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"Being Laid Off. It's Not a Happy Thing"



by Michael Laskoff BusinessWeek Online

Introduction

Former dot-com high-flier Michael Laskoff is turning career distress into a new career with his book *Landing on the Right Side of Your Ass*

During the Internet's heyday, *Fortune* magazine likened Michael Laskoff, then chief marketing officer at CompUSA's Cozone.com, to a dot-com Hannibal Lechter, feasting on the Old Economy. His ride to the top was certainly dizzying. After graduating from Harvard Business School in 1994, Laskoff joined investment bank Furman Selz and hop-scotched his way to Bertelsmann, McKinsey, and WorldQuest Networks. Laskoff reveled in his identity as a gilded Internet guy, as his salary soared 1,300% from 1989 to 2000, to \$350,000.

That was three years ago -- a lifetime in Internet years. Now, Laskoff is self-employed, spending his time ministering to the only growth market he sees: the unemployed (see BW, 6/30/03, "[For Gen X, It's Paradise Lost](#)"). His book, *Landing on the Right Side of Your Ass: A Handbook for the Recently Fired*, is due out in January from Random House.

Laskoff also has a Web site, askyourass.com, featuring career advice as well as the *Reemployment Musical Spectacular Spectacular*, an opera set to the tune of Verdi's *Pace Pace* with such lyrics as "I got a pink slip, a foul and wretched pink slip, and now my life is over." Visit the Web site, and see Laskoff appear in drag.

BusinessWeek's Michelle Conlin recently talked with Laskoff about trying to make unemployment funny and removing the stigma from the state of being axed, downsized, and dissolved. Here are edited

excerpts from their conversation:

Q: What do you make of most of that job advice sitting on bookstore shelves?

A: Most are either derivative hippy philosophy or these kinds of New Age, self-empowerment books. But no one really talks about how to deal with how you've been fired or how to cope with being laid off. It's not a happy thing. There's a dearth of practical job advice -- especially for people under 40.

Q: And your book and Web site?

A: I think what makes mine different is that I've developed expertise that can be useful to a lot of people. I've been plotting my own career and making successful moves long before it was the vogue thing to do.

Now everybody needs to be thinking about their career this way. I've gone through it all, and I think to be an expert you have to have had the experience.

Q: Does the number of jobless MBAs from top schools surprise you?

A: This is a recession that seems to indicate that the fundamental things that used to guarantee success aren't working anymore. I graduated in the top 10% of my class at Harvard Business School. Ten or 20 years ago, if you went to one of these top schools, you were seen as inherently adding value. There was always going to be a place for you. Now, it's "What have you done for me lately? If you're not doing it for me today, then I can't afford you."

Harvard MBAs are expensive. For me to recoup the cost of an education, I can no longer count on a company to...provide me with a terrific salary. In the end, I would have rather had Girl Scout cookies than all that paper wealth.

Q: So what are a lot of these elite jobless doing?

A: Some people I know have gone from being CEOs to taking corporate staff roles. That's not a fun transition to make. Some are taking these jobs with the idea that this is just for a year or two. But that could be a delusion. A lot of them are pining for a time that won't come back. I think that in the future there's going to be even more risk, instead of less.

Q: What sorts of people are companies looking to hire now?

A: The pendulum has swung back. We're now living in a world in which companies are saying: "Don't bring me your best and brightest. Bring me someone who has demonstrated real consistency. Someone who didn't make any mistakes over the past five years."

I've found that companies very much want people who have not been risk-takers. But the mantra I grew up with is that mistakes are O.K. Companies are making money right now not through growing the top line but by reducing cost pressures. Candidates who can run a tight ship are popular right now. The kinds of people who can squeeze blood from a stone. In the very best sense they are bureaucrats. Bureaucrats as opposed to innovators.

Q: What are some of the biggest mistakes you see job-seekers making?

A: I think one of them is overstating what you can do. People are savvy about who they're hiring. Other people think the process will be easy or have the attitude that hiring managers owe them something.

There's also a real problem of pride. People don't want to call their friends or take their parents up on offers of new contacts. Then there are those who take solace in the bad economy -- almost as if it's an excuse to not push every day.

Q: What do successful job-seekers have in common?

A: The actors who work the most aren't necessarily the best or the most talented. They're the ones who don't give up. Who keep pushing and auditioning and being proactive every day. It's the same thing with a job search.

You have to wake up every day and make the calls that will get you that much closer to your goal. People who maintain a good outlook also do better. Those who say "Hey, I met three new people today. I had a good day." You have to treat those little conquests as victories.

Q: Your dad is a small-town, old-fashioned, general-practice lawyer. How has he been influential in your career decisions?

A: After the third professional situation blew up in my face, my dad said, "What do you expect? These people owe only themselves. The only form of self-protection is to be employed yourself." There are lots of dangers. He wasn't romantic about it. But ultimately, you have to strike out on your own path.

Edited by Patricia O'Connell

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