

***Fired, Laid Off, Out of a Job: Understanding, Coping, Surviving Career Transitions***  
***By B. Keith Simerson, Ed.D.***

**Times Have Changed**

In today's turbulent economy, fundamental workplace principles appear to have changed. Seldom can we expect (and seldom are we expected) to work continuously for the same employer until retirement. Lay offs reflect a stark new reality: even if we do a good job and are loyal to our employer, we cannot rely on our employer to return that loyalty with continued employment.

**No Job Is Secure**

Feel as if job security no longer exists? In reality, it never really existed. The nation's unemployment rate is now at or near its highest level since the early 1990s. Unemployment claims, unemployment benefit payouts, and the number of layoffs announced in a single month are also at or near their highest levels. Such statistics, while interesting, are "background noise" to those of us currently employed. Unfortunately, everyone—by virtue of working in today's business environment—is at risk of being subject to a job cut (layoff or discharge).

**Turbulent Times Are Here To Stay**

We must keep certain key factors "at the forefront" of our minds as we function in today's turbulent work world. Whether currently employed, at imminent risk of being discharged (or have just been laid off), or laid off for a while and back on the job market, be sure to consider the following factors when making decisions and taking action.

**Currently Employed?**

If you currently are employed, keep in mind we are all at risk. Make decisions now and take decisive action to bulletproof your career! Protect yourself—no one else will. Our turbulent economy, the competitive business environment, and the need for employers to meet the economic expectations of shareholders or partners create an environment where companies are willing to turn to layoffs as a business solution. This mindset is not necessarily bad, so long as decision makers treat employees honestly and with dignity and respect. This is not a temporary trend—prepare to work within such a business environment throughout the remainder of your career.

- Feel you might be happier working elsewhere? Think things through before resigning.
- Never "burn bridges" when resigning.

**About To Be (Or Recently) Discharged?**

If you are at imminent risk of being—or have just been—discharged, your next steps must be prudent ones. Make sure your initial decisions and actions are positive and in your best interest! Consider the following factors:

- Rumors spread quickly in the workplace. Attempt to obtain additional information from your supervisor about your status.
- You see the "handwriting on the wall." Attempt to work with your supervisor or manager to resolve this situation.
- Do not waste time trying to challenge your dismissal (unless you have solid grounds to do so).
- If offered a severance package, be prudent; if offered a limited severance package, be careful about asking for more.

**Out Of Work And On The Job Market?**

If you have been out of work for a while and are now back on the job market, take control of your future and plan for career success. Make decisions now and take decisive action to crystallize your career! If you are back on the job market due to a recent lay off (or other type of separation), consider the following factors:

- Immediately focus on "getting your arms around" the financial aspect of your job loss.
- Maintain focus as you work through this career transition.
- Plan and prepare, prior to launching a full-scale job search.
- Make your job search as efficient as possible.
- If you do not have an elaborate personal network, work to expand it.
- Firms and institutions sponsor Alumni Programs—they typically are helpful.
- Take advantage of placement and outplacement services.
- If you can't get your arms around your job loss, ask for help.

**All is Not Lost**

This information may prove useful to anyone working in today's business environment. Keep the initial comments in mind as you try to understand events occurring throughout the work world (events occurring around—and potentially to—you). Keep the subsequent comments "at the forefront" of your thinking as you formulate and execute your career strategy. Doing so will keep you pointed in the right direction, help you keep your priorities in order, and help you maintain a proper perspective.

Although now sensitized to a variety of issues, round out your awareness by obtaining and reviewing information presented elsewhere. Move forward simultaneously on several fronts. Conduct a self-assessment, develop an action plan, and then execute your action plan in a planned and purposeful manner.

Make career change (whether planned or unplanned) a boost to a higher level!

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B. Keith Simerson and Michael D. McCormick recently published a book, *Fired, Laid Off, Out of a Job: A Manual for Understanding, Coping and Surviving* (ISBN 1-56720-634-4, Greenwood Publishing Group). The book discusses these topics in detail for the benefit of employees, employers, HR professionals, and educators.

Anyone can offer medical and legal information; only licensed physicians and lawyers can give medical and legal advice. Information presented here is general. It is not based on your specific set of medical or legal facts—it is meant to serve as helpful information, rather than advice. Contact a licensed physician or an attorney for advice tailored specifically for you.

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## Maximizing the Impact of Professional References

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Presentation to Tri-City  
Unemployment Group

B. Keith ("B.K.") Simerson, Ed.D.  
St. Charles, IL

## The Successful Job Search

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- Organize and manage your job search
- **Develop an effective resume**
  - > **Manage Professional References**
    - Select
    - Prepare
    - Leverage
- Prepare for, participate in, and follow-up on interviews
- Manage the job offer process

## Selecting Your References

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- Decide on the six key messages you would like to send the prospective employer. These key messages may relate to your ability to: lead, make decisions, solve problems, negotiate deals, resolve conflict, and communicate to diverse groups.
- Identify three people you trust who can comment on your capabilities, experiences, and accomplishments.

## Selecting Your References

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- Answer this question: Are these three individuals able and willing to share these six key messages with prospective employers?
- If the answer to this question is "no," identify three other people. If the answer is "yes," contact each person.

## Selecting Your References

- Ask each prospective reference if he or she is willing to share information with prospective employers. If "no," identify someone else. If "yes," inquire further.
- Ask each prospective reference if he or she is willing to share your message with prospective employers. If the answer to this question is "no," identify someone else. If the answer is "yes," prepare the individual to serve as a professional reference.

## Preparing Your References

- Ask each reference which capabilities, experiences, and accomplishments they are most comfortable commenting on.
- Each reference may cite:
  - > Five or six capabilities,
  - > Two or three experiences, and
  - > Three or four accomplishments.

## Preparing Your References

- Compare the information the references are planning to share:
  - > Are there gaps needing to be addressed?
  - > Are there redundancies (some repetition is good, in that it verifies what is being said) needing to be addressed?
- If each reference is sharing the exact same information, alert them to this fact and determine if there is other data he or she is willing to share.

## Preparing Your References

- Compare the information the references are planning to share against the key messages you would like to communicate to prospective employers. Are some or all of them being communicated?
  - > If so, you are in great shape.
  - > If not, alert each reference to this fact and determine if he or she has other information to share more closely associated with the key messages you need to send.

## Typical Questions for References

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- How long have you known this individual?
- In what capacity do you two know each other?
- How much authority or responsibility did this individual have?
- Do you view this individual as a leader?
- Did this individual work well with others—in other words, is this a team player?

## Typical Questions for References

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- From your viewpoint, what were this individual's most significant personal and/or professional accomplishments?
- What do you consider to be this individual's most valuable contributions to the organization?
- Is there anything I have not asked that I should ask?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell me before we end this discussion?

## The Effective Recommendation Letter

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- Begins by providing the following background information
  - How long and in what capacity he or she has known you.
  - General information about your overall authority and responsibilities.
- Next, provides more detailed information about you. Keeping the factors previously covered in mind, provides information on your capabilities, key experiences, and accomplishments.

## The Effective Recommendation Letter

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- Concludes with a vote of confidence.
- May take the form of a statement similar to, "As my comments indicate, I am impressed with this individual's skills and abilities and therefore, without reservation, recommend him (or her) for the position he (or she) is seeking."

## Using References to Counter Typical Concerns

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- You would like to work in a particular industry but lack work experience in that particular field.
- You have been just been laid off for the "x" time in the same number of years and are afraid you will be viewed as a "job hopper."
- You were just laid off, you are "x" years old and feel there may be an underlying concern about your age.

## When You Lack Work Experience...

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- Stress systems, processes, tools, and techniques within the desired industry that you are familiar with or have knowledge of.
- Stress your familiarity with networks, suppliers, and distribution channels.
- Stress the capabilities and assets you possess that are transferable to the desired industry.

## When You Have Concerns About "Job Hopping..."

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- Be factual...reinforce message that lay off involved others and was not within your control.
- Stress the positive aspects of previous positions—focusing on responsibilities and accomplishments.
- Provide personal references from previous employers.

## When Concerned About Your Age...

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- Stress the challenges you have encountered, the solutions you have helped create, the lessons you have learned, the breadth and depth of your experiences, your proven track record.
- Stress the capabilities and assets you possess that are transferable to the desired organization.
- Stress your level of competency, self-motivation, and self-confidence.