



Book Surviving a Layoff

A Week-by-Week Guide to Getting Your Life Back Together

Lita Epstein
Adams Media , 2009
Listen now

- play
- pause

00:00
00:00

Recommendation

In Country Western music, sad songs about losing your job have a special niche, something a little more wistful than David Allan Coe’s hearty “Take This Job and Shove It.” Merle Haggard’s “If We Can Make It Through December” is about a worker who gets laid off from his factory job at the end of the year. In “These Days I Barely Get By,” George Jones moans that his boss plans to lay everyone off come winter. No question about it, getting laid off is even tougher to handle than losing your dog or your pick-up truck, two other sad themes in country tunes. But getting laid off also can signal a time for renewal, starting over and moving ahead in an exciting new direction. *BooksInShort* finds that retirement expert Lita Epstein does a very solid job of showing you how to cope with life after a layoff. She explains how to make the best of a bad situation by taking practical, weekly steps. Her book will help you achieve a heads-up state of preparedness and – if you do have to pick up your guitar (or laptop) and hit that lonesome unemployment road – she tells you what song to sing next to get back in the saddle.

Take-Aways

- Layoffs are increasing and millions of people are now out of work.
- Sometimes you can spot a layoff coming, but sometimes you cannot.
- If you get laid off, preserve your health insurance and get a letter of recommendation.
- People who lose their jobs go through a grieving process similar to the turmoil of losing a loved one.
- Your first week out of work is not the time to look for a new job.
- If you are suddenly laid off, first evaluate your assets and liabilities.
- Next, assess your work capabilities and strengths, as well as your interests.
- Think carefully about any new employment direction you might follow.
- Be measured, deliberate and controlled about your job search and interviews.
- If you can’t find work within a reasonable period, consider a new career as a freelancer, consultant or contract worker.

Summary

Here’s Your Pink Slip, There’s the Door

Layoffs are a major problem. In the United States, unemployment has reached record levels. Many long-term laid-off workers are settling for lower-paying, part-time jobs, and some have quit looking, started their own entrepreneurial ventures or gone back to school for retraining. Have you been laid off? If not, are you liable to lose your job if the economy doesn’t improve? When it comes to a layoff, you will be better off if you know in advance what you could be facing, what your rights are and

how to deal with such a difficult situation.

“You may never see or hear any warnings about a layoff.”

Often, you can spot a layoff heading toward you. Is your workload lighter than normal? Budgets tighter? No new hires? Are new faces showing up at work, such as possible corporate take-over buyers? These are signs of a potential layoff but, sometimes, people get no warning. One day you have a job, the next day you don't. U.S. workers have few rights in case of termination (except health insurance extension), but you can make a case if you get fired due to discrimination.

“Most people will be laid off at least once...and many will be laid off multiple times.”

Employers do not have to pay severance wages to those with “at-will” employee status. Often, however, employers provide some type of severance to laid-off workers, generally salary for a period of time from a few weeks up to six months. Private health care is costly, but U.S. workers have rights under the “COBRA” regulations to keep their group health care coverage for 18 to 36 months. If you are laid off, also be sure to get a letter of recommendation from your employer.

Week 1: Now What Do You Do?

Never look for work the first week after you lose your job. Your mind is probably muddled, along with your emotions. Instead, try to come to terms with your new laid-off situation. This will not be easy. Find some way to tell your spouse, children, family and friends about losing your job. When you do, be mindful of your feelings and theirs. This is an emotional time for everyone. Indeed, a job layoff involves five stages of grieving, just like mourning the loss of a loved one:

1. **“Denial and isolation”** – At first, you cannot believe that you lost your job. You may unrealistically think that the boss will call soon and ask you to return. Don't use such feelings as a reason to isolate yourself. Try to stay active and involved. Exercise can help.
2. **“Anger”** – As your job loss sinks in, you may get mad. You could strike out at your family and others. Your anger is normal, but try not to take it out on those around you.
3. **“Bargaining”** – You may engage in “bargaining” with yourself as an inducement to find work. For example, “I promise to quit smoking if I get a new job in two weeks.”
4. **“Depression”** – Of course, such bargains seldom work. Thus, many out-of-work people slip into depression after the bargaining stage. Avoid going down this path. Feeling depressed will do nothing to help you cope with your challenging new situation.
5. **“Acceptance”** – You finally come to terms with being out of work. At this stage, you begin to try to fix the situation. Be careful, because you could easily slip back into depression. To avoid this problem, keep as active as possible. Eat well. Don't take on any new challenges. You already have enough on your plate.

Week 2: A New But (Hopefully) Temporary Lifestyle

Now assess where you are so you can start to build a new future. First, tackle your finances. Determine your assets, what kind of cash flow you need to get by, what your debts are, what your healthcare and benefits situation is, and what you should do with your retirement savings, if anything. Look first at assets you can turn into cash quickly, including stocks, CDs, bonds and so on. Develop a list of people you could ask for money, even if you never intend to do so. List all your cash on hand, any government unemployment benefits and the future cash you can derive from convertible assets. In the U.S., visit your local unemployment office where you may find access to valuable retraining programs and assistance with your job search.

“Whether or not you've received a notice, the actual moment of layoff is traumatic.”

After totaling your assets, list your bills. Then make a monthly budget. If you do not have enough cash assets to cover your budget, raise money by selling things. You also might be able to work on a freelance or a contract basis to bring in some quick cash. Look for low-interest or no-interest credit cards for quick cash infusions. If these tactics do not help you meet your bills, contact your creditors and request better terms. One last resort is to convert any pension funds and other retirement savings into cash. However, be aware that tapping into such assets before you retire often provokes fee and taxation penalties.

Week 3: Inventory Your Life

Once you understand your financial situation and have determined how to pay your bills, assess your life and consider what you want to do with it from this point forward. Think about your previous job. Could you have done anything to save it? Can you derive any lessons from your experience that will help you with future employment? List your weaknesses and strengths, as well as what you most liked and disliked about your work. Assess who you are. Consider your personality and the type of worker you are. Maybe this analysis will help you decide to strike out in a new direction or it may confirm your current career path.

“The worst thing that you can do during your first week of unemployment is panic and start looking for work.”

Career counseling and testing may help you figure out your next steps. In the U.S., the National Board of Certified Counselors can help you find a career counselor. When you consider someone, ask about his or her certification and specific professional training. A career counselor could help you identify available work options, develop a résumé and map out an effective job search plan. If you cannot afford a career counselor, your local unemployment office may provide free assistance. Do not venture into the marketplace until you have developed a “layoff story” that reflects positively on you. Rehearse your story; practice until you have it down pat. If you remain bitter or angry about being out of work, you are not ready to enter the job market. Try to put these feelings to rest before meeting future employers.

Weeks 4 to 8: Looking For Work

By this time, you are ready to look for work, so you need a good résumé. Print only a few copies to take with you on job interviews. Primarily, you will e-mail electronic versions of your résumé to potential employers. Make a Microsoft Word .txt file for online posting. Companies now often receive 1,000 or more résumés in response to one job posting, which makes securing work by responding to online listings extremely difficult. Companies initially screen résumés by using keywords that fit the job listed, so be sure your résumé includes probable keywords. For online résumés, list keywords in white font, so the scan picks them up, but they don't show

up or print.

“Don’t be concerned if you seem as undecided as you were when you first graduated high school or entered college.”

Your résumé can go up to two pages. Include all previous jobs that pertain to your job search, even if you held them many years ago. Do not say, “References available upon request.” Create different résumés to fit various jobs. Use active verbs, such as “built” “led” and “developed.” If you are older and have vast work experience, you may not want a chronological résumé. Instead, write a “functional skills” résumé. After your name and contact data, write a summary that profiles your work strengths and career highlights. Include the right keywords. Then add an “experience” section with a few paragraphs describing your skills. Use short sentences that detail your specific accomplishments in previous jobs. Now list your actual jobs in chronological order, then put your educational background. Proofread carefully. A résumé with typos is a dead-end. Post your new résumé on the Web, review and follow up on any pertinent online or classified ad job listings, and contact possible employers until you secure job interviews.

Week 9: Interviewing

Prepare mentally for job interviews by first overcoming the stress you feel about them. Practice deep breathing to eliminate tension. Use visualization: picture something that makes you feel relaxed, such as a beautiful sunset. Do not let other thoughts intrude. If negative thoughts arise, mentally say “Stop!” Such “thought blocking” can be highly effective. Plan a checklist for your interview; be prepared for categories you think will arise. Draft succinct, compelling answers to inquiries you can anticipate, such as, “Tell me about yourself.” “Why do you want to work here?”, “Why are you the best person for the job?” and “What are your goals?”

“Company websites are a great place to find job postings that get fewer hits than those at big online job search sites.”

Make a strong impression at the start of an interview. Smile. Shake hands firmly. Sit straight in your chair. Nod affirmatively to what the interviewer says (but don’t overdo it.) Avoid strong scents or perfumes. If the job manager must halt the interview temporarily, ask if you should wait outside his or her office. Never speak poorly about a former employer. If you have been out of work a while, and the interviewer asks why, perhaps answer that you took time off to think about what you want to do next. If you have worked at many jobs, turn this into a positive by stating that you are adaptable and learn new skills quickly. Do not bring up salary. If the interviewer asks what you expect to earn, turn the question back by asking what the job’s salary range is. After the interview, thank the manager for his or her time. Follow up with a thank-you note by e-mail.

Week 10: Working Again

Congratulations: You found a job and you’re ready to go back to work. As a seasoned worker, you may feel that you can slide right into a new job without worrying about office politics. Not true. You are the “new kid on the block,” so learn the territory before you make any rash moves. Go slow. Take it easy at first, not on work, but on how you come across to fellow employees.

“Loyalty toward a company...is dead. Yes, you should do a good job, but always keep your eye on yourself and what’s best for your career.”

Make a strong impression by always being friendly and positive. Try hard to “fit in” with everyone. One tactic is to join any after-hour company activities, like a softball or bowling league. Be a good listener and a team player. Thank your co-workers as they help you learn the ropes. Let your new boss know how you are doing on work tasks and on acclimation. If your new job is in a field you don’t know well, consider special training or education. Your firm may even pay tuition, although company policies often require you to be on the job for a year first.

What If You Don’t Find Work?

Some people are fortunate and quickly find new jobs. But many are not so lucky. Often, this is not due to any personal failing, but rather is the result of a dismal economy, a severe industry retrenchment or related factors. What if this happens to you? First, stay upbeat, active and engaged. Don’t take rejection personally. However, do double-check your résumé and references. Make sure that everything is just as you want it. If it looks like you may not be able to return to full-time work in your industry any time soon, get busy building alternatives. Enhance your job skills. Take a business class. Become more adept on a computer. Join a public speaking group.

“When you first start a job, no matter how much experience you’ll be bringing to your new position, remember that you are the new kid on the block.”

If you are out of work for an extended period, stay on a schedule. Get up at the same time every day. Plan a full day of activities, whatever they may be. Include time for exercise to clear your mind and make you feel better. Since money will become increasingly important as the months roll by, consider part-time work, even at minimum wage, to bring in some cash. Another way to earn fees is to freelance, consult or become a contract worker. If you do, be as professional in your new work as you were in your full-time job. This income may be the only money you earn for a while as you work hard to carve out a new life for yourself in your new freelance, consulting or contract worker career.

“Don’t even think about starting a new business from scratch unless you have the financial resources on hand to fund the business for a year as well as pay for your personal needs.”

Many laid-off employees don’t ever want to work for a boss again. They are ready to work for themselves. If you have the money to invest, you may want to purchase an already established business to run, but do not overpay for it. Conduct the necessary due diligence regarding the firm’s financial statements. Consider buying a franchise. Or, perhaps you want to start your own business from scratch. If so, don’t jump in with your eyes closed. Research whether a viable market exists for your proposed new products or services. Fully investigate the competition. Create a formal business plan.

“Getting up, dusting off your clothes and restarting your life after a layoff is hard work – but it’s also a great opportunity to reinvent yourself into just what you want to be.”

Life after a layoff can be challenging, but it also can become a turning point. Ultimately, things will be whatever you make them. Your future is in your hands and there’s beauty in that.

About the Author

Lita Epstein, M.B.A., teaches at the College of Graduate Business and Management at the University of Phoenix. She has written numerous nonfiction books on such topics as Medicare and Social Security.
