

Unemployment First Hand

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The economy's heavy job losses have taken a toll on HR practitioners. Here's how some out-of-work HR professionals have coped with unemployment.

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By Susan J. Wells

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Donna Gold didn't see it coming.

As vice president of human resources at The Canyons—one of the country's largest ski and snowboard resorts—and with 11 years in the profession, she never dreamed she would become a layoff victim. But the Park City, Utah, resort was sold, the senior team restructured, and her job eliminated in April 2009.

"Never in a million years would I have expected it; I've never been unemployed in my life," she reflects. "Now I've been on the other side of the layoff desk—and it certainly hasn't been fun." As the recession took its toll, many HR professionals found themselves thrust into the ranks of the unemployed and navigating the worst job market in decades.

It stands to reason that as staff sizes shrink and businesses contract, so do the rolls of HR professionals who serve them.

HR practitioners were not "immune from the brunt of this recession's downsizing—they took it just as much as anyone," says John Challenger, chief executive officer of Challenger, Gray & Christmas in Chicago, whose research shows 2009's overall planned job cut total to be the largest on record since 2002. "There are a lot of very talented HR people who are still out of work and looking."

Harsh Reality

While no one keeps a tally on HR professionals out of work, data suggest the scope of the loss:

In December 2009, Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) researchers surveyed 842 self-identified unemployed members about their job searches and aspirations. Of 209 respondents, 85 percent indicated they had been laid off from their previous jobs. Of those who found work, 47 percent had been unemployed for six to 12 months. Forty-nine percent of those who secured jobs said they were less satisfied with their current jobs than they were with their previous ones.

Demand for professionals in most HR job categories continues to decline or remains flat, according to a monthly tracking of new, first-time online job ads by The Conference Board. Its latest report, citing January numbers, shows drops or flat results for HR managers; employment, recruitment and placement specialists; and compensation, benefits and job analysis specialists. The exception: The number of advertised vacancies for training and development specialists has shown slight improvement since March 2009, says economist June Shelp.

As the recession's grip tightened, HR professionals definitely experienced the squeeze, confirms Donna Davis, founder of Donna Davis Associates in Englewood, N.J., a recruiting firm that specializes in placing HR executives. In 2009, "companies cut very deep." She

experienced a "huge uptick in HR candidates over jobs," at times receiving 200 to 400 resumes a day from well-qualified out-of-work HR professionals.

See [Hire Me](#) chart

The Personal Toll

Kathleen Bloom, SPHR, a senior HR professional with 25 years of experience, was laid off from Integrated Device Technology Inc. in February 2009 due to economic conditions. For 10 years, she led training and development at the company's Hillsboro, Ore., site and helped with learning and development throughout the semiconductor and telecommunications company.

Since being laid off, she has applied for more than 150 jobs and had 14 interviews.

While she maintains a positive attitude and stays busy with the search, networking, continuing education and training, and volunteer activities, she acknowledges that unemployment has been personally challenging for her, her husband and her three school-age children.

With less money, "I've had to budget more carefully and cut out any extras," she says. "The family seems to understand, but it can be difficult for children to have to wait for a new coat or pair of shoes until it fits into the budget."

A severance package helped—and she has kept the security of health insurance benefits through COBRA for now, thanks to the six-month extension Congress passed in November 2009.

But she has had to plan ahead by getting advice from financial advisors about budgeting and exploring the impact of accessing retirement funds, should that become necessary.

During her unemployment, Gold applied for 30 jobs, tapped her network of contacts and joined HR networking and job support groups. But she found herself in an unlikely temporary position for three of the seven months she was out of work: picking up a hammer and working alongside her independent contractor husband, helping with hotel renovations. "I was putting up shower rods, installing wood frames around mirrors and staining wood balconies," she recalls. "You say to yourself, 'I'm going to do whatever it takes.' It kept me busy and helped with finances."

Top Job

In November 2009, Money magazine and PayScale Inc. combined analyses of jobs from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, The Conference Board and a survey of 35,000 workers. Based on the results, "HR manager" ranked 20th in a list of 50 best jobs for the future. Respondents gave the profession a "B" grade for flexibility, a "B" for benefit to society, a "C" for stress and an "A" for personal satisfaction.

The Strategies

Gold is not alone: During their unemployment, 14 percent of the HR professionals polled by SHRM worked part time in jobs outside the HR field. Seventy-four percent did unpaid volunteer work, 34 percent took HR classes or training, 21 percent took classes or training in another field, and 20 percent worked part time as HR consultants.

Atlanta-based senior-level HR professional Nancy Vepraskas, SPHR, for example, launched a consulting practice after a leadership change led to the loss of her position as vice president of human resources for the automotive parts group of Genuine Parts Co. in July 2009. Her consultancy, People, Performance & Excellence LLC, now coaches individuals and teams looking to improve workforce effectiveness, develop talent and grow businesses.

Figure out your own course, she advises. "Many people are doing all the right things—it's just that you have to keep doing all these things until circumstances change."

These and other unemployed HR practitioners learned ways to handle the challenges of unemployment, gained traction in the job market and positioned themselves for career growth. Here's a roundup of their top tips:

Commit to a full-time endeavor.

David Bockman lost his Atlanta-based job as HR director for global online computer games maker CCP North America-White Wolf Publishing in May 2009.

Bockman has since applied for more than 400 positions throughout the country, had six face-to-face interviews, five in-depth phone interviews and three phone discussions.

He approaches the search as "a full-time job" from his home in Suwanee, Ga. His routine? "I get up early, get my morning three-mile jog in, have breakfast, read the paper and am on the computer or on the way to a networking meeting by 6:45 a.m."

He tries to attend three to five networking meetings a week—many affiliated with the SHRM -Atlanta chapter and others supported by his church.

"You tend to be constantly thinking about it or working on it and, if you're not, you begin to feel guilty," he admits. "It can become all-consuming. But in many ways, it has to be." Indeed, he estimates that he spends six to eight hours a day on job search activities.

Expand your contacts.

Michael Rundle, HR manager at the Chattanooga, Tenn., office of Arcade Marketing, called or e-mailed every one of his 160 personal and professional contacts after he was laid off from two successive positions within two years—one as operations manager for an electronics manufacturer and another as HR manager for a media production company.

But he never stayed connected to the corporate attorney for an earlier employer. Interestingly, 100 applications and six interviews later, that attorney ended up being the unlikely source of Rundle's next job offer. During a discussion with the interviewing manager, the attorney saw Rundle's resume and strongly recommended him. Less than two weeks later, Rundle was the new HR manager.

"Ask every contact that you know and every contact that you don't know," Rundle advises.

Seek training.

Certificates and degrees can advance the careers of unemployed HR professionals, says Edward Lawler, director of the Center for Effective Organizations at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business.

He also suggests taking this time to learn about how other functions in corporations operate. This makes you a valuable contributor to HR because you understand the business and strategy and "you may have more opportunity to transfer to another area if HR is downsizing," he explains.

While out of work, Bloom did just that: She took advantage of information at Oregon's employment department, received money for training and refreshed her skills. She completed a certificate in human resource management at Portland State University, took a legal seminar and attended a conference sponsored by the Northwest Human Resource Management Association.

Join.

In May 2009, the SHRM-Atlanta chapter created an initiative dubbed "HR Helping HR." Intended as a one-stop way to address the out-of-work and career transition needs among its 2,500 members, the event drew 200.

Participants took home practical tools—from ideas on leveraging social networking sites in the job search to tips on how to turn interviews into job offers, says Tamara O'Neill, SHRM-Atlanta's president-elect, noting that her city has a competitive HR job market: One local employer received 4,000 resumes within two hours of posting a recent job opening.

In addition, the chapter's "Career Connections" group meets regularly; within it are a dozen networking groups. Many other SHRM chapters sponsor similar events and networks.

Volunteer.

At the Atlanta chapter's "HR Helping HR" event, Michael Esposito, HR leader and director of associate relations for the Northern Division of The Home Depot, lauded volunteering as a key in building contacts, relationships and skills.

Volunteering, he says, empowers HR professionals with "a great story to share with prospective employers when asked how you have been spending your time while unemployed."

Bloom agrees. She's looking into volunteer opportunities with her SHRM chapter. And, she met with college seniors to discuss the HR field at her college last fall.

Stay positive.

It's hard but necessary, veteran job seekers say.

"You really can't give up," Gold says. "You just never know where the next opportunity will come from."

Adds Bloom: "I was told recently that job seeking is 10 percent technical skills and 90 percent attitude. That is about right."

Look to the recovery.

Although growth in the numbers of HR jobs may be slow now, HR employment is expected to grow by a whopping 22 percent through 2018, according to projections from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2010-11 Edition.

See [A Brighter Human Resources Jobs Outlook](#) sidebar

Endgame

Even after experiencing job loss, a good number of HR practitioners say they'd never leave the profession. In the SHRM poll, 50 percent of unemployed HR professionals said they were seeking a job in HR, while just 5 percent said they were looking for work in another field.

"I love working in HR, and that hasn't changed," Bloom says. Along with the training and development focus that dominated her last job, she is expanding the scope of her search to include HR generalist, manager and business partner positions.

Rundle insists that "HR transcends all fields." Yet some of his perceptions regarding HR professionals' roles and responsibilities have changed as a result of his travail: "I work harder as an HR professional—both on myself and my career—to be more invaluable to my employer," he says. "I also work to improve my employees' outlook on their careers, and help them to improve themselves so that they have the best chance to succeed despite business changes."

Gold's story, in the meantime, has a happy ending.

In December, she landed a position as HR director for Lake Powell Resorts & Marinas in Arizona's Glen Canyon National Recreation Area.

"It was a big move but an excellent one," she says. This spring she plans to end a six-hour commute by putting her home on the market and moving her family closer to her employer.

And while her seven-month search had its ups and downs, she managed to find value in the experience.

"It has given me a renewed sense of empathy" for those who face similar job loss, she says, "and a whole lot of perspective."

The author, a contributing editor of HR Magazine, is a business journalist based in the Washington, D.C., area.