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## MANAGING YOUR CAREER

By JOANN S. LUBLIN

### When Big Resumes Chase Small Jobs

BIOLOGIST David Weinberg received feelers from a biotechnology start-up shortly after Merck & Co. laid him off in October.



But the 20-person firm never interviewed him for its middle-management vacancy because Dr. Weinberg had spent his 19-year career at the pharmaceutical giant. The biotech concern spurned six other prospects with similar backgrounds, according to recruiters Klein Hersh International, which handled the hunt.

The recruiters said the start-up's officials feared a large-company alumnus "isn't going to be able to move fast," recalls Dr. Weinberg, of Westfield, N.J. "Frankly, I think there's some truth to that." The scientist remains unemployed.

As many major U.S. companies slash staff, more job seekers with big-business resumes are pursuing smaller employers. Concerns with 500 or fewer people employ more than half of the nation's private-sector workers. However, fledgling and midsize enterprises say they often reject applicants from sizable companies as bad fits for their businesses.

Big-business veterans face greater hurdles in downsizing employers than during the 2000-2001 downturn. Smaller employers often assume big-company veterans prefer a highly structured workplace, plentiful perks and extensive organizational support. To overcome such stereotypes, you must portray yourself as a self-starter. "Just having a blue-chip company in your background isn't going to open doors like it once did at small concerns," says Fred Whelan, a San Francisco recruiter and co-author of the forthcoming book, "GOAL! Your Game Plan for Success."

Yet "the right executive can make that difficult leap," says Glenn Fox, CEO of BusinessElite, a free online service that helps senior executives find opportunities. "You have to have very specific skills to be attractive to the smaller companies." Among the skills sought are small-team leadership and high-level strategy expertise, he adds. Five big-business executives recently aided by BusinessElite joined small employers.

You could position yourself for the same switch by reviewing activities on and off the job that illustrate your likelihood of thriving in an entrepreneurial setting. For example, you might cite a risky project where you wore multiple hats.

That's what Kate Gerwe did. While a senior marketing director for Yahoo Inc., she led the company's "Green Team," a volunteer group of 200 staffers with a tiny budget that tried to promote colleagues' awareness of environmental issues. Team members persuaded Yahoo last year to install a real-time energy-monitoring system from Lucid Design Group, a start-up in Oakland, Calif. The new system assisted Yahoo in reducing energy usage.

Ms. Gerwe, an ardent environmental advocate, was intrigued by Lucid and soon began chatting with its founders. Chief Executive Michael E. Murray initially was skeptical. At the time, the start-up only consisted of him and three co-founders and he worried whether a corporate executive could flourish at a little workplace where "roles are going to be shifting."

Ms. Gerwe says she argued that Green Team's success demonstrated she could "achieve results with little or no resources." She promised to help Lucid grow because she understood complex management systems -- rather than arrogantly asserting, "This is how we did things at Yahoo," according to Mr. Murray. Ms. Gerwe became Lucid's first chief operating officer last October. The firm now employs nine people.

Adapting your large-company tool kit to a smaller enterprise's needs may boost your candidacy. If that potential employer is struggling, for instance, you could propose speedy revival steps based on your big-business experience and contacts. Smaller concerns need confidence in a candidate's transferable skills because "every person hired has a magnified impact" in a small company, explains Mike Ramer, a career coach and recruiter in Livingston, N.J.

Some big-company veterans have trouble migrating. In January, a division controller laid off by a huge computer maker tried to prove that he had a small-business mindset. He hoped to become controller of a \$500 million concern that "wanted someone very hands on," recalls **Dora Vell**, CEO of **Vell Executive Search**, a high-tech search firm in Waltham, Mass., that was conducting the controller search for the concern.

But because his last employer was a slow-moving bureaucracy, the executive couldn't convince Ms. Vell that he was a "hands-on" player there. He further weakened his prospects when he bragged that he used to oversee 45 people. He's still jobless.

Some small firms ignore big-business veterans because they would refuse to make the coffee or fix a jammed printer. At a start-up, "you have to do everything," says Gregory M. Coticchia, CEO of eBillingHub, a small Pittsburgh provider of law-firm billing software. "It's very difficult to wean yourself from all the things that are done for you at a larger company." The result? Mr. Coticchia favors applicants with start-up experience.

A willingness to take less status may enhance your chances of landing at a smaller employer. Randy Briggs was a project manager and vice president for Wells Fargo Bank until his January layoff. He omits his VP title when he sends his resume to small concerns because most don't realize that a vice presidency of a big bank represents a midlevel role. Mr. Briggs would accept a lower-paid position at a smaller employer as long as "everything else is right," he remarks. "I always thought there was more job security in large companies -- but not lately.

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