

September 30, 2003 12:11 a.m. EDT

THE JUNGLE

Plan a Smooth Exit

By **KRIS MAHER**
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

In June, midway through a meeting with his manager, Charles Barnette decided to call it quits at his job.

The 41-year-old store manager at a video-rental chain in the Midwest had worked at the company for 11 years and had been unable to land a corporate position after several attempts. The last straw, according to Mr. Barnette, occurred when his manager questioned the number of hours he had worked recently.

"I just communicated to him, 'I think it's important that I move on,' " Mr. Barnette says. "He said, 'Well, what does that mean?' I said, 'Well, I'm resigning.' "

Mr. Barnette, who got a degree in communications while working at the company and is now looking for a position in broadcasting, stresses there were no hard feelings on his part, and his exit was cordial. But, looking back, he says, would have done a few things differently, such as contacting human-resources sooner and trying to work two weeks after giving his notice. As it happened, he typed a letter of resignation with his boss in his office, gathered his belongings, said a few goodbyes to employees and left that same day.

Few people give nearly as much thought to how they will leave their employer as they do to how they will land a new job, say career experts. But a rocky departure can haunt you down the road. Making a smooth exit from your current employer is just as important as starting a new job the right way.

With surveys showing a majority of workers plan to start job-hunting once the job market improves, here are a few things to keep in mind when it is time to move on:

Don't leave in anger. This is one of the biggest mistakes people make, says Susan Meisinger, president and CEO of the Society for Human Resource Management an Alexandria, Va., professional association for human-resource professionals. You can be honest -- if measured -- with your boss about why you are leaving, but if you have a lot of angst built up and feel the need to provide constructive criticism, the best forum is an exit interview with a human-resources staffer, who may be more

objective than your boss. Ticking off your boss could damage your reputation at the company and ruin any possibility of getting a good reference, a hole that could follow you.

Plan ahead. Explore your options for continuing health care and managing your company's retirement or investment plan. Consider joining an online alumni bulletin board or newsletter to develop contacts while maintaining ties to the company. Find out from the human-resources department if you can help draft a reference that will be given to other companies who are considering hiring you in the future. Many companies, fearing lawsuits from former employees, are willing to write a reference letter with an employee, says Ms. Meisinger.

Inform your supervisor in person that you intend to leave the company. But be sure to also bring along a short letter half a page long that indicates why you are leaving, expresses appreciation for your positive experiences at the company and that lets your employer know how long you are willing to remain on the job before departing. Two-weeks notice is standard, but as a gesture of goodwill you may be willing to remain slightly longer.

Be honest about why you are leaving. "Constructive honesty is an important tool, whether you're interviewing with a new employer or leaving an employer," says Doug Leland, principal of SOAR Worldwide Inc., an executive coaching and consulting company in Portland, Maine, and San Diego. He encourages people to explain whether they are leaving for the opportunity of a lifetime or because they feel they didn't receive adequate raises or promotions. A written letter, in particular, sets the tone for departure, he says. It can also be kept on file, and can be useful in the event that you reapply to a company.

Be prepared for a range of responses. Some bosses will take your departure personally and fly into a rage. Others will shake your hand and wish you luck. You can increase your chances for a smooth transition by offering to complete assignments, train a successor and by asking your manager what if anything can be done before you leave. If there is a chance that you will be escorted to the door immediately, however, be sure to round up your personal belongings ahead of time and delete personal files and emails.

Be ready for a counteroffer. While you may suddenly see your employer in a positive light again if your boss offers you a big raise to stay, though, the lure of a counteroffer often unnecessarily complicates the decision to leave, says Anne Maxfield, president of Project-Solvers Inc., a New York staffing company for the apparel industry. Ms. Maxfield advises candidates to figure out ahead of time how they will respond to a counteroffer, so that people don't forget their initial motivation for leaving. In most cases, she says, "you have to stick to your guns and not be swayed by counteroffers."