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Don't Let a Jobless Spell Dampen Your Prospects

By Mark Goebel

If it's been nearly a year since you left your last full-time job, you may be beginning to feel like damaged goods. Hanging over every interview is the dreaded question about why you've been out of work so long.

Relax. A long spell of joblessness, even one of a year or more, isn't the kiss of death it once was. With the right approach, job seekers who have been out of work six months or more can minimize employers' doubts about their abilities and dramatically improve their chances of winning offers.

You Aren't the Only One

Kate Wendleton, president of the Five O'Clock Club, a national career-counseling organization, says more job-hunting professionals have longer employment gaps now than at any time in the more than 20-plus years she's been a career counselor. Many mid- to senior-level executives with specialized skills who are in outplacement also are taking much longer to find full-time compared to the late 1990s, says Gina Hall, an Orlando, Fla., consultant for outplacement based in New York.

Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics bear out these observations. Last winter, the rate of unemployment peaked at five months and has held steady at this level through May, according to the bureau. By comparison, the average length of unemployment in 1999 was three months, the bureau reports. Says Leo Munoz, a recruiter for Saks Fifth Avenue in New York: "Today it's generally understood that good people are downsized and may be out of work for an extended period of circumstances beyond their control."

No Need for Secrets

The best strategy for job seekers who have been out of work for a long period is get the issue out of the way early.

Lauren McDonald, a business-development director for Advantage Human Resources, a New York City-based recruiting and HR-consulting firm, tells candidates who have been out of work for a

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months to state in the second paragraph of their cover letters why they have this gap and what they have been doing during this time.

"The fact that you've been out of work for a while is going to come up eventually. Confront it head-on, diffuse it, and enables a candidate to focus on what they can bring to an organization."

"It is important for a candidate to cast their time away from full-time work in a positive light," says Davis, a legal recruiter in New York. "Prepare in advance for the most difficult question and, no matter how long you have been out, don't be defensive. The more confident you are, the more confident the interviewer is going to be. Spend time on the issue and the quicker you can move on to discuss your resume."

Show You're Up-to-Date

During their months out of work, job candidates should seek to improve their employment skills. Be sure to mention how they've kept their skills sharp during interviews.

"Join a work-related association, attend an industry conference, take career-related courses, read trade journals, and, of course, keep networking," says New York-based career counselor E. Vladich.

Brad Agry, a principal with Career Team Partners, a New York career-coaching firm, says describing your job-search efforts to hiring managers also shows you've used the time productively. "Employers want to be reassured that job candidates have been doing everything possible to find a job, even if it means elaborating -- 'I came close three times to getting a job but was beat out by another candidate,' he says.

Candidates who are out of work for more than six months should think about doing consulting or volunteer work. Even projects outside your chosen field will "fill in a gap on your resume that you have been busy and give you a more recent reference," says Ms. Hall.

Overcoming long employment gaps may require some creativity. Ms. Wendleton says one candidate who was out of work for more than a year volunteered to help a large bank on a technology project for a month even though it wasn't hiring at the time. "He was willing to work for free," she says. "He got free work and didn't have to go through all the red tape of hiring him."

Joe DeRupo, downsized from IBM in early 2002, spent six months seeking full-time work. He decided to take a part-time public-relations position with New York City Councilman Al Raimondo. Although he often worked more than 40 hours a week, he continued to go on informational interviews. He joined several work-related associations, including the International Association of Business Communicators, the Public Relations Society of America, and ExecuNet, a networking organization for mid- and senior-level professionals.

The City Council work and association activities on his resume filled in what otherwise would have been a sizable gap. They also apparently reassured employers that he had maintained his professional skills. He landed his current position as director of communications for the New York-based National Association of U.S.A. Inc. in September 2003. "The fact that I was laid off from I.B.M. and that I was in a regular full-time position for more than a year hardly came up in my interviews," he says.

Russ Conway, a professional who overcame two stints of unemployment, was a casualty of the dot-com bust when the sports-memorabilia Web site that he helped launch in 1999 went under in early 2000. He consulted for six months, then searched fruitlessly for another six months -- 500 resumes per job opening -- so he decided to take three months off to help raise his kids.

- **No one wants to be sued.**

To avoid violating various federal laws, companies must be circumspect about interview conversations with prior employers or references, and the reasons for an applicant's rejection. "Companies are afraid of being sued if they say the wrong thing," says an HR specialist with a New York-based insurance company.

Not responding to prospects "is not intentional or malicious," he says. "They're focused on finding the perfect candidate, so the process drags on, making it much more likely that someone will file a lawsuit."

Joe Madigan, an accounting and finance recruiter in Oakland, Calif., says some HR professionals who work with aren't well-informed about hiring procedures. "They may be good at explaining why they're often poor nuts-and-bolts communicators, don't always know what the needs are when trying to fill a position and know little about the mechanics of hiring someone. It has gotten to the point where I've had to draft offering letters for some of them."

George Fencil, an advertising executive in Austin, Texas, had three rounds of interviews over a period of three weeks with an advertising agency before learning he wasn't chosen. For one sudden afternoon interview with a worldwide account director, the agency called him at 11 a.m. "It seemed that the people I had interviewed hadn't communicated with each other, and they really didn't know what they were looking for," he says. Mr. Fencil adds that follow-up phone calls and e-mails went unanswered.

- **The hiring process has gotten longer.**

Hiring a new employee now takes an average of eight weeks (but often longer) compared to three years ago, says Mr. Madigan. Someone interviewed early on may fall off the radar since the process drags on, says Mr. Agry. Moreover, to keep their options open, some companies hold onto the finalist in the job for a few weeks before closing the files on runners-up.

"If a candidate goes in early, a required skill set may not come up in the interview," says Ms. Landers-Lee. "I'm telling my clients to ask up front for the opportunity to address any issues the hiring manager has" later in the process.

But how can you avoid getting the brush-off from hiring managers? Mr. Agry and Ms. Landers-Lee advise clients to ask for a hiring timeline when they first interview. "Be direct, find out when they anticipate making a decision," says Mr. Agry. Also, "ask if it would be all right to call if you haven't heard anything by the anticipated decision date," he says.

Ms. Landers-Lee adds: "That puts the hiring manager on notice [you] won't just simply disappear."

But job hunters may have the last laugh. Economic growth, job creation and the impending retirement of baby boomers in significant numbers may create new labor shortages. When this happens, that have been treating passed-up job candidates poorly may regret their shortsightedness, says Vladich.

-- Mr. Goebel is a free-lance writer in New York.

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