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Tech's dark cloud carries silver lining

Industry castoffs have learned a thing or two about what it takes to stay employed in the fickle sector

By RANDY RAY

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Two layoffs in 13 months taught Mark Windle a thing or two about searching for a new job on the heels of Canada's high-tech meltdown.

When the Bayshore Health Group in Toronto took an interest in Mr. Windle's networking skills last fall, he studied the company's annual reports, read financial statements and talked to customers and colleagues who knew its history.

During an interview for the position as co-ordinator of the information-technology help desk, he inquired about new products and how coming changes would affect his job, and learned there was enough work on the books to keep him employed for at least 12 months.

He also took pains to learn why the 20-year-old health-care company had twice changed ownership.

"I was determined to do the necessary due diligence this time. I had to know that when a job came along, I wouldn't come in one day and find the door locked and the furniture gone," says Mr. Windle, whose most recent layoff from Markham, Ont.-based Centrinity Inc. was part of

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the downturn that slashed 64,000 jobs from Canada's high-tech work force between March and October, 2001.

In a sector where job security is a pipe dream and juicy perks and lucrative stock options are distant memories -- in dot-com time anyway -- Mr. Windle and other industry castoffs have found a silver lining.

By drawing on experiences they gained as their former employers struggled through tough economic times, they've recognized the importance of digging into the affairs of potential employers, having a better idea of who to work for, and finding fresh ideas about what it takes to stay employed.

All are excellent assets as the high-tech picture brightens and employees begin to trickle back to Canada's tech sector, which added jobs for 11,000 workers in the final two months of 2001.

"We are finding that people are extremely committed to better preparing themselves so that a layoff will not happen again," says Richard Clark, managing partner at the Toronto office of career-transition company Murray Axmith & Associates Ltd. "They are doing their homework on companies, they're looking to see who sits on the board of directors, asking about a company's culture and values, how much business is in the order book and who the investors are."

Many workers who watched past employers disintegrate are avoiding companies that offer stock options in lieu of salary and steering clear of startups that could fold on a moment's notice. Many employees who worked 80-hour weeks only to be thrown onto the high-tech scrap heap have resolved to strike a better balance between their work and personal lives.

"Many who lost their jobs have taken time to do some soul-searching and decide what they really want to do," adds Kirsten Watson, president of HireTopTalent Inc., an Ottawa company that specializes in finding jobs for laid-off tech workers. "They have learned to look for jobs with a chance for promotion, they have learned how to switch jobs and be more fiscally responsible. Some feel refreshed by the experience."

Although beggars can't be choosers in today's tough job market, some employees have turned down jobs for fear of being burned again in a future downturn.





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Leslie Rosenblood, who lost his job as a Web designer at Nortel Networks Corp. in Brampton, Ont., last January, shunned two companies before being hired in December as national sales director at Bridgeway Software Canada Inc. in Toronto, which develops software for corporate legal departments.

"I dismissed one position because its business model was not viable and the other because I didn't trust the people doing the hiring," says Mr. Rosenblood, 29, who did plenty of background checks before rejecting both firms. "Never before have I done this kind of research when looking for a job but why would I? Nortel was a mature and growing company. Who thought it would ever lose \$19-billion in a single quarter?"

Huge losses by Nortel and other companies have convinced Mr. Rosenblood to put less faith in stock options and company share plans. Thinking Nortel could do no wrong, Mr. Rosenblood invested more than \$75,000 in Nortel stock. Today his holdings -- the bulk of his savings -- are worth less than 10 per cent of that.

Isabelle Roumagnac, among 86 workers laid off at Microcell i5 Inc. in Montreal last fall, feels she would have found a job by now had she maintained the contacts that two years ago helped her land a job as manager of product development.

Seventy-hour work weeks and a heavy travel schedule often made networking impossible, says the 35-year-old Ms. Roumagnac, who is still unemployed. Since losing her job, she has networked through her membership in an organization of management consultants in Montreal and by staying in touch with HireTopTalent.

"This time around I will maintain my relationships in a more serious fashion, so I can look out for future mishaps. Networking is not just having contacts, it is doing things with those contacts, meeting company people, finding out what projects they have on the drawing board and where their investments are coming from."

Since being axed in late July from her post as director of Web development at Vancouver-based Multi Active Real Estate Inc., which builds realty Web sites, Gladys Wong has decided an established company with clear business goals is the only place she'll work.

"Multi Active was caught up in the dot-com hype, it was go, go, go. No one thought straight. . . I want to work at a company which makes decisions based on fact, not gut feelings and

without a revenue model."

After losing jobs at three failed high-tech firms in Ottawa between October, 2000, and August, 2001, Ron Fischer saw the need to set aside money, in case another rainy day befalls the high-tech sector.

Once Akela Software Systems, the company he co-founded in October, starts to bring in revenue, Mr. Fischer plans to sock away money every month until he has a year's salary in the bank. He made that pledge when the stock options he accepted from four previous employers became worthless.

"If I've learned anything in this business, it's that you have to stop relying on others. You have to take the bull by the horns. . ."

When Christine Bacinski was given her walking papers after two years as a Web applications developer at Art Technology Group in Mississauga, she had two regrets: She never blew her own horn to make her bosses aware of her work and she didn't set aside enough time for life outside the office.

She is doing both in her contract position at Cogeco Cable Inc., in Burlington, Ont., where she develops Web sites.

"If you do something significant, make sure management is aware of it. In the past, I didn't make noise, so that probably meant I was more likely to be let go than someone else," Ms. Bacinski says.

As for her personal life, in the four months she was out of work, Ms. Bacinski landed parts in several plays and took a first-aid course. She plans to do volunteer work with St. John Ambulance.

"I have realized there is more to life than work," says Ms. Bacinski, who is 35 and single. "Before, I didn't feel I had the time to investigate some of the things I wanted to do. I had the feeling of security. Now, I realize nothing is certain, so I might as well find security in other ways."