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Advice on Restarting A Stalled Job Search

By Arlene S. Hirsch

Every economic downturn has employment casualties. But this time around, things seem worse than usual.

The numbers alone are cause for alarm. The percentage of people *not* in the work force has grown nearly every month since early 2001 and the number of long-term unemployed -- now about 1.8 million -- is up 36% from a year ago. As of April, the tally of discouraged workers who are no longer looking for work -- 437,000 -- was up 37%, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

This isn't just a blue-collar trend. From Jan. 1 through the end of April, the average number of U.S. managers and professionals who grew so discouraged that they dropped out of the labor force was 33,000 monthly, according to the BLS. This is 25,000 more a month than the 8,000 who dropped out on average each month during the first four months of 2000.

Many of the unemployed are talented, hardworking people with college and advanced degrees, strong technical qualifications and managerial skills. But they have become so demoralized by searches that stretch on for months, disappointing offers or outright rejections that they are leaving the job market altogether.

Yes, looking for work is rough. Regardless of qualifications and experience, many job searches can take six months to a year or even longer. And most people don't have the luxury of dropping out of the work force, so it's imperative for job hunters who are facing this kind of difficulty to find ways to stay focused and motivated.

During this stressful and challenging time, professionals must learn to think more creatively about how they approach the job market and to be more resourceful and resilient.

An Ego Blow

In December, a 36-year-old attorney in Chicago who sought the advice of a career counselor needed more than a pep talk to meet this challenge. After six months of job hunting, she looked so despondent and miserable that it was hard to believe she'd once been an aggressive litigator. How

could she convince an employer she was tough enough to fight for its clients' rights and win rough courtroom battles?

Steadily sending out resumes and cover letters that fell into the hands of indifferent recruiters, making phone calls that seldom got returned, and begging for jobs she didn't even want had destroyed her spirit in ways that the practice of law never could. Looking for a job was much harder and more demoralizing than the work she had so ably performed as a lawyer.

Her search hadn't started out that way. When she began, she'd been confident that she'd find another position within a few weeks, a month at the most. After all, she had solid qualifications: a good legal education, work experience and references. She was in the job market only because her former employer had lost its major client and couldn't afford to keep her on staff.

But she had no idea that seeking new employment would have such an impact on her personally. It was a blow to her ego. She wanted to find a hole somewhere and climb in. As time went on and she failed to land a new position, she became more and more isolated.

Such feelings aren't uncommon, according to career counselors. "Isolation is the first lever of discouragement in a prolonged job search," says Laurie Anderson, a career and organizational consultant in Oak Park, Ill. "Isolated people get stuck." The challenge, she says, is to find or create a community that stimulates "movement," or activity, in your search. This means finding someone who will support you in achieving your goals. Many people locate this kind of help through mental-health professionals, job clubs, or friends. It may be harder to gain such support from a spouse because he or she has an investment in the outcome of your job search.

Get Active

Author Steve Chandler writes in his book, "Reinventing Yourself: How To Become the Person You've Always Wanted to Be" (Career Press, 1998), that one of the most demeaning aspects of job hunting is feeling like you're at the mercy of the world, that your fate is in someone else's hands. To change that mindset, you have to take more control over your own destiny.

For the Chicago attorney, this meant taking more ownership of her job search and career future. On the advice of her career counselor, she got involved in pro bono work and the local bar association. By providing free legal services, she could function as a lawyer; the bar association helped sustain her professional identity and sense of belonging to the legal community. These activities served to remind her that she had something important to offer and was still a good lawyer, even if she didn't happen to have a job.

Shake It Up

The second reason that people get stuck or give up, says Dr. Anderson, is that they keep doing the same thing in the same way. That means that they keep getting the same discouraging result. If you want to get a different result, you have to do something different.

She encourages her clients to create a breakout strategy, a way for even experienced job hunters to separate themselves from the line at the front door by targeting a specific employer and demonstrating how they can add value to the company. "Don't talk about what you can do for the company," she says. "Find a real need or service, and go do it. Prove to them you can add value." For example, one of Dr. Anderson's clients implemented a software package for a company at no charge

as a way of proving her value. The company liked it so much that it hired her as a software consultant.

Explore Your Options

Another way to stay motivated during a lengthy job hunt is to widen your search parameters to include other positions, says Phyllis Brust, director of career services at the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago in Hyde Park, Ill. "Think about how to use your skills in different ways," she says. "Branch out into different settings. Be creative when you think about the possibilities."

When a 43-year-old English professor in Chicago was denied tenure, she knew she'd have a hard time finding another position in academia. After several months of fruitless searching and numerous rejections, she began to explore other arenas and ways to use her talents and skills. This enabled her to refocus her energies on teaching at community colleges, editorial roles with educational publishers and training and development positions. She eventually found a job as a professor in a community college through a professional trade publication.

To expand your options, career counselors recommend the following three-step process:

1. **Self-assessment:** Use workbooks and vocational testing, as well as thoughtful self-assessment to gain a better understanding of your interests, abilities, values and personality style.
2. **Research jobs:** Explore the job market by reading and talking to people who work in a variety of industries and job functions to see what areas best fit your talents and needs and where you might be able to use your skills.
3. **Develop a strategy:** Once you have identified the best fit, map out a plan to open the door to new possibilities that will make your future seem much brighter.

Take a Fresh Look

Dr. Brust also recommends doing a "reality check" on your search strategy and goals. "Revisit the basics to see what isn't working for you," she says. "How does your resume read? Do you have realistic career goals and targets? Do you need to change the way you think?"

Because it can be hard to answer these questions yourself, she recommends enlisting a professional to help you. If finances are tight, look into the career services offered by your alma mater or a local community college, mental-health center or social-service agency

It's easy to become negative by telling yourself that no one's hiring and no good jobs are available. But professionals are finding good jobs. Conducting a successful search in this economy takes time, patience, creativity and resilience. The longer your search lasts, the easier it becomes to doubt yourself and to lose hope. If you allow yourself to become too isolated, cynical or insecure, it will become that much more difficult to rebuild your career on a positive note.

To make sure that doesn't happen, you must take the time and initiative to evaluate your needs and develop the proper attitudes, strategies and support systems to sustain you for the long haul.

That's what the Chicago attorney discovered. As a result of her counseling and pro bono work, she

regained some of her self-confidence and optimism, which showed in her job search. To her surprise, she started receiving more referrals and job leads from networking contacts. Still, it took another two months for a good offer to materialize. While working on a pro bono case, she made a connection with someone who liked her work so much that he recommended her for a job with his law firm.

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