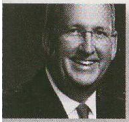


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RUSHMORE

DON'T BURN YOUR BRIDGES

In today's economy, millions of employees are being laid off as companies rapidly downsize to balance labor costs with declining business. The hotel industry has been particularly hard hit as all forms of travel have either been curtailed or eliminated. The government hasn't helped the situation by reprimanding companies for excessive travel expenditures. I'm sure all of us know at least one person who lost their job and now sits on the sidelines. It is not a fun experience—and bitterness toward the company and economy is a natural reaction. Another natural reaction is for terminated employees to abscond with company property on the way out the door. If you're facing a similar situation, my advice is

resigned and announced they were joining a competitor we became suspicious that our databases, client lists and proprietary software might have been compromised. We eliminated their log-on rights and went through our computer records and e-mails to identify any suspicious activity. Sure enough, we found a trail of e-mails detailing their plans to leave our company with hundreds of confidential files and software.

What was particularly horrifying was the fact that the company they were leaving to join seems to be supporting their effort to "clean us out" and cause "maximum disruption." With this theft fully documented, we went to court and immediately obtained an injunction requiring them to return everything they appropriated. While we were able to thwart their attempt before we incurred major damage, our court filings identifying the culprits and subsequent publicity has certainly reduced the ethical credibility of these three former employees along with the firm they were going to.

LIKE IT OR NOT, **“BIG BROTHER”** IS LOOKING OVER YOUR SHOULDER WHILE YOU DOWNLOAD OR PRINT OUT PROPRIETARY INFORMATION.

don't burn your bridges. The consequences far outweigh the benefits, and you're likely to be caught.

The *Lodging Hospitality* website recently reported that Starwood Hotels sued Hilton and several of its executives, alleging corporate espionage, theft of trade secrets and unfair competition. Starwood says Hilton used W's trade secrets to fast-track the roll-out of its Denizen luxury lifestyle brand. According to the suit two former Starwood executives who left to join Hilton, "stole massive amounts of proprietary and highly confidential Starwood information which was used to expedite Hilton's entry into the lifestyle hotel market, reposition its luxury brands and substantially reduce its costs and risks of doing so." The article says Starwood received from Hilton boxes of documents that former Starwood employees had "brought to Hilton." No matter how this case is resolved, it's likely that these executives' careers will be tarnished by these allegations.

My company, HVS, recently went through a similar experience. When three of our employees abruptly

resigned and announced they were joining a competitor we became suspicious that our databases, client lists and proprietary software might have been compromised. We eliminated their log-on rights and went through our computer records and e-mails to identify any suspicious activity. Sure enough, we found a trail of e-mails detailing their plans to leave our company with hundreds of confidential files and software.

In today's cyberspace age it's incredibly easy and tempting to take some useful file or software from your employer. It's also incredibly easy to continuously track and document all computer activity for every employee in a firm. In addition, your company e-mails are usually preserved and accessible even when deleted. Like it or not, "big brother" is looking over your shoulder while you download or print out proprietary information. You will be caught. In addition, most firms are requiring employees to sign confidentiality agreements that turn your harmless download into a felony offense.

This is no way to end your employment, no matter how poorly you were treated when your job was terminated. The hotel industry is extremely small, news travels fast and human interest stories, such as the Starwood/Hilton lawsuit described above, are great material for the press. None of us wants to be the subject of these types of stories, because whether you're in the right or wrong, your reputation will always be in question.