

# **10** WAYS TO SABOTAGE YOUR OWN CAREER

*Are you  
making these  
mistakes?*

*By Hannah McNamara*



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## **Introduction**

Nearly everyone wants to get ahead in their career in some way or another. Whether it's a promotion you're shooting for, or just a well-deserved raise, there's all kinds of advice out there for how to get it. However, some of the advice, while it might be held as conventional wisdom, and while it might sound great on the surface, should be avoided at all costs. As we'll see in this article, it's all too easy to sabotage your own success when trying to get ahead in business.

Don't let this happen to you! Here are ten ways in which you might think you're doing the right thing, only to discover that you've created unnecessary obstacles for yourself on your way to achieving your business goals.

## 1. Thinking appearance doesn't matter

Simply put, when you brush aside all the idealism and arguments of “how it ought to be”, image does matter. More than that, it's one of the most important elements of career advancement, and if you aren't actively working to promote the right image for yourself, you can be sure that others are getting the wrong ideas.

There are a million ways to go wrong when it comes to image, and it truly does pay to know about them. Adhering to standard rules is bound to get you into trouble because what's perfect for one job might be too formal for another. What might provide just the right level of rapport in one position looks frumpy in another. To make matters worse, image is about a lot more than what you wear as well!

With so much to keep in mind, what can the average person do to ensure that they're putting across the kind of image that's going to help them advance in their career?

- **Dressing for success**  
In a new job, err on the side of formal. It's best to be in a suit when everyone else is in t-shirts and shorts than vice versa. Once you get a handle on the company culture suitable to your workplace, adapt yourself to it so as to fit in without causing a distraction. Looking too casual or too formal will create an automatic barrier that prevents others from engaging with you and accepting you as part of the company. Also remember the old adage: don't dress for the job you're doing, but for the job you *want* to be doing!
- **Body language**  
Learn to carry yourself like a person who is ready to be promoted and to receive extra responsibility. A confident posture and stride can speak volumes that come across as sincere and capable whereas words to a similar effect might just seem boastful. Practice useful business skills such as eye contact when speaking, a firm deal-closing handshake, and a relaxed but poised posture. If the idea behind getting in on management's good side largely revolves around attacking their subconscious opinion of you, this can be one of the fastest ways to go about it.
- **Speak through your work**  
Creating the right image for yourself isn't all about posturing. When it comes down to it, you'll need to take on the assignments that prove you can do the job you're shooting for, and that you're not afraid of hard work. Many times, poor work performance will drag down a good personality, but not even the best personality will succeed if stifled by incompetent core job performance.

## 2. Working too hard

This might come as something of a shock, but there's some sound logic behind it. How often have you heard someone making the complaint that despite working long hours and going the extra mile, they can never seem to get ahead in their company? If you're anything like the average, the answer is: more times than you can even begin to recall!

Now, this isn't to say that slacking off is going to get you ahead. Far from it, of course. However, there is one critical thing that slacking off would get you, and it's something that gets overlooked when we "work too hard": getting noticed. That's right... if your nose is to the grindstone 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and you never take the time to get up from your desk and engage other people in the company, how can you entertain the hope that your name and face will be fresh in management's memory when it comes time to choose someone for that job that you've been hoping for?

Rather than just "working hard", the secret is working smarter. Go ahead and put in those extra hours and take on the extra assignments. Just do what you can to make sure that they're the kind of assignments that are going to work for you. If you're at liberty to pick and choose your own projects, choose the ones where you have the opportunity to win the kind of success that's going to be noticed by the whole company. Leave the "backbone" work, the kind of stuff that's only noticed when it *doesn't* get done to someone else.

If you hope to get ahead, you not only have to work hard, you have to make sure you're working hard at the kind of things that are going to be noticed and get you the recognition that you deserve.

## 3. Being too familiar with people

You might have the idea that the more personal a relationship you can establish with your co-workers or even with your boss, that the better your chances of being considered for promotions, raises, and other advancements. This might be true to a certain extent, but there are countless ways in which the ingratiating tactic can turn around and work against you. Of course, if you plan to get ahead, you need to be aware of these dangers and steer far clear of them.

Talking with your co-workers or bosses when they need someone to listen to, and offering friendly advice (when it's solicited) can be a good way to get on their good side, sure. However, it's hard to walk both directions on this street. If you make a habit of speaking too openly about your own life, for example, describing a row that you had the previous night with your partner, or sharing other intimate or

uncomfortable details, you'll only succeed in alienating people. Even if they're close enough to you to have an active interest in these details of your personal life, it will still distract from your professional image.

Talking too much about your life outside of work engenders the conception in others that you're indiscrete. Even if it's only subconsciously, your managers will feel less safe entrusting you with company secrets or job responsibilities that require dealing with sensitive information. You also run the risk of appearing disorganised, simply because of the mental associations that people have between a nervous, frazzled person (which is what you'll seem to be if you're constantly complaining) and someone who needs to get their stuff together. Lastly, you'll give the impression that you're not focused on your job. Typically, people talk about the nature of their work when they're at work, because this demonstrates to management an active interest in not only your own livelihood, but also the continued success and well being of the company as a whole.

Things to watch for that might seem like a good idea at first, but run the risk of putting you on management's bad side:

- **Gossiping**  
It might seem like a good idea at first to jump right in with others and speak poorly of someone who's presently unpopular, but when that person attains a position of power, look out.
- **Flirting with colleagues**  
This is generally a pretty bad idea. If you happen to become romantically involved with a co-worker, you can do this kind of thing outside of the office, but inside the office it's usually an unwelcome distraction bordering on harassment, and it's certainly going to attract the wrong kind of attention.
- **Rude jokes**  
Sense of humour is a very subjective thing, and what might seem hysterical to you might leave an indelible bad taste associated with you in other's memories.
- **E-mail forwards**  
Unwanted e-mail forwards should be treated exactly the same way as gossip, flirting, and bad jokes. They're usually passed along because the sender thinks they're funny, but in reality, they're just a nuisance that creates clutter and an unwanted distraction. Help stamp out a trend that nobody likes and don't forward e-mail chain letters or similar "must see stories".

#### 4. Avoiding office politics

Seen as the flipside of the coin to rule number 3, rule number 4 outlines just how to approach the intriguing and terrifying world of office politics. Like it or not, there will be personal drama going on at some point in the workplace. This is just an undeniable side effect of autonomous humans working in close contact with one another, and there's little that anyone can do about it. However, it usually seems like the arguments go nowhere, and nobody ends up advancing as a result of the schemes and machinations that float beneath the surface. So, the smart thing to do is just to avoid office politics altogether, isn't it?

Wrong.

Exactly because office politics is such an unavoidable part of life in the workplace, it needs to be understood and addressed. People don't just argue to hear themselves most of the time. Instead, what they're doing in many cases is playing social games, testing the boundaries of how far they can go with one another, and trying to realise their own limitations.

As such, someone who doesn't engage in office politics to at least some extent is going to be seen in a strange light. They'll be viewed by others as someone who's disinterested in his or her co-workers, someone who's not a team player, someone who just simply doesn't fit into the company culture.

Of course, it's easy to get dragged down into the quagmire of endless back and forth arguments about nothing, but you simply have to know what to watch out for. Probably the best way to get involved in office politics without sabotaging your own career is to maintain an active and healthy interest in the affairs of others without committing your own opinion and taking a stance in the issue. Often simply noticing that others are talking, asking what's going on, and responding with a sign of interest and acknowledgement is enough to "fit in" without getting dragged down.

Playing these kinds of games is a useful thing to practice, as it's a social skill that you won't get far without.

#### 5. Concentrating on minor details

Obviously, if you want to get ahead in business, you've got to do a fair bit of tooting your own horn. If you've done something that helped out the company, you can't rely on others to notice it, but rather you have to go out of your way to make that fact known. However, like most rules for getting ahead in business, there's a dark flipside to this that you must know about.

The fact is that most employees are able to do minor things that help out the company on a daily basis. These are important and they all add up to a huge effect, but at the same time, they're kind of a given. You're an employee at this company, right, so you're *supposed* to be doing things to help it out! If you go about boasting about every little five pound saving you've made for the company, or every little corner you've been able to shave off, then you're not going to get the effect you're looking for.

Constantly talking about your achievements when most of those achievements are everyday things that any employee could do is detrimental and is going to create the impression in others that your view of "going above and beyond" is warped, that your sights are set far too low for you to do anything of true and lasting value.

In line with rule number two, you've got to pick the right work. Choose those assignments that give you the opportunity to make a huge impact upon the company's bottom line, something that really makes a difference (a difference numbering in the thousands and even millions). When you can pull off something extraordinary like that, *then* it's time to start singing your own praises and making sure that management took notice.

## 6. Failing to network

In that every decision in the company is ultimately made by a human at some point along the line, networking with other people is one of the most critical things you can do to influence these decisions. In other words, the decision to promote and grant raises isn't made by a machine that objectively evaluates the numbers and gives it to the person who is, statistically speaking, "most deserving". Instead, those decisions are made by people who are prone to all the foibles and complexities of human thought: they can show favouritism or prejudice just as easily as they can strive for objectivity. As such, the value of networking and increasing your "face value" cannot be understated.

Many think of networking as little more than the ability to "work a room", to give a presentation that clicks with each member of the audience, or the ability to quickly establish rapport with others. These are all highly useful workplace skills, but networking is about so much more than that. It's about building legitimate, lasting relationships with the people you work with, both inside *and* outside your department.

The advantages of networking are endless. With every person that you network with, your understanding of how the company operates increases, and you gain valuable insights into parts of the whole that you would never have had otherwise. You establish yourself as a constant workplace presence in the minds of others, and when they think of work, they can't help but picture your face, something that can be of



invaluable assistance when it comes time to make those decisions about who to promote or who to give that raise to.

Perhaps the most important side effect of networking is that you will gain direct avenues of communication with senior members of the company, which directly translates to two major benefits. Firstly, they'll be able to act as your mentors and guide you through any rough areas that might befall you as you work your way up. They'll have been there before you, and they'll be able to tell you what to expect, and offer helpful advice on how best to get through it. Secondly, when it comes time to consider people for promotions, they'll know quite a lot about you and your work habits, and so will be able to act as your "champion" at meetings with the decision makers in upper management. Having someone like this on your side is one of the most valuable assets to getting ahead in *any* business.

There are lots of different ways that you can go about effectively networking with the people in your workplace. Just a few of them are as follows:

- **Find out how your organisation functions**  
Learn about all the different departments, tiers, and hierarchies, who runs them, and who ultimately makes the decisions. This is a way in which networking can be useful practically rather than just to groom yourself for advancement. Consider for example that you personally know the people responsible for allocating the budget to your department. You could then draft a pitch specifically suited to what you know would sway them in order to convince them to send that much needed increase your direction.
- **Volunteer to work in as many cross-functional teams as possible**  
Cross-functional teams are those wherein each member comes from a different department or speciality. In addition to increasing your name and face recognition and looking like a "go-getter", you'll gain at least one valuable contact in any area that you might end up needing one.
- **Ask other workers outright what it is that they do, and take the time to truly understand their responses**  
This is in line with understanding exactly how your company operates. Many workers do this already during their first 90 days on a new job as a part of some standardised process for acclimating themselves to a new company culture, but this is severely limiting. This kind of "interest survey" should be taken at least every six months, so that you remain on top of the constantly changing nature of business.

## 7. Not communicating with your boss

Most people are too intimidated by their superiors to engage in much, if any, direct contact with them. Too often, they allow their interests to be communicated to “the boss” by proxy, through colleagues or intermediate managers at monthly meetings. This, needless to say, is entirely insufficient when it comes to making a name for your self. You’re going to have to overcome your fears, realise that your boss is a human just like you, and engage in some personal interaction from time to time.

Of course, your boss is likely to be a very busy person. They plan those monthly meetings for a reason: it’s because they can’t afford to waste time in one on one contact every time any little thing happens! So, if you engage in personal communication with your boss frequently, aren’t you just going to make a nuisance of yourself?

Not at all!

Just exercise some basic common sense. Like we’ve outlined in some of the other tips here, use your best judgment, and approach your boss with news only regarding those matters that seem the most important or stand to make (or lose) the most for the company.

There are a lot of benefits to be had here. First of all, your boss probably has his or her own boss and is required to report to that boss in monthly meetings similar to your own. There, he or she is probably required to talk about the progress of all that’s going on in your department. If you’ve been upfront with him or her about any successes or failures that you’ve encountered, they’ll be grateful, because they’ll be able to give a more informed report and they won’t be embarrassed by being caught off guard in front of their superiors or peers.

Secondly, your boss’s perspective of your department is very likely somewhat removed and detached. This is only natural considering that he or she must “look down” from above and manage a large number of people and projects all at once. This kind of influence is critical, but at the same time, they might very well lack the intimate knowledge of department processes that you have. As a result, they rely on you and other creative minded employees to spot areas where improvements are needed, and to report them so that they can be acted upon.

In short, your relationship with your boss doesn’t have to be one based in fear and the worry of “making a good impression”. Just try and understand what it is that your boss wants and then deliver it consistently. By maintaining constant contact with him or her and informing them of your many successes, they’ll know exactly who to thank for all the positive changes that your department has undergone.

## 8. Making yourself irreplaceable

This one is quite possibly the most misunderstood principle of how to get ahead in business. It stems from age old advice, and seems unassailably wise at first glance. People are replaced and pushed out of their jobs all the time for any number of reasons, from underperformance to technological advancements that make their personal presence unnecessary. That said, it only makes sense that you should take what steps you can to make yourself irreplaceable! Whether it's by creating a highly beneficial system that everyone loves but would collapse without your input, or simply by doing your job better than anyone else could, making yourself irreplaceable is the surest way to guarantee job security!

Take a minute, however, to think about exactly what that implies.

If you're a candidate for promotion or advancement in your company, it's an extremely positive thing for you. What you might be overlooking, though, is the void that you'll be leaving. Someone is going to have to take a look at the position you're vacating and find a replacement for you who is just as capable as you were of performing the job with excellence.

But this begs a question: how can you find a replacement for the irreplaceable? Yes, it's possible to be "too good" at your job! If you're not careful, and you go too far in creating the impression that your position at work is totally dependent upon you in particular, you run the risk of getting stuck in this rut. Rather than projecting the image of yourself as the ideal person for your current job, you should leave them saying, "he (or she) does a great job in that position! I wonder how well they'd do with more responsibility?"

## 9. Being modest about your accomplishments

No one likes a braggart, but there's some point at which modesty goes too far. Generally speaking, things that aren't really in your control, like say, your father's history as a successful businessman, aren't the kinds of things you should draw attention to. Your own achievements, however, gained by your own effort, are perfectly acceptable things to acknowledge.

Moreover, you shouldn't allow your achievements to go unacknowledged if you want to succeed in business. Don't just assume that others know what you've done and what you're capable of, tell them. It's entirely possible to find some way to let others know about your successes without coming off as arrogant.

In addition, the ability to properly receive praise is an important skill to have in any workplace. Too often, workers shrug off praise for their accomplishments with a “just doing my job” or a “forget about it”. If you tell others to forget about your achievements, rest assured that they’ll do just that. Instead, a simple “thank you” shows both gratitude for their recognition and pride in your achievements.

## **10. Not updating your Curriculum Vitae (CV)**

Fresh out of school or university, chances are that you used a curriculum vitae (or CV) to score your first job. In lack of practical experience, you instead put forth a document that showed all the relevant training you’d received and what special skills you’d developed, as well as anything meritorious that you’d achieved in practically any area of your life. Chances are just as likely that after that CV got you that job, you cast it aside and haven’t given it much thought (other than a few tweaks here and there) since then.

This is a big mistake! Even if you’re not actively looking for another job, a CV can be a valuable tool. It should be a brief summary of one’s entire life experiences and professional accomplishments, not just a “pre-business” summary. As such, updating it every three months is a great idea.

When you do update your CV, be sure and add in any tangible accomplishments that you’ve achieved, and to focus on things that are relevant to what would be expected of someone in the position that you currently fill (or that you hope to fill in the future).

What use is it to update one’s CV, you might wonder? In addition to giving you an objective view of your own professional accomplishments, it’s useful to have something right at hand to show should a downsize occur and you find yourself a potential candidate for the chopping block.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, it’s pretty easy to shoot yourself in the foot in the world of work. Even the most well meaning actions can have unintended side effects that undo years of work and lock you out of that promotion that you’ve been striving for. It’s possible, however, to avoid this fate, if only you take the time to learn about the common pitfalls, as well as the related strategies for how to actually get ahead.

It’s not that today’s workers don’t know what’s best for them, of course. It’s simply that their perspective is limited by their close proximity to the businesses they work in. This is one of the primary benefits that an executive coach offers: a wider

perspective that shows you your position in the company and precisely how you relate to your managers and other superiors. Armed with this information, you can avoid sabotaging your career, and confidently prepare yourself to move ahead in any business, no matter how lofty your ambitions.

### **Next Steps**

To read more tips and suggestions on enhancing your skills at work and furthering your career, read Marketing Career Zone at [www.marketingcareerzone.com](http://www.marketingcareerzone.com).

If you are at the point where you would like to speak to someone confidentially about how to strategically plan and progress in your career, working with a Career Coach could work for you.

For more information about Career Coaching to help you to plan your next career move or get ahead within your current organisation contact Hannah McNamara on 020 7939 9910 or [hannah.mcnamara@hrmcoaching.com](mailto:hannah.mcnamara@hrmcoaching.com). The HRM Coaching team of experienced and approachable coaches and mentors are ready to help you achieve your career ambitions!

You can find details of their career coaching packages on [www.hrmcoaching.com/londoncareercoach](http://www.hrmcoaching.com/londoncareercoach)

### **Contact Details:**

HRM Coaching Limited, Delta House, 175-177 Borough High Street, London SE1 1HR

Telephone: 020 7939 9910  
E-mail: [info@hrmcoaching.com](mailto:info@hrmcoaching.com)  
Website: [www.hrmcoaching.com](http://www.hrmcoaching.com)

### **About Hannah McNamara and HRM Coaching Ltd**

Hannah McNamara is an experienced Marketing professional who rose through the ranks quickly and by 26 was running a multi-million pound Marketing department of a national retailer, reporting directly to the Chief Executive. Now a published author and public speaker on Marketing and Business Growth, she and her team coach and mentor ambitious professionals to develop the skills that will help them to excel in their roles.

Hannah McNamara established HRM Coaching in 2004. Over the past few years, the company has grown to include a hand-picked group of professional coaches, working with clients in a wide range of industries and professions. Based in London, the company provides one-to-one Executive and Career Coaching both in person and over the telephone, meaning that they can work with individuals across the UK and internationally. They also run Career Development workshops and networking groups, as well as training courses on Management Skills and Soft Skills such as improving communication skills.