

Finding a New Job in a Tough Economy: What I've Learned along my Journey

By Ann Held Ciotoli



October 15, 2010 was a pivotal day for me. After working for over 25 years with a national rehabilitation provider, my position as the Public Relations Coordinator for the Pittsburgh market was eliminated along with several colleagues. Like many others who have experienced a lay-off, I was stunned and devastated. I have little recall as to how I got home that day. My car, which seemed to be on automatic pilot, got me there somehow. But my story is not about October 15th, rather the experiences I have had since.

I gave myself the weekend to pull myself together and then I began my journey to find a new position. My resume was up to date; however I quickly discovered that my format was very conventional. I contacted a friend and former HR Director and asked for her input. Ironically, she is part of an amazing group known as *Discover HOPE Here*, a non-profit organization founded almost 2 years ago. *HOPE* has over 200 members and 25 volunteers with expertise in writing resumes and cover letters, interviewing techniques, career coaching, and financial advisement, all at no charge.

"Over 65% of our members are over the age of 45," said Linda Weller, Founder/Director of *HOPE*. "Many were not offered outplacement packages at the time of their layoff, and cannot afford these services. We teach people ways to climb over obstacles instead of wishing them to disappear. Our volunteer team brings special talents at all levels and truly cares about you as a person."

HOPE provides members the opportunity to surround themselves with positive people who will provide support and assistance no matter what stage of the job search they are in. Team members provide a personal strategy to help each job seeker land their next position. Workshops and networking opportunities are also provided at no charge.

I was soon discovering that looking for a job in 2010 was much different than twenty-five years ago. It is a process with many components and can be a real test of one's character. I immediately started to register for workshops, networking groups and classes exposing myself to a wide range of topics and discussions. I began to learn how vital networking is in today's search for employment. With the number of individuals currently out of work, sitting in front of the computer, applying to job after job online is no longer effective.

ExecuNet is another organization I found extremely impressive. ExecuNet brings executives together online and in face-to-face meetings to discuss business challenges, solutions and opportunities, and share job leads. Many major cities throughout the US provide a facilitator that sponsors monthly meetings. In addition to offering services to the community in Southwestern PA, the Pittsburgh group draws professionals from as far away as Cleveland, Buffalo and Erie. Meetings offer programs, speakers and an opportunity to network with others, sharing similar challenges.

As part of my course of action, I sent emails to my professional contacts as well as neighbors, family and friends. I was amazed at how willing people were to help me. Many of my professional contacts offered introductions to colleagues in their network and soon, I was meeting with at least 7-10 connections per week. These total strangers did not owe me anything. Many were busy with their own careers and other responsibilities, but they were eager to offer guidance, support and suggestions on companies I should target and contact information. A meeting in the lobby of a downtown hotel led to a meeting with the COO of a company and a referral to another business. Other high level executives have offered their time and expertise as well which has been invaluable to me.

Naturally, there were days when I felt overwhelmed or discouraged, but those days became fewer and fewer. I realized that I was now working for myself. I was in charge of my destiny. If I chose to dwell on my situation, it would only hurt me. I became my own boss and set daily and weekly goals. As I met new people, I marketed myself and my skills but also used the time to educate myself on other industries and opportunities in Pittsburgh.

Other well-established non-profit organizations include Career Link and Priority Two. Career Link offers job seekers assistance with navigating the internet to search for employment, classes and workshops, and funding for continuing education. For over 28 years, Priority Two has provided training and support for individuals in their job search. Workshops and classes are held offering training for the intermediate as well as the advanced level job seeker.

"For those who just recently became unemployed this is an opportunity to really get to know who you are by identifying your values and your strengths, what industries and positions where your skill set and strength are transferable," said Carol Schoenig, HR Manager for Invivodata and Career/Life Coach.

"Ask yourself if you would consider part-time or freelancing to get you through this period of unemployment."

Schoenig also recommends volunteer work that aligns with your values and strengths. You never know who you might meet and introduce you to your next employer.

In a recent article from *Career News* (Vol. 9 Issue 49), titled "Key traits employers really want," here are five traits most hiring managers seek:

- **Communication skills:** This includes listening actively, asking great questions, summarizing and turning thoughts and ideas into crisp, clear and direct emails and notes.
- **Integrity:** Know what you stand for; know your values and show your honor and honesty. Live up to your promises and admit mistakes.
- **Adaptability and creativity:** Stay fresh and engaged; welcome change and see new ideas everywhere.
- **Thoughtfulness and kindness:** These demonstrate your commitment to your colleagues and your emotional intelligence. They build teamwork, collaboration, loyalty and motivation with your coworkers.
- **Critical thinking:** Use this wisdom to curate ideas, demands and more. Be thoughtful, strategic and fast moving; use great judgment and carefully reflect on choices.

Through this journey, I have discovered there are many talented, experienced individuals who find themselves out of work. Some have changed careers frequently and are more adept in this process. But there are many others, who, like me, had been with the same company for most of their career and are faced with a downsizing. Despite the backgrounds, when gathered with this diversified group, true camaraderie and support has occurred for me.

I have learned that remaining positive, persistent and patient are qualities needed in order to move ahead in securing the right job. A sense of humor does not hurt either! There are many reputable organizations and websites that can offer immediate assistance to those who are unemployed. Reaching out to everyone you know is also so vital, not only for support and encouragement, but for direction and guidance. I have been blessed with all of the assistance I have received and feel confident that I have found the silver lining in what was initially a very dark cloud.

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www.Indeed.com
www.discoverHOPEhere
www.ptwo.org
www.execunet.com
www.careerlink.com

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