

Surviving Unemployment

By
Mariette Edwards

The job market is all over the news. Even though it looks like it is starting to improve, there are still plenty of people who are out of work, frustrated and getting desperate. The other day I received an email from someone who was all of those things with a good measure of anger besides. He had just read my article on how to sell results achieved in prior employment when interviewing for a new job. This reader felt that I was completely out of touch with the job market and that I really didn't understand how hard it is to find work. From his comments, it was clear he thought I had never experienced anything like what he is going through. That's why I decided to tell you a story. If you or someone you know is out of work, what I am about to tell you may give you hope.

In October, 1989 I was Director of Human Resources for a major telecommunications company in Atlanta. I lived in a beautiful two-story condominium in an upscale high rise in midtown. I drove an expensive sports car, had a nice 401K plan and a good income. A year later I put my last twenty-five cents in the collection plate at my church and wondered how I was going to get through another day.

Surprise! You've been downsized.

We all knew something was going on in the office that Friday the 13th. We had been asked to stay late for a meeting. As I sat in the President's office at 7:00 PM, I heard the lawyers tell me that the company was downsizing and that my position was one that would be affected. Curious. I was always the person who was part of the team making those decisions, usually counseling the bearers of the news on how to say what had to be said, how to collect the company's property, how to escort the person out of the building. Now it was my turn. Not one of the frightening thoughts that gripped me in that moment could have prepared me for what I would actually go through over the next two years. It was, in fact, my worst nightmare. But, here's the good news. I lived through it and along the way I learned a lot about the way things work.

Something to fall back on.

When I was a kid my mother, who was perhaps the greatest executive secretary on Earth in the 1960s, insisted I learn to type. She said I might need to fall back on that skill one day and she was right. It wasn't so very long after leaving that job that I was earning my living as a temp. Along the way I had a very brief and miserable experience as a recruiter for a headhunting firm. I thought this might be the perfect work for me. I was, after all, a great recruiter in the corporate world. I'd even won awards for it. But this kind of recruiting was very different and my income was completely dependent on my results. Mornings consisted of smiling and dialing, cold-calling to troll for job listings, afternoons were spent looking for candidates while beating off unqualified, unsolicited hopefuls with

a stick. I learned I could not stand rigid structure to my days. I also learned I had a very low rejection threshold. I got out as fast as I got in.

Back in the temp world again, I was assigned to invisible jobs in major banks, architectural firms and real estate management companies all around the city. I, who had managed temporary services budgets of hundreds of thousands of dollars, been courted by all the major players for my business was now “the temp” herself.

As a temp, you basically disappear. Since you won't be there that long, your temporary co-workers don't want to invest any time in you. It's like you're a ghost observing their world from a parallel universe. Being unseen isn't half as bad as being bored which is what you are most of the time since they just want your body in that chair in case someone should need you. But the biggest impact of temping or doing any work that is not your life's work is how quickly you can lose your sense of value and self-confidence, how fast you can forget who you are and what you're good at. That certainly was my story. I recall an interview I had for an HR position during that time. The recruiter leaned back in his chair and said, “You've been looking for work for a year? What's wrong with you?” What, indeed!

Where did the money go?

It's amazing how fast the money went. First the unemployment ran out, then the 401K plan, then the tiny inheritance I had received from my best friend who died that year and then what the Coroner in the small California town where my father who had also died that year advised me he had left in his checking account. I remember the moment when I knew I couldn't make the mortgage payments anymore. I can't think of another time when things looked so completely black.

Life goes on.

OK. Obviously it all worked out because here I am. But before it did, I dressed windows and arranged displays for a boutique hair salon, assembled and packed products for a new line of educational toys, inventoried supplies and did data entry for \$5 an hour and worked part-time in a dirty, dungeon of a building on the wrong side of town. I also fulfilled my commitment to find a buyer for my condo so I could avoid foreclosure. The deal I worked with the bank is a model for what can be done when all one has left is her wits. (More on this below.) I also had the wonderful opportunity to work for a professional speaker who was opening an office near where I lived. She taught me everything about the speaking business, knowledge and skills I am still using today. I met some of the most wonderful people who exposed me to many new and different ways of thinking. I got a chance to sample real humility as I ended up on a temp assignment working for people who used to work for me. And, I think best of all, I lost my attachment to things. In fact, the moment I let go of my need to hang on to my stuff, I achieved real freedom and, coincidentally, things started turning around for me right about then.

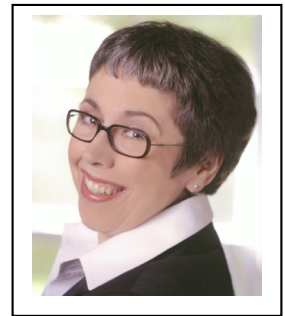
A few things I learned about the way things work:

- **We are all always self-employed.** I was and am responsible for my own results. It's up to me to act.
- **Attitude is more important than experience.** People were always commenting on my great attitude, regardless of the work I was doing. I was offered full-time work almost everywhere I temped.
- **Control only what you can control.** There are only three things any of us have any real control over and those are attitude, what we think about and how we spend our time. Control those instead of trying to control the outcome of the situation you find yourself in and the possibility of good results are greatly increased.
- **Find something to be grateful for every day.** No matter how bad things got, I somehow always had enough to eat for which I was very, very, very grateful. I always had just what I needed on any particular day.
- **People want to help you if you ask for what you need.** My life has been filled with random acts of kindness and generosity from people I didn't know.
- **Do all you can to keep your morale up.** When I was briefly working as a recruiter and learning just how low my rejection threshold was, a colleague told me about a trick he used to keep his spirits up. He wrote down every good thing that happened every day, especially the compliments he received. I immediately started what I called a "brag book" where I kept a record of all that I did including the wonderful notes I got on various temp assignments and records of the volunteer activities I engaged in. It started as a one-inch ring binder and today it is a four-inch binder and continues to grow. It's a terrific reminder of how far I've come.
- **Initiate conversations about money early.** The worst thing you can do when you are running out of money is to hide from your creditors. This is especially true if you own a home and you can't make your mortgage payments. When I was facing foreclosure, I talked to the mortgage lender. I told them what I had done to try to sell my condo. I researched the market in my neighborhood and identified how many units like mine were on the market and how many had sold (none!) as well as the impact of competing apartment buildings. I created my own flyer that I passed out all over town. In fact, it was that flyer that brought me a buyer. Because I had done the research, I could make a compelling argument to the bank to take the ridiculously low offer the buyer presented. I knew it was the best they (and I) would get. They took it, forgave me the thousands of dollars shortfall between the offer and the mortgage balance and even paid off the condo fees that had been piling up for a year. This experience proved to me that anything is possible!

If you are unemployed and going through hard times, I hope you will triple your willingness to do what it takes to make it through. In my experience, that is the most important choice of all.

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