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Employees Who Leave Increasingly Return to the Fold – by Alina Tugend

LeBron James has been called a king, a superathlete, a traitor. And now that the basketball megastar has decided to return to Cleveland and the team he once abandoned, he's earned a new moniker he may not even know about: boomerang.

That's as in boomerang employee. And while few will do it with as much fuss and fortune as Mr. James, it's happening more and more often.

There is no hard data on how frequently employers rehire workers who've left to go elsewhere, but "it is growing, and smart companies are the ones pushing it the most," said Abbie J. Shipp, an associate professor of management at Texas Christian University. "We're updating the image of what employee-employer relationships look like."

Experts point to a number of reasons boomeranging is booming: Social media makes it easier for companies to keep track of former employees, and it's often cheaper to rehire them because firms can bypass the search process. There's less risk, too. Employers know what they're getting when they hire a former employee.

Perhaps most important, the old idea of loyalty — from both worker to company and company to worker — has evolved, and employees change jobs and switch career paths more frequently than in the past, said Brian Swider, an assistant professor of business at Georgia Institute of Technology. So leaving a company no longer seems like a betrayal.

"Boomerangs are not common in the classic employment model," said T. Brad Harris, an assistant professor of labor and employment relations at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. "Companies used to have the idea that you need to instill fear in workers — you only have one shot here."

That is no longer entirely true. For example, Swanson Russell, an advertising agency based in Lincoln, Neb., has about 150 employees, including 12 who left and returned. That's "an all-time high," said Brian Boesche, a partner and the chief creative officer.

"People worked differently 10 to 15 years ago," Mr. Boesche said. "Attitudes have changed." In fact, the company recently posted a short video — as a recruitment tool — on its Facebook page consisting solely of interviews with workers who quit at one point and then rejoined the firm.

Nate Custard, 31, a senior writer and producer was one of those. He moved to a competing advertising agency — which used to be viewed as the ultimate infidelity — after a five-month tenure at Swanson Russell.

He knew some of the staff at the rival firm and wanted to work with some of the bigger clients it served. "I felt terrible leaving Swanson," he said. "They had made an investment in me. We had a tough conversation, and I think some feelings were hurt, but they understood. I left on good terms."

He stayed in touch with his former bosses and colleagues and, after about two years, realized he didn't want to put in the 80-hour workweeks required at his new job. He looked into rejoining Swanson, where he felt he could have a more balanced work life, and returned almost a year ago.

His words of advice: "It's about being respectful and not burning any bridges," he said.

While Mr. Boesche said he did not recall any returnees who didn't work out, that doesn't mean everyone makes a good boomerang employee.

Mr. Harris is a co-author of a recent study — Ms. Shipp was one of the other authors — on boomerang employees, "Gone Today but Here Tomorrow: Extending the Unfolding Model of Turnover to Consider Boomerang Employees," which examined an accounting firm of 15,000 employees, where, at the time of the study, 20 percent of the hires were people who had left and returned.

Those who came back had more often formed a plan for what to do after leaving the job — a pregnancy, going to graduate school or pursuing a specific career goal — than those who quit and never returned.

Mr. Harris is also co-author of a study looking at approximately 200 to 300 players who have left and returned to the National Basketball Association over the last several decades.

Not surprisingly, the study found, the most successful returnees were those who left on good terms and of their own choosing, did well at their interim employer and weren't away too long, so they still understood and fit into the organizational culture.

What are the wrong reasons to return? You miss your friends, or you haven't given your new job a fair chance, said Roy L. Cohen, a career counselor. Be sure to look hard at why you left, he said.

"If you left because of lack of growth opportunity, a boss with whom you had a rocky relationship or the belief that you were underpaid, there is no guarantee that a return will resolve your relationship beyond the initial honeymoon," he said.

While some employers worry that allowing workers to leave and come back will create a culture where employees feel they can drop in and out at will, Ms. Shipp said there is no evidence of this.

"Those who had left once were not more likely to leave again than those who had never left," she said. In fact, boomerang employees might, in some cases, be more satisfied workers, because "they knew all the good things and all the bad things and came back with their eyes open," she added. "It was their choice."

That was the case with Ché Knight, 28, a senior account executive with the Boston public relations firm Denterlein.

In 2011, after working at Denterlein for a little over a year, she made the jump to a rival company.

Ms. Knight said all the articles she read about how millennials advance in their careers urged them to keep their eyes open for opportunities and be ready to leap to other firms to climb up that ladder.

"So I thought my growth trajectory should be quicker and, when I was offered a promotion, why wouldn't I make the jump?" she said. Although she initially applied to the competitor, it was "very aggressive" in recruiting her, she said.

"My company countered with a very generous offer, but I wanted the promotion. I have a lot of loans, and I wanted the title and the money," she said.

In less than three weeks, she realized it had been a big mistake. The promotion didn't make up for the fact that she had no mentoring or support. She wanted to return right away, but it took about three months for her boss, with whom she still had a close professional relationship, to make it work.

She has been happily back for almost four years, but acknowledges that "I was very concerned about what my colleagues thought. I would be lying if I didn't say it was a little awkward at first, but I don't think there was any resentment."

Not all companies are open to the boomerang idea. Bloomberg L.P. is well known for its closed-door policy toward former employees.

"There are exceptions if someone leaves for certain family situations, education, public service or military service, but not to a competitor," said Ty Trippett, a spokesman for the company. "From the early days, the philosophy was very clear. If you left for a competitor, you were not welcome back."

And what are the chances that LeBron James will succeed as a boomerang employee? He left his team on his own volition, didn't spend too much time away and is definitely good at his job, so that all points to success.

However, Mr. Harris and his colleagues can't factor in some of the elements that most returning employees don't have to contend with — an intense fan base and the national spotlight. What effect they will have on this particular boomerang remains to be seen.



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Dan Bubalo: Accidental fraud landed him in jail – by Quentin Fottrell

When he was CEO of an international trade company based in Minneapolis, Dan Bubalo says, "People called me 'The Wizard of Wall Street.'" When it came to completing investment deals, "I had a reputation for getting things done." The nickname proved ironic: He violated the law when he sold \$4.5 million convertible debentures between 1994 and 1998—some of which weren't registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission. Bubalo was convicted in 1999 of mail fraud, wire fraud, securities fraud and conspiracy to commit securities fraud.

Today, Bubalo, 59, is waiting on a job offer to be a manager for an auto leasing company. He says he was unaware that what he was doing was illegal at the time: "I'm not dumb enough to commit a crime, and I'm not smart enough to run such an enterprise."

MarketWatch: Why did you do it?

Bubalo: My attorney, who is now deceased, didn't register the convertible debentures. I wasn't aware of it, but I couldn't go in front of a jury and say the dog ate my homework. As CEO, I should have known. The FBI told me that if one was illegal, they were all illegal. The average loss was about \$10,000 per investor.

MarketWatch: How did the issue come to light?

Bubalo: Complaints were registered by the SEC and ultimately referred to the FBI. People were not getting their return on investment quick enough. We thought it would be a quicker turnaround. We failed to deliver. The feds got in the middle of it. Would we have succeeded? Maybe, maybe not. It's like going to Vegas, sometimes you win, sometimes you lose.

"I couldn't go in front of a jury and say the dog ate my homework. As CEO, I should have known."

MarketWatch: What did you do with the money?

Bubalo: The \$4.5 million was reinvested in the company. I deferred almost all of my salary of \$250,000 a year and put it in the company too. I lost about \$1 million of my own money by not taking a salary. The \$4.5 million fine sits on my credit report. As part of the plea bargain, they said it went to my pocket. If I had \$4.5 million in my pocket, I wouldn't be talking to you right now. I still owe the federal government \$4.5 million. I pay \$500 a month under threat of being rearrested. That was based on my income and ability to pay. I have a year's sabbatical [right now] as I reconfigure what I do with my career. Who the hell wants to go back to prison?

MarketWatch: So you didn't know it was a crime?

Bubalo: Absolutely not. I never had so much as a speeding ticket. I'm known as a rule follower. We went through three or four years of audits and all the audits passed with flying colors. I paid my lawyer—who practiced security law and had for some 30 years—over \$1 million over a five-year period.

MarketWatch: You made a plea bargain.

Bubalo: Yes, when you do a plea bargain, the feds get to write their own script. I lived in the best neighborhoods. I was member of the best country clubs. This was my only criminal act. I am the criminal in the family. This wasn't a pattern. I come from a family of European laborers. We were not highbrow, wealthy people.

MarketWatch: Did you go to prison?

Bubalo: I was sentenced in 1999. I was eligible to go to Camp Cupcake, but I had custody of my daughter, who was 13, and they were going to send me to a camp eight hours away from home. I asked could I go to a higher security prison closer to my home. They granted it in a heartbeat. I served 46 months at Waseca Federal Correctional Institution just outside Minneapolis.

MarketWatch: How was your family through this?

Bubalo: I was divorced in 1990. I had full custody of my daughter, but she went back to live with her mother in 1999. I wrote her a letter every day. I never failed on that promise. I don't come from a family of whiners. I have a great family around me. Once every two or three months, I get really p***** off.

MarketWatch: How much do you get paid for giving speeches?

Bubalo: The most I've ever been paid is a few hundred dollars.

MarketWatch: What has the audience reception been like?

Bubalo: **The audience has been incredibly receptive. I spoke at the Texas Christian University's Neeley School of Business for six years and was chosen as best guest speaker five years in a row. I don't tell them I was convicted until halfway through my lecture.**

MarketWatch: **They must sit up in their seats when they hear that.**

Bubalo: **You can see them get interested immediately. I don't mean to be boastful; I spoke very intelligently for 40 or 50 minutes. It wasn't entertainment, it was for a purpose, to tell them this is what can happen if there's a breach anywhere in the chain.**