

You're Out!

BY CAROLYN HARSHBARGER

Reengineering the workforce, downsizing, corporate restructuring, centralizing functions, permanent layoff—whatever it's called, you are out of there! You lost your job! You're fired! Don't say that word. I didn't do anything wrong. People get fired because they can't do their job. That isn't what happened to me. I was victimized.

Yes, you are a victim of the economy, of the time we live in, and you probably *didn't* do anything wrong. It's easy to get complacent in the workplace. You have been there for some time, you know your job, and you manage to maneuver within the corporate politics and survive or even flourish. You are used to your paycheck and look forward to annual raises and a possible promotion in the future. Then it happens...your company is terminating you.

So what now? Panic? Fear? Escape? It seems no one asks about your work until you are out of it. Invariably, friends and relatives will ask how the job is going when you no longer have one. You want to run. Or make excuses. Or evade the question altogether. As hard as it might seem, candor about your situation is exactly what you need. Networking is by far the best way to become re-employed. After being downsized three times, I have some expertise on how to approach the job market, again and again.

Getting Started

Your first step should be to investigate who you really are and what you want to do. Being downsized can be the

best thing to happen to you. You may have been locked into a boring, mundane job where you weren't flourishing but stagnating. It is so easy to become routinized and rest on the corporate security you have enjoyed for so long. You may have considerable interests and talent that you aren't using. Or you may be doing functions that you really don't enjoy or feel positive about. Now is the time to assess who you really are and what you want to do with the rest of your life.

Writing a résumé is tops on your agenda. Actually, you should already have a good résumé. The first thing you should do when starting a new position is to update your résumé. Your thoughts may be...“but I don't think I will ever need one in the future,” or “I have a career position, and I am moving up the ladder with the company.” Yes, I thought so, too. The worst time to construct a résumé is when you need one. But if you don't have one, make it your first priority. If only to chronicle where you have been for biographical purposes, you need a good résumé, possibly more than one. Today, professionals must have multiple skills such as accounting and computer technology. Your strengths might be in two or more different areas, and it is advisable to have more than one résumé so you can tailor it to a specific opening. A tax background might not fit with a position that is more general management with human resource responsibilities. At the very least, have a core résumé that you can easily change to fit a specific need.

Don't rush through and just list your employment his-

LOSING YOUR JOB DOESN'T HAVE TO MEAN THE END OF THE WORLD. HERE'S SOME GREAT FIRST-HAND ADVICE ON HOW TO RECOVER AND LAND YOUR DREAM JOB.

tory. Your résumé is your sales tool that defines who you are and what you can do. Beyond the basic information of your employer, job title, and dates of service, you should incorporate the contributions you made, enhancements to processes, projects you spearheaded, and other accomplishments. A prospective employer is much more interested in how you did your job than what it was. Have you:

- ◆ Performed community service,
- ◆ Served on boards of worthwhile organizations,
- ◆ Volunteered at any of several well-known community endeavors,
- ◆ Exercised leadership roles, or
- ◆ Advanced your corporate expertise for the benefit of the community?

The books on résumé writing fill the business shelves of any bookstore. One perennial favorite is *What Color Is Your Parachute?* If you don't know how to approach the task of writing a résumé, professional help may be a good investment. Many executive search firms will also help you, and don't overlook the Internet for resources. Some of the best job-search sites are www.careerbuilder.com, www.monster.com, www.flipdog.com, www.nationjob.com, www.ajb.org (America's Job Bank), www.job.com, www.careerjournal.com (from *The Wall Street Journal*) and www.HireDiversity.com.

Explore these and other sites for articles on résumé writing, interviewing, and job searching and for other pertinent feature articles. You can cut and paste your

résumé on them, too. Be sure to have it in text format as well as in Word. After all, the first perspective a potential employer has of you is your résumé, so make sure it is solid and well written. The days of choosing the right paper and font style are mostly gone, but you should have quality supplies because some positions still solicit hard copies in the mail as opposed to electronic communications.

One of the best tools during your job search is a journal. You should chronicle dates, names, and places where you have applied or sent résumés. Find out specific names, and keep good notes. You may hear back weeks or months after your first submission, and it's crucial to know with whom you talked the first time. You should also document all the expenses and mileage you have used. It may seem small in the beginning, but it can add up to a considerable sum that you could use as an itemized deduction on your tax return. Well-documented dates, places, and miles traveled will make your tax return easier to prepare. Keep a list of the supplies, stamps, envelopes, and other items you purchase as well.

A Full-Time Job

Your job search is a full-time job. Don't treat it like a part-time job. Use all the resources you have: newspaper ads, Internet sites, placement firms, executive search firms, friends, neighbors, relatives, and business acquaintances. Do you belong to a professional organization? Let them know you are in the market. How about your alum-

ni? Many colleges and universities have job placement centers. Document all these resources in your journal, and follow up with them.

Your doctor, dentist, lawyer, and minister can be excellent sources for leads to a new position. You might be surprised who they know that has a need for your specific skills. Have you considered teaching part time? Local colleges, technical colleges, community colleges, or trade schools often have a need for someone as adjunct faculty. Also, there are consulting and temporary assignments. One of the benefits of working as a temporary is getting a feel for a new environment and trying it out before you decide. You could land the perfect new position this way. You can also be somewhat relaxed knowing you aren't scrutinized as the incumbent. Life can be much easier, allowing you to demonstrate your technical and managerial capabilities when you aren't a permanent employee.

Another essential task is to line up your personal references. Former managers are a good place to start, but I have discovered that several potential employers want to hear from peers at your former employment. How well you team with others is a key component in today's market. Don't simply ask a former associate to be a reference for you. Ask them what they will say if consulted about your work habits. Don't be shy about coaching them and suggesting appropriate statements. You can offer to write out some key elements for them to use when asked. The important point is to know what your references will say about you before a potential employer asks.

Time for You

So you have started the job-search process and constructed a résumé. Now what? Take time out for yourself. Get a physical, get your vision checked, and see the dentist. Not only will you benefit from these tasks physically, but take advantage of the medical benefits from your former employer while they are still available. Also, when you start a new position, you will have these things already completed so you won't need time off from your new job. If you have been putting off elective surgery or other medical procedures, this is the ideal time to proceed.

Do a complete grooming—manicure, haircut, and style—and take a critical look at your wardrobe. Be sure you get everything laundered or dry-cleaned so it is ready when you need it. Get rid of outdated, worn clothing. Maybe you could get by at your old job, but now you need to start fresh. Business casual may be the new rule in corporate America, but the interview still warrants a

good, properly fitted suit. And don't forget to clean, polish, and shine your shoes. Little things say a lot when you are interviewing for a new position. You will automatically get a mental lift from knowing you look and feel your best. That positive mental image will radiate during the interview process and could be the decisive factor in landing your new position.

This would also be an ideal time to start an exercise regimen. Besides toning and strengthening your muscles, you might lose a couple of pounds that are already excess baggage. The health benefits will also enhance your image. Staying active is crucial now. The easy thing is to vegetate and revert into self-pity. Remember, you are looking for a new job; it won't look for you.

Tend Your Finances

Your financial situation should also be addressed. Don't rely on your old employer to continue taking care of your 401(k), pension, stock options, or other assets you've accumulated. Investigate alternatives for rolling over those monies into an IRA account. Remember, if you touch the money, it is subject to 20% withholding from the payer, and if you roll it over later, you must come up with that additional money in order to waive the penalty. Talk to a minimum of three investment counselors before making a decision. The choices are almost endless as to how to invest your monies. Make sure you are comfortable with the firm you select. Don't be afraid to seek advice; just because you're an accountant doesn't mean you know all the answers concerning investments. You should review your insurance policies, too. Life, auto, homeowners, and medical insurance are all important factors that may be changing because of your employment status. As your personal situation changes, your insurance needs will, too. It may be time to review and update what you have versus what you need.

The same is true about your debt. Credit cards, loans, and mortgages should be analyzed for the best solution to your current and future needs. I can't stress enough the importance of good credit, especially now that you are in the job market. Many employers routinely check credit ratings of potential employees. For a small fee, you can check your own ratings with the three major credit agencies—Experian (formerly TRW), Equifax, and Transunion—and know what is being reported about you. If there's any erroneous information, now is the time to address it and get it cleared up. The cost can also be used as a job-search expense.

The Interview

You have made progress and are scheduled for an interview. Prepare for it. Research the company you are interviewing. Show that you're interested. The library has a variety of reference materials to help you. The Harris Industrial listing will reveal a considerable amount of information about manufacturing companies. Various other texts such as local directories, Dun & Bradstreet, etc., can also help. The very minimum you should know is:

- ◆ What business(es) they are in,
- ◆ Standard industrial classification (SIC),
- ◆ Stock symbol and performance,
- ◆ Size,
- ◆ Key management persons,
- ◆ Their competition,
- ◆ Their market share,
- ◆ Whether they are positioned for growth, and
- ◆ If there's a possibility for mergers or acquisitions.

The more you know, the better equipped you'll be to handle the interview process.

Find out ahead of time the names of all the individuals you will see. Don't be shy about asking for the correct spelling. You'll need this information when you send thank-you notes. Yes, thank-you notes! Often a position has been secured because of the follow-through of writing a thank-you note when the other candidates didn't bother.

Take Action

Get up, get started, and do something! Clean out closets and drawers. Do that heavy, deep cleaning you have put off. Wash and wax your car, weed your lawn and garden, paint it, fix it, mend it, throw it away. We have all procrastinated about things that we mean to do when we get time. Now you have the time, so get busy and stay busy. You might be surprised what you learn about yourself as you do these improvements. It could open up a new avenue for you.

Most of all, develop a positive outlook. Reflect on what happened as a catalyst for a new career venture, not the end of everything. You are captain of your own destiny. In order to discover the ocean, you have to let go of the shore. The unknown is uncomfortable, but it doesn't have to be painful. You are the best one of you there is, and it's up to you to find that perfect fit in the job world. Now go out and let the world know you are here! ■

Carolyn Harshbarger wrote this article from first-hand experience. She has been affected by three corporate reorganizations within the past 10 years when she was a senior cost accountant for the Westinghouse Corporation; a corporate accountant/budget analyst for West Ohio Gas, a subsidiary of Consolidated Natural Gas; and most recently as district controller for Waste Management. You can reach Carolyn at charsh@bright.net.