights. If you have many years of service, are an older worker or will be hard to re-employ, or if your employer did nothing to help you succeed or can’t document that you have the failings it says you have, you have some negotiating power when it comes to a severance. Use it.
2. Save your vitriol and resentment for your family, intimate friends and your employment consultant. “If you start speaking negatively about the organization that let you go, you’ll never move forward, and you’ll ruin your network,” stresses Joanne Wells, senior HR consultant with Robertson Surette in Halifax.
3. Make good use of employment counselling that’s available to you.
4. Maintain your perspective, and try on some new ones for size. Although the day of a layoff may bring tears, when Wells sees the victims a week or two later, “in most cases, they’re relieved.” It may be hard to see the silver lining at first, but expect some pleasant surprises. “Everybody has something that may be a negative in one organization but a positive in another,” says Wells.

job until you do. After months of cutback rumours at one employer, I thought I was prepared for the worst, but I was still caught off guard when the whole staff received letters that summoned us to a meeting with no apparent agenda (never a good sign). What was puzzling was that half of us, including me, were asked to attend a 1:30 p.m. meeting while the other half were to assemble at 2 p.m.

“Are you 1:30 or 2?” was the buzz all morning. When the first group had been gathered uncomfortably around the boardroom table for 20 minutes, the boss’s secretary poked her head in the door. She hesitated, then bolted. But not before we saw a bundle of identical brown envelopes in her hands. Apparently we were the dead-duck group.

Finally the boss arrived. As each face around the table registered the terrible news, I felt as if I were watching other people scratch their bottoms. We were trapped in an intensely personal, vulnerable moment.

This once-common method is a tad cruel, says Wells. “Nowadays, it’s usually done one-on-one,” as it was with Porter, though being escorted by her boss past her co-workers to the HR department was bad enough.

But in the end, says Porter, losing her job turned out to be “a blessing in disguise.” She soon found a similar position in a field she finds more “fun and dynamic,” a direction she’d hoped to go in all along. “It just ended up happening faster than I’d thought it would,” she says.

And although it galls me to admit it – I behaved rather badly after losing one job, burning bridges left, right and centre – the circuitous path I was unwillingly launched on led to opportunities I treasure that I’d never have had otherwise.

In any case, staying in a position for 10-plus years is no longer viewed as a strength, says Anne Howard (who has herself suffered the sting of being fired): “Now it’s likely that the long-term employee is seen as someone who doesn’t adapt to change very easily or may not be able to learn new things.” Whether or not you saw it coming, perhaps how you left your job isn’t as important as the fact that you did, finally, move on. ●