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Employment News from the Globe and Mail

Laid-off workers not picky about jobs

Growing number 'career cocooning,' or doing work they are overqualified for while they wait for the economy to revive

By Vicki Lee Parker Raleigh News & Observer Monday, May 13, 2002

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John Wyman calls it "career cocooning."

It's his way to describe a trend affecting a growing number of workers who are taking a job for which they are overqualified while they wait for the economy to recover.

"You do the job, keep your mouth shut and you wait for the recession to really be over," said Mr. Wyman, who lives in Hillsborough, N.C., and was laid off by Koz.com a year ago.

Then, he said, "you burst out of the cocoon like a butterfly and get a better job."

As the economic downturn led companies to cut hundreds of thousands of positions, many workers have been forced to navigate a tight job market.

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In some areas, particularly in the once-booming high-tech corridors, unemployment is close to 20-year highs.

There are a variety of reasons someone may have to settle for a lesser job, which some employment counsellors refer to as a survival job.

Some need the money: Most Americans haven't saved enough money to ride out a layoff. Others want to keep their job skills sharp.

A few simply have to get out of the house.

For many, the consequences can be bitter.

Most people taking such jobs are forced to accept lower salaries and reduced health benefits. Some have had to sell their homes, cancel vacations and drastically cut back on discretionary spending.

"It's tough, but it doesn't take a rocket scientist to realize that if someone is looking for the same job they came from, it's not going to happen," said Sheyenne Kreamer, president of Bottom-Line Recruiting & Consulting Associates in Knightdale, N.C.

Ms. Kreamer points out that although it's likely many will have to settle for jobs outside of their fields that pay less, the experience doesn't have to be miserable.

"I tell them: 'Think about the things you put on the back burner. Get creative; you may surprise yourself.' "

In Mr. Wyman's case, he has decided, for now, to volunteer in order to keep his career on track.

"I'm not fishing for the little fish. I want the big fish," said Mr. Wyman, 61, who plans to provide free business counselling to companies until he finds that ideal job.

With unemployment cheques and savings, Mr. Wyman said he could continue job hunting until the end of the year without running into financial trouble.

Some layoff victims switch careers and discover their true calling. A few may earn more at a new job or decide to launch a new business that becomes successful. Others recognize that their situation is temporary.

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Clayton Wilkes lost his job last May after 22 years at telecommunications equipment maker Nortel Networks Corp.

He went from being a senior engineer earning \$80,000 (U.S.) a year to holding a part-time job for the Apex Parks, Recreation & Cultural Resources Department, where he makes \$8 an hour. Instead of managing engineering projects, Mr. Wilkes, 51, is building pitchers' mounds and supervising baseball games.

He's also being supervised by one of his daughter's high-school classmates.

Mr. Wilkes said his daughter has been supportive, but more than a little uncomfortable.

"I told [my daughter] that's life, get over it. I'm having fun," said Mr. Wilkes, who plans to work with the recreation department until a better opportunity comes along either locally or in Jupiter, Fla., where he plans to eventually move his family.

Although Mr. Wilkes is getting unemployment payments, he still needed part-time work to help make ends meet.

The family lost practically all of its \$1-million in 401(k) savings, which consisted entirely of Nortel stock. Nortel's financial troubles, which led the company to lay off thousands of workers, caused its stock to drop 96 per cent from its high in 2000.

"We had to liquidate everything," Mr. Wilkes said, adding that he feels he is better off than most. He attributes that mainly to his positive attitude and the support of his wife.

Shortly after being laid off from Nortel, Mr. Wilkes sold their 4,000-square-foot home and they moved into a 1,000-square-foot, two-bedroom apartment. He also sold a beach home.

The family owns another beach home in Florida and may move there when the economy turns around.

Until then, Mr. Wilkes said, he is going to make the best of the situation and enjoy his job at the recreation department.

"We've looked at this as sort of an adventure," Mr. Wilkes said. "My kids are grown. My situation is not a hardship."

There are others, too, who are trying to make the best of a bad situation.

Much to his surprise, Terry Olenchuk, 35, is weathering the economic downturn working as a substitute teacher after being laid off from Lucent Technologies Inc. in August.

He quickly realized other technology companies were not hiring. So in October, knowing that he still had a mortgage to pay, he accepted the job as a fill-in math teacher, earning about one-third of his previous salary.

Six months later, he's still there. "I'm a full-time teacher. I'm doing paperwork, making lesson plans, completely taking over the class," Mr. Olenchuk said.

He said he has decided to look at his current job as a kind of sabbatical.

He has continued to look for work in his field.

Although he hasn't had to put his house up for sale, Mr. Olenchuk said he has gone into miser mode. Scuba-diving trips to Australia and other countries, which he used to take twice a year or so, are out. Dinners at fancy restaurants have been replaced with more home-cooked meals. And he has curtailed his spending on CDs and DVDs.

Raleigh News & Observer

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