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Hone your skills to survive a layoff, experts advise

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NEW YORK (AP) — Losing a job can mean losing more than just a paycheck. Without some planning, an extended layoff can cause job skills to fade and make someone less attractive to potential employers.

And it's not just the unemployed 8.1 percent of the work force that has to worry about a personal brain drain. Add in those working part time or who have given up looking for a job, and the Department of Labor says 14.8 percent of the U.S. work force is "underutilized."

Those people need to find ways to keep their skills up.

"Maintaining your skills and advancing your skills is critical to advancing if you're employed, and getting a new job if you're unemployed," said Dean Tracy, a recruiter and career coach in San Ramon, Calif.

But how do you stay on top of your field when you've been downsized? Tracy and other career counseling experts identified three potential avenues:

CONTINUING EDUCATION

Even for those who are not out of work, learning new skills or brushing up old ones is always beneficial. Several experts said classes that offer certifications are particularly helpful.

"What it tells the employer is you're not sitting around wondering what to do next, you're taking the initiative," said Tracy. Those who can't attend a class should look for online training.

Technology and business models have evolved so rapidly that anyone who got their education 10 or more years ago is no longer current in the market, said Don Straits, president of the Auburn, Calif.-based executive search firm Corporate Warriors: "That MBA from Stanford that you got in 1978 or 1980? That and a dollar will get you a cup of coffee."

Straits said it is vital to take advantage of Web-based technologies. "I won't say they need to be Twittering," he said, referring to the fast-growing service through which users send out short messages. "But they do need to be connected or involved in Web 2.0. It's not just a matter of surfing the Web any more."

Social networking, he said, is a good place to get acquainted with the expanding possibilities online. It's an area that can have numerous applications once you're back in the workplace. Pointing to a 24-year-old staffer at his company who has 4,000 "friends" on MySpace and 300 connections on LinkedIn, Straits said, "He will never have a problem connecting to a position."

Experts in using resources like Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn might be able to help others by teaching a class or leading a workshop for a professional organization. Another possibility is to seek an adjunct faculty position at a local college.

"Having a faculty appointment is never a bad thing," said Roy Cohen, a master coach for The Five O'Clock Club, a New York-based career coaching network.

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Beyond the potential for teaching fellow members, professional organizations typically offer access to broader workshops and seminars. But Straits said it's important not only to join, but to be active in professional groups. "One of the best jobs in any association is the membership chairman," he said, "because you are going to get to know every single company or individual in that organization."

Professional organizations also often need help with tasks like maintaining their Web sites or organizing their finances, providing more opportunities to put languishing skills to use.

VOLUNTEERING

Donating your time can also add some interest to a résumé and demonstrate a commitment to community that might impress a potential employer.

Tracy says it's a mistake to rule out listing a volunteer position on your résumé: "Just because you got paid or didn't get paid does not diminish the importance of that being a job that enables you to enhance your skills."

Look for organizations that connect volunteers with not-for-profits needing expert help. The Taproot Foundation is one national group that provides pro bono help with things like strategic planning, annual report preparation and marketing.

Taproot Recruitment Manager Melanie Damm said the group has seen a huge influx of volunteers in the past six months. But, she said, "we still have shortages for very specific sorts of skill sets" like Web site development and graphic design.

Being open to working as an unpaid intern at a for-profit company, or volunteering to help on a specific project, might get you in the door. Cohen, of The Five O'Clock Club, has a client who approached a company offering to be an apprentice. "They were very taken with his strategy," he said.