

BE VISIBLE

Here's the bulletproof truth: If your superiors don't see you or know who you are, you're very easy to let go. Out of sight, out of mind, and—poof!—you're gone. Accentuating and improving your physical presence and raising your overall profile at work are, together, the first steps toward locking down your job security.

I'll be honest: much of what you need to do is to create a *perception* that makes you more visible, more notable, and ultimately more valuable to your company. That means, for example, that you don't actually have to pull all-nighters twice a week to show how committed you are to your job. You do need to arrive at work before your boss and leave after she does in order to create the impression that you're there all the time. And you need to go out of your way to meet and engage people—coworkers, managers, even the CEO—who will unwittingly become a part of a team of people who will help you bulletproof your job.

I'm not being cynical, I'm being practical. And I'm not telling

you to fake it, I'm telling you to make damn sure you're not invisible at the critical times when decisions are being made about who stays and who goes. **Because the invisible guy is the first to go.**

1. ARRIVE EARLY AND STAY LATE

The joke goes that 80 percent of success is just showing up. I disagree. I think that 80 percent of success is showing up *early*. More to the bulletproof point, it's showing up *earlier than your boss*. The rest is a magical combination of talent, exceptional effort, and good luck. For now, though, let's just concentrate on showing up early for work, shall we?

Arriving at work early shows your commitment and industriousness. Of course, you need to get there only five minutes before your boss or coworkers every day to come off as the world's most committed employee. Besides making it clear to your superiors that you take your job seriously enough to be more than on time, showing up early—before the phone starts ringing or your coworkers start bugging you—gives you valuable time to prepare for your day. Or rather, it gives you time to *look* as if you're prepared for your day. Sure, it's a bluff, but if you make it a habit, you'll always be ten steps ahead of the idiots who straggle in late all the time.

The same goes for meetings or conference calls or any other appointments. Be there early to get your ducks in a row. Showing up late, looking unprepared or discombobulated, isn't quite the impression to cultivate if you want to keep your job. Bosses and coworkers hate when you show up late for meetings. *Hate* it. So don't.

JUST SO YOU KNOW

It doesn't matter if your company pays for your health club membership or even provides an on-site health facility—that's to make *it* look good, not to help you lower your cholesterol. Installing a swanky gym on the premises is strictly for PR purposes; it looks great when the company is being profiled on *60 Minutes*, but no one expects you to actually use it. Same goes for those nifty pool tables, nap rooms, and massage services offered by youthful and progressive CEOs. If the stock in your publicly traded company is in free fall, I guarantee the pool-playing slackers will be sent packing long before the CEO's private jet is listed on eBay. So admire those perks, brag about them to your friends, but, whatever you do, don't get caught using them.

No one likes a martyr, but managers *love* an employee who is willing to stay late in order to get the job done. Be willing to do whatever is necessary timewise in order to complete a project. This doesn't have to make you a slave to your job or a doormat for your boss; do it on an as-necessary basis, and it will demonstrate your commitment to your work.

Here's another easy bluff: Don't stay late, just stay later. Leaving a mere ten minutes after your boss has gone reinforces the impression that you're the world's most committed employee. It also shows that you're not a clock-watching nine-to-fiver. People who say "I'm outta here" the minute the whistle blows every day are bound to be "outta there" come downsizing time.

While you're at it, skip the two-hour lunches—you don't want to be MIA when something important is going down at the office. And you don't want to give the impression that what you do on your lunch hour—such as shopping, going to the gym, or

JUST SO YOU KNOW

Working through lunch to meet a pressing deadline is one thing. Eating at your desk every day is another. As a general rule, don't do it. Here's why:

- ▶ It's inappropriate. Your desk is your workstation, not the dinner table. You wouldn't (or would you?) use a fingernail clipper at your desk, neither should you use a knife and fork there. The separation of work and personal activities—including eating—is just good manners on the job.
- ▶ It's inconsiderate to your coworkers. No one should have to smell your tuna sandwich or watch you picking popcorn out of your teeth at your desk.
- ▶ It doesn't look professional. Even if you brown-bag it every day, eat in the office dining area or off site.

visiting the dentist—is more important than the work that's waiting for you on your desk. Appointments are for weekends, and working out is for before or after work. If you must take care of personal affairs during your lunch hour, be clandestine about it. No one needs to know you're at your techno-Pilates class or getting your eyebrows waxed—especially your boss.

Do step out of the office for lunch or even just a short walk to clear your head. Better yet, do it while your boss is at lunch, so she never sees you not working and never has to wonder where you are. But keep it to twenty minutes or less, unless you're having a business lunch, in which case make sure your boss knows where you are, and aim to keep it to an hour, ninety minutes tops.

There's always someone in the office who can't sit still, always

getting up for a cup of coffee, visiting the bathroom ten times a day, endlessly making the rounds to chat with friends. This is not a supereffective visibility strategy. Avoid frequent breaks—you don't want your boss thinking you're away from your desk more than you're behind it. And when it comes to the nearly extinct cigarette break, I say go ahead and smoke like a chimney in your private life, but don't let your superiors see you loitering in front of the building dragging on a cigarette. *Everything* is wrong with that image.

Be judicious in taking time off. That monthlong bike tour of Italy? Take it another time. No one's saying you shouldn't take a vacation or long weekend to which you are entitled. You should just be very aware of timing and the impression your taking time off gives to your boss and colleagues, especially when things are tough at work. Weekend weddings are generally acceptable; long holidays—especially when business is either busy or slumping—are not. This isn't France, you know!

Pay close attention to exactly what's going in the office when you make plans. Think about spacing out your vacation time in chunks of three or four days at a time instead of two weeks at once, so you're not out of the picture for too long a stretch.

JUST SO YOU KNOW

Smoking is a bad habit, unattractive, and harmful to your health. So don't do it—unless your boss does. Smokers love other smokers, and bosses who smoke love employees who share the habit. What better time to bond with your boss than leaning against the front of your building puffing away? A sneaky guy I used to know actually took up smoking when he realized that his boss was a nic addict. Not good for his lungs but he enjoyed a connection with his boss that his coworkers didn't.

Same goes for sick days. If you have a hacking cough or a 104° fever, by all means, keep all those germs at home where they belong. But if you're just hung over from watching the NCAA basketball finals until 1:00 A.M. with your buddies, suck it up and get to work. You don't want to be known as the guy who's always out sick.

And by the way, you *really* don't want to be known as someone who needs "mental health days." Britney Spears needs mental health days—lots of them. *You* need to bulletproof your job. So if you don't have a blazing fever, you better be at your desk at work.

Finally, even if your job allows for you to work from home instead of at the office—even just the occasional one day a week—think hard before doing that, especially when turbulence is in the air. Because soon enough you'll be "working from home" plenty; home workers are always the first to get fired. Your boss or your clients won't remember why you're valuable if you're *not there*.

▶▶▶ ***Be punctual.***

▶▶▶ ***Create the perception that you're always there.***

2. LOOK GOOD

Even if you work in a Monday-through-Friday casual dress environment, the way you dress should send a message that you're serious about your job. Or, more to the point, that you're serious about *keeping* your job. So go to your closet right now and map out a strategy to dress as if you mean it.

First of all, consider your company's dress code. If it's not

SHOES MAKE THE MAN . . . AND THE WOMAN

Shoes are near the top of the list of things people notice first about a person. To be sure you're sending the right shoe message every day at work, women should not wear sneakers; glittery, fussy, or open-toed shoes; or crazy-high heels. Men should wear black or brown shoes (not boots) that are well made and not trendy. Wear the best-quality shoes you can afford; go into hock if you have to so you wear shoes that make the most emphatic "success" statement possible. In the case of shoes, price happens to be a decent indicator of quality, so do a little research and cross-referencing between, say, Nordstrom, Brooks Brothers, and Barney's to figure out your high-water mark of affordability. Keep them shined and in good repair; worn heels and scuffed toes on even the finest shoes will peg you as a down-and-outer, not an up-and-comer.

spelled out in the employee manual, take a look around to make an assessment. What do the top-level managers wear every day? The midlevel managers? How about your supervisor? Your colleagues? If you're not dressing better than your colleagues and at least as well as your supervisor, you're missing an easy opportunity to make a subtle but positive impression on the powers that be.

Take your cue from the folks who run the show. If the CEO wears a power suit and tie every day, you should wear something just as serious and purposeful that's appropriate for your job. But even if all the top managers wear Hawaiian shirts, you still need to aim high yourself. The idea is to wear what suits you but in the general genre of your boss; it's the kind of subtle flattery that will get you everywhere.

None of this means you should go from jeans and Birken-

stocks to an Armani suit overnight; if you suddenly start dressing up, your colleagues will think you're interviewing for a new job. Which is no way to keep the job you have, right? So instead of dressing up, start dressing upward. Look for ways to sharpen your appearance without looking as if you've gone and had a total makeover.

Start by taking a good hard look at your clothes. Try on every item of clothing you regularly wear to work in front of a mirror. Then set aside anything to which you answer "no" to any of the questions below:

- ▶ Is it well made, clean, and in good repair?
- ▶ Does it fit me well?
- ▶ Does it make me look professional?
- ▶ Does it make me look successful?
- ▶ Would I wear it to an important meeting?

Even if this exercise forces you to retire half of your usual wardrobe from work duty, you don't have to go out and buy new threads. With a little common sense, the remaining clothes you have will do just fine. Wearing one excellent suit three times a week is infinitely better than wearing five different outfits that don't market you as a capable, confident, can-do employee.

While you're doing the mirror test, take a look at your hair. Smartly styled hair is the new power suit, easily as important as what you're wearing. And worth every penny you spend getting it right. So:

- ▶ Do you keep up a good haircut, or are you usually overgrown?
- ▶ Is the hairstyle you wear appropriate to your age?

- ▶ Is the color flattering?
- ▶ Is the color current? (Meaning, are your roots showing or do you have unintended stray gray hairs?)

If the answers to these questions are “no” or “I don’t know” get yourself to the best hairstylist you can afford *right now* to sort out your hair situation. Don’t skimp on hairstyle or color. I don’t mean you should get a \$600 Sally Hershberger haircut if you’re making \$600 a week. But don’t end up with a bargain style at Supercuts that you’ll sorely regret, either. Just budget for a good

TOP WORK WARDROBE MISTAKES

- ▶ Revealing clothing (cleavage, visible belly, rose tattoo above your butt crack)
- ▶ Poorly fitting clothing (muscleman tight, too tight anywhere, or too loose everywhere)
- ▶ Age-inappropriate clothing (for example, a pleated schoolgirl mini on anyone but a schoolgirl)
- ▶ Any clothing with logos on it
- ▶ Inappropriate shoes (slutty footwear and sandals, for example)
- ▶ Too much makeup (including Dracula lip liner and freaky fake fingernails)
- ▶ Too much perfume or cologne (frankly *any* perfume or cologne is too much)

N.B. If you have to ask yourself whether you’re making any of these mistakes, you are.

TRUE STORY

Anna was a junior-level account rep at a hip dot-com agency. Like her co-workers, she enjoyed the low-key feel of her workplace, including casual attire, flexible hours, and a generally collegial, creative atmosphere. She was easy to recognize by the elaborate dreadlocks she'd worn since college, as well as for the dragon tattoo that curled around her entire right arm and the nose ring dangling from her left nostril. She was happy doing a job she enjoyed in a place where her personal expression was embraced.

All that ended the day her company learned its VC funding had fallen through and Anna was included in the first round of layoffs. Why her? While her colleagues appreciated her unique personal style, her boss had to make a choice between Anna and a more conservative coworker who was more presentable when pitching to much-needed potential clients.

haircut—regularly, and at least two weeks before an important event—because it's *that* important.

Now follow these basic rules for a bulletproof look:

► Dress to be noted, not noticed. Whether your style is classic and conservative or more contemporary, looking good always comes down to wearing clothing that flatters you and suits your body. Dressing appropriately for your job and your personality lets you be who you are but always look professional. That said, fads and fashion statements (ahem, that would be you, young lady, the one thinking about wearing high-waisted hot pants and knee-high gladiator sandals to work!) do not belong in the workplace. Neither do obnoxiously loud colors, jangly jewelry, or dangerous or ill-fitting footwear. All that's a little too much you, okay?

► Use accessories to dress upward. A good watch, a silk scarf or necktie, smart eyeglasses—all send signals of quality and self-assuredness. So do an expensive haircut and neatly manicured hands (this goes for both men and women). And finally, I have three words for you: Crest White Strips. A bright white smile is the best, most bulletproof accessory of all.

► Give extra care to your daily grooming. When you show up at the office with wet hair or needing a shave, you're saying that you don't care enough to pull yourself together for work. Clean hair and fingernails and brushed teeth—that's stuff your mother taught you. Well-tended facial hair (including eyebrows, nose, and ear hair), fresh breath, neutral body odor—that's the stuff you ought to pay attention to but might overlook. These are the details that send silent positive messages about you to everyone around you. Or negative messages that can put your job in peril. You choose.

► P.S. Regarding facial hair, an extremely tidy beard or mustache may be appropriate in a workplace where they are clearly accepted. After you take a good look around, though, don't be surprised to discover they're not. In any case, follow the boss's lead. Regarding the "styling" of eyebrows, men *and* women: do

JUST SO YOU KNOW

One of the best ways I know to initiate, reinforce, or improve the chemistry between you and your boss is to think of yourself as his Mini Me. Follow his or her lead in wardrobe, general demeanor, and communication style. Being a bit of a Mini Me is subtly flattering to your boss, and it ensures that you're basically behaving in a way you already know he approves of. Plus, who's going to fire his Mini Me?

not overdo. And those intentional 9 A.M. five o'clock shadows? I think they give the impression that you never made it home last night, and they're a good idea only if you're a fashion photographer or a European architect—or if your boss has one.

- ▶▶▶ ***Dress upward.***
- ▶▶▶ ***Get an excellent haircut.***
- ▶▶▶ ***Have a bright, white smile.***

3. PAY ATTENTION TO DETAIL

I don't care what anybody says, you *do* have to sweat the small stuff. Whether you're the front-desk receptionist or the CEO, your mastery of detail can be the difference between succeeding and failing on a simple clerical task or a multibillion-dollar deal. If there is one person in the workplace who *might* be considered indispensable, it's the person who is on top of the details.

That's easier said than done, though. Being detail-oriented is one of those qualities that's much admired and rarely possessed. It's like being good with languages or numbers; it comes either naturally or not at all. Fortunately, there are plenty of ways to improve your detail skills even if you're an oblivious boob.

▶ Be organized. This is the A-number-one most important thing you can do to help yourself pay attention to detail. Being organized helps you work with an ease and efficiency that never fail to make you look good. In particular, your workspace should be organized so that whatever you need is at your fingertips when you need it most. This means that everything has a place, you can access what you need without effort, and someone else could eas-

SPELLING COUNTS

Don't get me started on how spell-checkers are turning us into a nation of dunces. The fact is, no matter how well a program sweeps up after our atrocious spelling, it's not going to catch everything. If you can't spell or you use bad grammar, you might as well pack up your desk right now. It's the kind of inattention to detail that sets you apart from others—in the bad way. So reread your documents, letters, and e-mails before sharing. *Especially* your e-mails. Before you send an e-mail, be sure it's addressed to the correct person—Karen from accounting probably doesn't need to see your note to Karen, the dancer you met last night at the Kit Kit Club. Proof-read your outgoing e-mail, too. Bad spelling—the kind that e-mail seems to make worse—can make even the smartest person look like a junior high school dropout. If you press “send” without proofing the contents and confirming the intended recipients, you may as well write “Fire me” in the subject line. If you must, find a colleague who's willing to proof your work for you.

Finally, as much as I think automated spell-check has set our collective intellect back about ten thousand years, install it on your BlackBerry or iPhone *right now*. Corresponding on the run doesn't tend to highlight your communication skills, especially when it's all botched up with missing words and bad spelling.

ily be directed by you to find something in your workspace in your absence. (Remember that vacation that was almost ruined by frantic calls from the office hunting for a contract lost in your “file pile,” which was obscured by a half-eaten box of Mallomars?)

In a perfect world, being organized means no piles, no clutter, no obstacles. In a bulletproof world, however, piles are not a bad thing. They're a part of the fine art of looking busy. Better to be

thought of as superbusy than anally organized, I always say. Just don't let important details fall through the cracks—or heaps—on your desk.

► Be thorough. This is what they call dotting the *is* and crossing the *ts*. Seems as if you shouldn't have to tell someone to do that, as the *is* and the *ts* aren't going to do you much good without those dots and the crosses, am I right? But you'd be surprised how many big problems are the result of sloppy mistakes. Double-check instructions, pay attention to deadlines, review your work before passing it on. Follow up to be sure it was received, that it was done right, and whether anything else is necessary. It is a tremendous compliment when someone refers to your work as thorough.

► Take notes. Keep a single notebook with you at all times to keep track of names, dates, phone conversations, or instructions you receive (no one likes to have to explain—again—how to change the toner in the copier). Other random but important details will end up in your notebook, and will you ever be a hero

JUST SO YOU KNOW

You might as well admit that when you claim you “lost all your work” it usually means you never did it in the first place and you're trying to buy time to get it done. Your boss can smell this a mile away, and while she might let you get away with it once, twice will try her patience, and three times will let her know you're a liar and you think she's stupid. So do your work and back it up. In the long run, it's easier than making up bigger and bigger dog-ate-my-homework whoppers that will eventually cost you your job, I promise.

when you're the only one who has them. Think moleskin rather than Hello Kitty—even your notebook sends a message.

▶ Keep a calendar. You'd be surprised how many people trust their reality TV-addled brains to remember important appointments. Whether you keep a paper datebook or a calendar on your computer or PDA, enter every single engagement (personal and professional) on the same calendar. Nothing looks more foolish than forgetting a meeting.

▶ Respond to e-mail and telephone messages quickly and efficiently. Don't be the person who takes a week to answer a simple e-mail or return a call. Be the one who manages detail-driven exchanges swiftly and effectively.

▶ Back yourself up. Losing an important document or your entire archive of e-mail because you weren't backed up is even more foolish than forgetting a meeting. If you're not automatically backed up by your company's system or you keep important work on your home computer, back your own files up. It's your responsibility to be sure your own work is secure.

Bulletproofing your job is more about being street smart and having good chemistry with your boss than it is about being organized. So don't think of all this as being Container Store organized; think of it as being-savvy-and-paying-attention-to-details-that-can-save-your-bacon organized.

▶▶▶ ***Don't be a slob.***

▶▶▶ ***Be thorough and efficient.***

▶▶▶ ***Keep a notebook.***

4. LISTEN UP

The mighty motivational speaker Zig Ziglar once said that when you talk, you say something you already know, but when you listen, you learn something that someone else knows. That's listening in a nutshell: shutting up and really taking in what someone else is saying.

How is listening a way to be visible at work? For one thing, it's the opposite of not listening. Zoning out in meetings, losing track of what's going on during a conference call, making your grocery list in your head while you're having a conversation with someone—that's the kind of not listening that moves you to the top of the list of expendable personnel.

Active, genuine listening is best way to be sure you're in the know—and that the right people know that you're in the know. When listening:

- ▶ Give your undivided attention. Turn off your cell phone, put away your BlackBerry, get out your notebook, and

JUST SO YOU KNOW

Don't you hate it when people don't pay attention when you're talking to them? Here's why someone stops listening: He has a pathetic attention span. There are too many distractions, including that cell phone vibrating in his pocket. He probably thinks listening is a chore, not a tool. He doesn't really understand what you're saying. He's too busy thinking about his own opinions to listen to what you're saying. Or finally, there's a very good chance you're not giving him something interesting or useful to listen to. Oh, that smarts.

make eye contact with the speaker. Good eye contact is 50 percent of the successful chemistry you need to have with the people around you. In short, be present.

- ▶ Don't jump to conclusions. Just because you think you've gotten the gist of the speaker's message, it doesn't mean you can turn down the volume and start daydreaming about your trip to Vegas.
- ▶ Practice 360° listening. You listen in order to learn, so listen to everyone in the room. And be open to alternative points of view.
- ▶ Confirm what you've heard. This is especially important in one-on-one conversations. If you're not sure you understand what has been said, ask the speaker to confirm his meaning. "I just want to be sure I heard you correctly: Are you saying . . . ?" Or come right out and say, "Could you please repeat that? I'm not following you." This helps avoid misinterpretation all around.
- ▶ Don't interrupt. The fact that it's bad manners is a good enough reason not to interrupt. Ever. It's also one of the most annoying and self-destructive habits a person can have. Let a speaker complete his thought—while really listening to what he's saying—before offering your own.

▶▶▶ ***Pay attention when people speak.***

▶▶▶ ***Be sure of what you've heard.***

▶▶▶ ***Don't interrupt.***

JUST SO YOU KNOW

You are your cell phone's ring tone. Which means don't have a ridiculous Looney Tunes ringtone, the cell phone equivalent of an e-mail address like foxymama@hotmail.com. That's tacky and silly. It also means turn your cell phone off at work. Period. Every time your cell phone rings when you're on the job, you're alerting your boss that you're not working.

5. SPEAK UP

Outgoing people and those with naturally strong communication skills are obviously more likely to pipe up in a group setting than others are.

The problem, for those of you who make up the quieter population, is that if you don't say anything, no one will know that you're smart or curious or creative or that you have a clever sense of humor, all qualities that can significantly distinguish you from your coworkers and give you a leg up when the company's chips are down. When people are losing jobs and you want to bulletproof yours, it's critical to be seen *and* heard. Action and words are of equal importance in showing you're alive at your job and want to keep it. So go out of your way to verbally assert yourself in all aspects of your work.

The easiest way to speak up is to start asking questions. It shows that you're willing to learn and that you're smart enough to know what you *don't* know. Ask for clarification early, and you won't find yourself barreling off in the wrong direction due to unanswered questions you were too afraid to ask. Your boss will be glad you asked, trust me. You'll also win fans among your col-

HOW TO SAY WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND

- ▶ Be confident. If you're so nervous that dry mouth and sweaty palms keep you from speaking up at work, practice in front of the mirror until you feel sure of yourself. Better yet, take one of those amazing Dale Carnegie courses that can turn just about anyone into a confident speaker. Every time you venture to speak, you'll feel more comfortable doing it again.
- ▶ Get to the point. When making a point or asking a question, don't blather on and on, using jargon or showing off what you know. Instead of coming off as smart, you'll come off as talky or, worse, as a self-important blowhard.
- ▶ Be diplomatic. Now's not the time to pick a fight with a coworker who disagrees with you or to correct your boss when he has misspoken. If you feel that you must correct someone's mistaken statement, do it tactfully and in private. And avoid critiquing others; *no one* likes to be critiqued, mostly because it's almost always negative. Just compliment them on their ideas and then offer your own.
- ▶ Show intelligence. Speaking up is your chance to show your smarts. But if you don't have anything insightful or intelligent to contribute, don't speak for the sake of speaking. That's almost always what makes meetings last longer than they should, and you know how much that gets on *your* nerves.

leagues for being willing to raise your hand, as they probably have the very same questions.

Offer suggestions. If someone running a meeting asks the group for ideas and you think you have a good one, say it out

ASK YOURSELF:

- ▶ Do I speak up regularly?
- ▶ Do I speak clearly?
- ▶ Do I share original thoughts?
- ▶ Do I help improve the dialogue?
- ▶ Do I improve the way I am perceived when I speak up?

loud. No one can read your mind, and you get no credit for an idea you haven't expressed. Not every suggestion you have will be a good one, and no one needs to know what you think about every single thing. But a carefully offered suggestion or opinion on the right subject at the right time can shine a positive light on you. If a higher-up offers you a chance to share your opinion and you have something intelligent to say, grab it. She'll admire you for taking the risk and for having a mind of your own. (Though she'll admire you more if you make it look as if it was *her* idea.) In the end, you want to be perceived as someone who is confident enough in his own intelligence and creativity to be an effective brainstormer.

- ▶▶▶ ***Ask smart questions.***
- ▶▶▶ ***Make thoughtful suggestions.***
- ▶▶▶ ***Speak clearly.***