

Chapter 7

MIDLIFE JOB SEARCH:

Managing Long Term Unemployment

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Abstract

Finding a job in today's high unemployment environment is challenging, especially for midlife job seekers. While the principles of traditional career searches remain valid, mid-lifers may need some adjustments to accommodate today's conditions. Four factors should be taken into consideration during the job search: Seekers must address the implications of a protracted job search very early in the job search process; Job seekers must evaluate and make decisions about the importance of seeking meaningful work and their need for income; Job seekers must address the emotional toll of the job search process and the impact on their family; and, once new employment is secured, individuals can benefit from understanding the implications of transitioning back to employment and developing strategies for confronting them. This article presents a perspective on proactively addressing the job search length, following one's passion vs. need for income, using techniques from positive psychology and engaging in positive thinking, and adopting a realistic perspective about applying one's skills in a new environment.

Finding a job in today's high unemployment environment is challenging, especially for midlife job seekers. Although their former jobs may be gone, their professional aspirations, financial obligations and desire to engage in meaningful work are not. This has resulted in a number of challenges for midlife job seekers, not the least of which is the arduous and lengthy job search. A recent Wall Street Journal article (Lahart 2010) cited the example of an individual who lost her job, received career counseling, and acquired additional skills. The individual stated "I did everything right and it still took me 14 months." Indeed, interviews with several career counselors indicate that it taking longer to find new jobs, as much as twice as long as it did a few years ago.

What does this mean for the unemployed midlife adult? While the principles of traditional career searches remain valid, they may need some adjustments to accommodate today's conditions.

Specifically, in this changed job search environment mid-life job seekers can benefit from considering four factors. With the extended time to find a job, seekers

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must address the implications of a protracted job search very early in the job search process. While a job loss provides an opportunity to explore new passions, abilities and experiences, midlife job seekers may feel conflicted about following their heart vs. filling their wallet, that is, balancing the desire for meaningful work and their need for income.

An extended job search extracts a significant emotional toll on job seekers and their families. Addressing the emotional upheaval, frustrations and job search weariness can support the job search process. Finally, while landing a new job results in many positive emotions, those who have been unemployed for an extended period of time may also experience some deeper anxieties beyond the normal “new job jitters”. These employees can benefit from understanding the implications of transitioning back to employment and developing strategies for confronting them.

Preparing for a Potentially Lengthy Job Search

“I had no idea how long it would take me to find a new job. I have been out of work for over a year. I was fortunate to receive severance but have used it up and have dipped deeply into my savings. If I had known it would take this long I would have encouraged my wife to start looking for a job the day I lost mine and would have cut household expenses earlier than I did. “--- 57 year old former accounting manager and out of work for 14 months

In today’s tough job search environment it is important to address the ramifications of the job search length early in the search process. Newly laid off employees need to get a realistic picture of their financial situation and include early involvement with others who depend on their in-come. Sometimes the newly unemployed delay sharing the full financial picture with partners, children, and parents until their financial situation has deteriorated significantly.

In addition, newly laid-off employees and their families need to consider a number of What if scenarios such as,

What if I make less than what I made before?

What if I find a good job in another city?

What if it takes me 12 months to find another job?

What if it takes longer?

What if my new job doesn’t have benefits?

Many job seekers have found that they need to take interim measures to help them through the transition period until they land their desired job. These include short term assignments, lifestyle reductions, spousal employment and family member assistance. Other job seekers have turned to making hobbies or interests into money making ventures. For example, one out-of work manager began selling the nutritional supple-

ments he had been purchasing for years. Another sold homemade pet treats. Career support can help midlife seekers evaluate these issues in order to address them proactively and develop contingency plans.

Sometimes the length of the job search is increased by job seekers' inability to start a job search immediately. Some midlife job seekers benefit from a respite before they begin a job search. For example, one manager was distracted on her last job by significant demands for taking care of a parent with serious health concerns. In fact, upon reflection she speculates that this distraction may have impacted her job performance and contributed to her being selected for layoff. She reviewed her financial situation and determined that her best course of action was to focus the first three months following her layoff on obtaining appropriate care for her father and developing a longer term parental care solution in conjunction with her siblings. Following this she was able to approach her job search with a high level of energy and a reduced level of distraction. In this case access to dependent care resources hastened this job seeker's ability to search for a job.

In another case, a professional employed for 30 years was so distraught by his job loss that he did not initiate the outplacement program provided by his former employer. He simply couldn't mobilize himself and needed time and ultimately counseling before moving on. The loss of a job can be devastating and for many it is essential to deal with the stress and grief before moving forward with the job search.

Sometimes midlife job seekers want to take a break, a vacation from work before beginning their job search. From a career search perspective this lost time immediately following the job layoff may negatively impact the job search. However, for some job seekers time to decompress, reconnect with family and friends or take care of personal health and other issues is beneficial before pursuing a next job. It is important that job seekers who take a break understand the risks and benefits involved in this decision and create a concrete plan that includes the length of break, the level of job search activities, if any, and a plan to handle financial obligations.

For example a 52 year old female technology manager had long desired to take a job break and had solid savings when her employer laid her off with a severance package. She identified some characteristics for an ideal job tied to industry and made key contacts in her target industries. She limited her job search to a few hours a week for four months and pursued only opportunities that met her ideal criteria. During this four month period she spent concentrated time with her children, reconnected with friends and started a fitness program. At the end of that time she pursued her search in earnest. In thinking this through she said "I decided

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that I could take a four month break now and accept that this might slow my job search. Although I may need to work a few years longer before retirement I believe this break will give me the energy and perspective to do that.”

Pursuing One’s Passion – or Not

I’ve been putting off following my passion for years. It looks like I’ll have to wait a few more before I ever get to it.---62 year old former warehouse manager and out of work for 14 months.

Midlife job change provides an opportunity to reevaluate past job satisfaction and consider current satisfaction drivers and interests to obtain a highly satisfying career. Developmental psychologists (Erikson, 1963; Levinson et al, 1978) have recognized that midlife presents individuals the opportunity to reflect on the past, meaningful experiences and personal contributions and prioritize what’s important. For many, the social and financial pressure of climbing the ladder has diminished, giving way to an interest in contributing to the bigger picture of the world around them or finding peace of mind by following one’s dreams. Many mid-lifers who self-reflect are able to build on the satisfying aspects from past jobs and seek jobs that contain the satisfying components. The job profile may not be the same as the one left behind.

For some who would prefer a new career path, the length of the search creates financial pressures resulting in the temptation to take any job I can get. While this may be justifiable in some cases, our interviews with career counselors have found that few of their midlife clients need to take such extreme measures. Indeed many job seekers found comparable, better, or more satisfying positions. However searches generally took longer and required strong commitment to a comprehensive job search strategy. These successful job seekers employed a number of approaches including focusing on what was most important, understanding there may be tradeoffs for following their dreams, postponing their dreams and finally, pulling out all the stops to make their dreams come true.

One strategy employed by job seekers focused on finding meaningful work is to identify clearly what is critically important to them, i.e. the nonnegotiable, and concentrate on opportunities that provide this. The nonnegotiable for one client involved engaging in socially responsible work. To achieve this she was willing to let go of past priorities such as pay, commuting time and job title. Some job seekers who attained their priorities clearly identified, vetted and accepted tradeoffs. They specified areas where they were willing to be flexible in order to obtain an opportunity that met their requirements. It is critical that these tradeoffs be fully evaluated by the individual and significant others in their lives

upfront. For example, one executive said that he was willing to relocate for the right opportunity defined by industry, responsibility and compensation. When he actually received a desirable job offer in another city he and his family reconsidered the impact of disrupting the lives of their two teenage sons and selling a house whose mortgage was more than its value. Ultimately, the executive declined the offer, resulting in wasted effort on the part of the executive and the hiring company because both had spent an enormous amount of time in the selection and interview process. Tradeoffs such as pay, level of responsibility, titles, relocation, extensive travel and benefit reductions can undermine satisfaction with a new job and need to be thoroughly understood and accepted early in the job search process.

Some job seekers pursue parallel career paths by seeking an acceptable job while preparing for a deeply satisfying one. For example, one manager's job was eliminated a few years before his planned retirement. Long term he had planned for a part-time retirement career as a piano tuner which engaged his passion for music. This profession involves a lengthy apprenticeship and would not provide the income he desired to bridge him to his planned retirement. This individual chose to pursue a job that leveraged his business skills and experience. He determined that he would work at this until he achieved his target retirement savings, while simultaneously obtaining the skills needed to become a qualified piano tuner.

Job seekers who successfully get what they want often demonstrate an intense single-minded focus towards achieving their career objective. They treat their job search as a full time job, organizing their job search efforts and identifying their best job search strategies. One successful midlife job seeker who found a target job, utilized every opportunity offered by an outplacement job firm and networked extensively for job leads. When he landed his position five months later, he commented that he felt that he had just completed an intense work assignment and needed a vacation before starting his new job.

These strategies involved job seekers reframing their focus from the impossibility of finding the perfect job to achieving what is most important to them and identifying the tradeoffs they were willing to make.

Positive Psychology and the Importance of Attitude

My moods fluctuate as my job search goes through its ups and downs. I see the impact on my family as they share their concerns about my health and also their security. Sometimes it's just so hard to stop thinking about my fears and anxieties. --52 year old former purchasing agent and out of work for 8 months.

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With a longer and more intense job search it's not uncommon for job seekers to feel discouraged and frustrated at times. Techniques from the science of positive psychology provide insights that may help individuals and their families manage through this period. Miller and Frisch (2009) talk about the value of happiness boosters. They provide a number of research based actions and behaviors that can help improve an individual's level of satisfaction. These include activities such as physical exercise, writing about past experiences and future hopes, recalling happy experiences, giving to others, forgiving and expressing gratitude.

In order to gain insights about how an understanding of positive psychology might support midlife job seekers one of the authors conducted a series of group coaching sessions with out of work managers based on positive psychology research. These sessions supplemented traditional career outplacement and focused on how participants could apply positive psychology insights to their job search efforts.

Happiness boosters discussed included physical exercise, celebrating good news, forgiveness, expressing gratitude, savoring the positive, performing acts of kindness, as well as others.

Participants reported increased confidence that they would achieve their job search goals, perceived improvement in their ability to turn obstacles into opportunities, and an increase in their overall happiness levels. At the end of the session series each participant was able to identify specific behaviors and tools to support his or her personal well-being. These were different for each person, consistent with Miller and Frisch's observation that happiness boosters are highly individualistic. While these observations are based on only a single group they do suggest that there may be value in supporting traditional job searches with ways to bolster job seekers' well-being. These observations are in line with research documenting that positive psychology interventions can positively impact well-being (Sin and Lyubomirsky, 2009).

Cognitive psychologists have long emphasized the importance of addressing negative and nonproductive thinking and self-talk (Ellis, 2001; Beck, 1970). For example, a component of some happiness boosters is adopting a healthy self-talk strategy. Psychologists have used self-talk techniques, sometimes referred to as cognitive techniques, to help individuals control reactions to adverse life events. The idea is that by challenging debilitating thoughts and replacing them with productive, healthy thoughts a positive attitude replaces a negative, doomsday attitude. In the case of a lengthy, exhausting job search, an individual may be thinking discouraging thoughts such as I'll never get a job. I'm too old. This type of thinking can lead to depression and inertia. Rather, a thought process of I'll get a good job if I am persistent. I need to be patient and

stick with it would lead to more beneficial outcomes, i.e. continued job search activities. Challenging ones self-talk is not referring to Pollyanna-type thinking. Simply put, it is an approach that helps people frame a situation in a way that brings out productive, healthy behaviors, and this, according to happiness expert Sonja Lyubomirsky (2008), increases optimism. Other happiness boosters are targeted at doing something differently, such as changing a routine or habit. In the case of the lengthy, exhausting job search, one can maintain stamina through physical exercise, maintain healthy focus through volunteering, and continue positive supportive relationships, for example.

Approaching and sustaining a job search with a positive approach, a willingness to view challenges as opportunities, and a belief that one can achieve their job goals can be helpful for actually achieving those goals. The authors conducted interviews with career placement counselors about midlife job seekers who have overcome the challenges in their recent job search. The counselors agreed that a positive attitude and a can-do approach were at the top of the list. Arrogance and rigidity were at the bottom. An example was shared about two former executives who were conducting their job searches. One was miserable and found the process of looking for a job “beneath” him. He repeatedly talked about his former status and refused to consider options that were presented to him that didn’t fit his notion of what he deserved. His job search was unnecessarily stressful-for him and those around him. On the other hand, another executive made the decision to step up to the challenge and frame the job search as “an opportunity” to learn something new. Throughout his search, he was welcomed by interviewers who found him dynamic and vibrant. His positive experience in the job search was determined by his attitude and his approach. The case in point, one’s beliefs, self-talk, and actions made a difference.

New Job – New Anxieties

I just started back to work and I feel so incompetent. I think I’ve forgotten half of what I needed to know in my last job. I am constantly questioning myself.---64 year old former engineer who found work after 1 year.

Landing the right job is just the beginning. While a bit of angst when starting a new job is common, it may be more challenging for the employee who has been out of work for a long time or is making a significant career change. A recent article in the Wall Street Journal (Lublin, 2010) points out that after a long stretch of unemployment the newly employed fear getting laid off again, worry about their performance, and experience several stress symptoms. New workers may also experience some uncertainty about applying their skills in a new environment.

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Wilson and Harlow-Rosentraub (2009) use the term interrupted mastery to describe the uncertainty of new volunteers as they begin to apply their existing skills to new tasks in a not-for-profit environment. They state that mastery is interrupted because individuals must understand new systems and determine how their skills can be applied to them. They note these individuals tend to be surprised at their own uncertainty. While these observations were based on midlife volunteers in not-for-profits, they may be applicable to those making a change after working in the same environment for many years or moving to a different line of work. Career awareness does not end when a client obtains that coveted new job. Similar actions that help an individual during the job search will also help thereafter. When one feels intimidated by new responsibilities and environments, remembering occasions in the past when success was achieved bolsters confidence. Continuing to engage in activities that make an individual feel good are also important. In addition, job seekers who have been unemployed for an extended period may have made lifestyle changes such as taking on additional household or caretaking responsibilities that need to be renegotiated upon a return to work. It may be beneficial to think of the achievement of obtaining a job as a significant milestone in the job search process, but not the final step. The final step involves successfully adjusting to the new job.

In summary, today's high unemployment environment creates new challenges for the midlife job seeker. While traditional career support strategies continue to be beneficial, additional considerations can help address these challenges. Firstly, midlife job seekers need to tackle the financial and other impacts of a lengthy job search early in the process. Secondly, it is important for many midlife job seekers to negotiate the balance of seeking meaningful work and meeting financial obligations. Given these it is helpful for job seekers to invoke specific strategies to stay focused on their goals and maintain a positive outlook through the search. Finally, once job seekers have landed positions they must prepare thoughtfully for the new job adjustment.

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