

How to Overcome Job Search 'Paralysis'

And answers to other common career questions

BY TAUNEE S. BESSON

Editor's Note: This month columnist Taunee Besson answers questions about common job hunting and career problems. If you have a question about your job search or career, send it to our monthly advice column, National Business Employment Weekly, Box 300, Princeton, N.J. 08540. All names are kept confidential.

Q: After 15 years as a geologist with a major oil company, I've been terminated. I understand why my firm can't afford to keep me and I appreciate its efforts to help me find another job through outplacement. Certainly, I'm grateful for the generous severance package I was given.

My problem is that two months after my final day on the job, I still can't believe I'm unemployed. This kind of thing happens to other people, not me. Why am I stuck in this paralyzed state? How can I push myself to get on with the job search I am guiltily avoiding?

A: Whether you realize it or not, you are suffering from the grief of losing a crucial piece of your life and identity. In fact, you are reacting much like people who have lost a loved one through death or divorce. Their relationship with a spouse, child, parent or friend represents an important component of who they are. When the relationship dies, a piece of them goes with it.

The grief you feel probably will evolve through several stages: denial, anger, bargaining and acceptance. (This concept was developed by psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross.) It's likely you will experience each of these in the next few months. Right now, your question suggests that you are stuck in denial. You aren't ready to accept that the rewarding career you enjoyed for years is suddenly gone. What's more, it's been taken away from you through no fault of your own.

If you had been incompetent or unhappy as a geologist, the desire to change careers probably would neutralize your current paralysis. Because of your past contentment you have no pressing reason to change, especially as financial realities aren't forcing you to find a new job.

The first sign of positive movement toward healing your grief will probably seem negative. Gradually you'll get angry. You'll curse OPEC, your company, the tunnel-visioned American public, your nagging spouse and anyone else you see as responsible for your predicament. If you can chan-

nel this anger in a positive direction, then you'll start moving on your job search. A lot has been accomplished by people with an "I'll show you!" motivation.

Anger often changes to bargaining as the grief process progresses. You may start offering deals. To your wife, "I promise that I'll look outside my field if I haven't found a job in the next two months." To God, or yourself, "If I get a good job I swear I'll never smoke again," or "If I find another geologist position, I will be grateful and satisfied forever."

Finally, after all of this emotional upheaval, there is acceptance. With acceptance comes the

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realization that you must learn to live with this painful change because it's real. You can't ignore it, fight it or bargain with it. This stage of grief offers comfort, peace and renewed energy if you use it to address new challenges. However, it also can lead to bitter resignation or deep depression if the anger is still there.

It's hard to say how long your grief will last, but you can speed up the process—or at least understand it better—if you take advantage of outplacement services or career counseling. Professionals in those fields know what you're going through. They can help redirect your grief and make its energy work for you.

If you prefer to be your own adviser, begin by identifying your transferrable skills, those not necessarily related to geology. Think about how you can use your natural talents to investigate other careers that sound intriguing. Then talk to friends or friends of friends in those fields. You will undoubtedly find that your skills are valuable in many other professions.

When you feel sorry for yourself, try concentrating on the ways you can make lemonade out of your lemon of a situation. You may even uncover an-

other career that's more fun (and more stable) than the one you swore you'd never leave.

Reimbursing Expenses

Q: Last week I saw a classified ad describing a job opportunity in Los Angeles. Since it asked for qualifications and a background very similar to mine, I sent a resume to the specified P.O. Box.

Yesterday I received a letter from the company's personnel manager requesting that I call him to schedule an interview trip to the corporate office in L.A. There was no mention of travel arrangements from my home in Dallas or reimbursement in the communique. How do I find out if he plans to pay for my trip? When is the best time to ask? If he offers me the job, what is the best way to ascertain if the firm will cover my moving expenses?

A: Generally, you can assume the firm will pick up the tab for your trip. Consequently your questions on the subject should be something like, "What would be the most convenient way to handle my travel arrangements. Would you (personnel manager) prefer that your secretary or travel planner select the flights, hotel, rental car, etc. and notify me by phone or letter? Or would you rather I do it and provide you with an itemized list for reimbursement when I arrive in L.A.?" The best time to ask the above is during your initial phone call when you discuss a date for getting together.

In the unlikely event that the personnel manager indicates that you are expected to pay your own way, you have several options. You might:

- Express your surprise and reply that you assumed the company would foot the bill. If he and his colleagues are really interested in you, they may pick up the tab in lieu of losing the opportunity to interview you.
- Suggest that you split the cost. You may want to visit Aunt Molly in San Diego or spend a few extra days in the nearby mountains. If the company covers the air fare, you can use the money you've saved to augment an impromptu vacation.
- Cover the entire expense and reserve judgment on the corporation's policies until you've had the chance to confirm or deny your suspicions in person.
- Decline the invitation, stating that it is your policy to accept distant interviews only from firms who think talking face to face is worth the price of your hotel room and plane ticket.

The best time to discuss moving expenses is after you have been offered the job. At that point you are its number one candidate, which gives you substantial negotiating leverage. Tell the personnel man-

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Your turn to ask

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ager that, as part of your compensation package, you would appreciate the company's covering the costs of your move. Be specific in your request, as your interpretation of moving costs may differ from your prospective employer's. In a large company, the personnel department probably will have a carefully considered policy with little flexibility. Smaller firms may choose to deal with new hires on an individual basis.

Whether you're discussing travel or moving expenses, if the firm doesn't state its intentions, you must take the initiative to clarify responsibilities. Clear communication averts nasty surprises for everyone.

Information Interviews

Q: Last month, after several years of painful indecision, I finally decided to change careers. Not knowing how to get started, I hit the library and checked out several books to help me through the process. All of them recommended doing information interviews (talking to people in fields that interest me) to identify my career niche and uncover potential job openings available only through the hidden job market.

However, I've read some articles recently that say information interviewing is a worn out tool; that people don't have the time or inclination to do it anymore. In an informal poll of my friends, most agree they wouldn't want to be bothered by some stranger asking lots of questions about their jobs.

What should I believe? Are information inter-

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views passe or are they still a valuable job search technique?

A: Information interviews have not outlived their usefulness. Potential interviewees are still willing to do them because:

- People like to be "the expert."
- People like to talk about themselves and their work.
- And most people like to exercise their altruistic inclinations.

In information interviews, human nature generally works in your favor if you give it half a chance. To make the process effective, you must approach it

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systematically. It's the haphazard, unprepared career changer who brings out the worst in potentially helpful people. To assure yourself the greatest number of successful contacts, be sure to do the following:

- Develop a generic job description that includes the skills, values and responsibilities you want in your new career. When people ask, "What do you want to do?" they don't need a specific job title. But they do expect an answer that indicates some serious forethought.

- Have a list of intelligent questions that will both get the information you need and impress your interviewee with your businesslike approach. Usually asking the person about him or herself is sufficient. However, a few well-chosen inquiries about his company or industry can score valuable extra points in building your credibility.
- To get background on specific organizations, read corporate reports, trade journals, business magazines or clipping files before scheduling your appointment.
- Make a list of your friends and their friends, as well as members of your church, fraternal groups or volunteer organizations. All of them are potential sources for information interviews, whether they work in fields that intrigue you or have friends who might. Naturally, individuals are more amenable to talking to you if they know that a friend or acquaintance suggested you call.
- Start with the easy interviews and work your way up to the ones that are scary and require cold calls. If you put these last, your previous successful experiences will bolster your self-confidence and motivate you to take risks.
- Ask for 30 minutes and don't over stay your time unless your interviewee's schedule permits and his interest is clear.
- Always send a prompt, typed or handwritten thank you note. This gesture not only emphasizes your thoughtfulness, but puts your name in front of a potential employer in a most favorable light.
- Follow up if you said you would. Remember, it's your responsibility to pursue a new career. Don't expect interviewees to get back to you. That's your job. ●