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HIRING LINE

The Extra-Innings Job Search

Unemployed for a long stretch? You'll need different strategies than if you've been sitting on the sidelines for just a few months

If you've been out of work for more than six months, you're in good company. About 20% of the long-term unemployed are professionals and managers, up from 13% in 1998, according to an analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics figures by outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas. When you've been unemployed for a long stretch, your job search requires different strategies than if you've been sitting on the sidelines just a few months.

- **Prepare a response for why you've been out of work for so long.** Make sure you give your statement a positive spin. ("Yes, it has been a long time. But I'm looking forward to getting back to work at the right company.") Some experts suggest you offer an explanation even if no one brings it up. "If they don't ask the question, they're still thinking it," says Kay Salikof, vice-president for training at Management Recruiters International in Cleveland.
- **Lower your sights.** During the boom years of the late 1990s, many companies were forced to hire people to fill positions they weren't really qualified for--and to pay them high salaries. If you were one of those hires, you may have to reduce your salary requirements by 10% to 20%.
- **Take interim work.** If potential employers say they can't afford you, offer to come on as a consultant. Or look for companies hiring executives to perform a short-term stint. One-quarter of such interim executive assignments turn into full-time jobs, says Salikof.
- **Revise your packaging.** You now have a better idea of just what's available in the market. Rejigger your résumé to reflect those changes.
- **Keep a journal.** Without the structure of a regular job, it's easy to lose your focus and forget about what you may have accomplished during your search. The last thing you want is to become demoralized. One solution is to keep a daily record of all the job-related activities you've done.
- **Take a temporary step backward -- outside your industry.** If you need to earn some money, take a job that isn't in your regular career path. "You'll be able to keep the job under the radar screen," says Alexandra Duran, an executive coach in New York. For example, on your résumé, use the heading "Relevant Experience"; that way, you can legitimately leave the job out of the listing.
- **Seek professional help.** With so much competition, you have to make sure you stand out. That might mean spending the \$125 to \$500 an hour it costs to see a career coach, who can help you develop the extra polish you might need to land a job.

By Anne Field

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