

Dow Jones Reprints: This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com)

[See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#)

[Order a reprint of this article now](#)

**THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.**

WSJ.com

CAREERS | DECEMBER 9, 2008

## Explaining Your Layoff to a Job Recruiter

*Skip the Details of Your Departure in the Cover Letter; Avoid Self-Pity or Bitterness at the Interview, Experts Say*

By SARAH E. NEEDLEMAN

If you're among the more than one million workers who've been laid off this year, finding a new job will require a strategy that differs from a typical search.

The competition may be stiffer than anything you've faced before, and you'll likely be asked difficult questions about your dismissal. Knowing where to look, how to set yourself apart and what to say about your situation could mean the difference between getting a job and sinking deeper into unemployment.

A critical first step is to come to terms with your job loss, says Cynthia Shapiro, a career strategist in Woodland Hills, Calif., and author of "What Does Somebody Have to Do to Get a Job Around Here." Some people become angry, others insecure. While these reactions are normal, they can derail a job search should recruiters pick up on them. "You have to take some time to mentally regroup," says Ms. Shapiro.

### *Cast a Wide Net*

Once you're ready to hit the pavement, consider that the wider you can look geographically, the greater your chances. To identify employers that are still hiring, start perusing local newspapers, trade magazines and business publications, advises Howard Seidel, a partner at Boston-based Essex Partners, a provider of career services. "Some [layoff victims] stop reading newspapers because it can get depressing," he says. But if you keep at it, "you'll get a feel for what companies seem to be doing OK."

Don't rule out small businesses or those in struggling industries. "There are some companies that are countercyclical," says Mr. Seidel. Industries like health care and education are still adding jobs. Public accounting and financial advising are also continuing to do well, although their growth is more muted.

Another job-hunting method is to network. Recruiters in particular can offer valuable insight, regardless of whether they have any search assignments that match your skill set. "They're very close to the market and tend to have an idea of what's happening," he explains.

If you don't already have relationships with recruiters, now is the time to start developing some. Many search firms accept résumé submissions through their

Web sites, which can lead to a recruiter contacting you. But you can boost your odds of success by reaching out to recruiters directly. Since they typically prefer to meet job hunters through referrals, ask former colleagues, business associates, alumni and other members of your network for an introduction to a recruiter they have a relationship with already.

Studies show that referrals lead to the highest number of job placements, so devote the majority of your search time to networking, says Annie Stevens, managing partner at ClearRock Inc., an executive coaching and outplacement firm in Boston. Responding to ads on job boards also ranks high, while attending career fairs delivers modest returns -- especially for experienced professionals.

When applying, avoid expressing bitterness or self-pity. Many layoff victims send cover letters that blame the economy for their job loss, says Ms. Shapiro. There's no need to even point out the fact that you've been laid off. "If your last work day was in October, your résumé will say that," she explains. Plus, since so many workers have been handed pink slips in the past year, this information is unlikely to kill your candidacy upfront. While it can be helpful to explain why you were let go over others whose jobs were not eliminated, save those details for the interview and use the cover letter to describe your strengths.

### *Signal Confidence*

Another faux pas many unemployed job hunters make: Sending introductory notes that overextend gratitude, says Ms. Shapiro. These include lines like, "Thank you so much for giving me consideration," which signal a lack of confidence. She suggests taking the opposite approach by conveying that employers should take advantage of this opportunity to recruit you. Just be careful not to come across as arrogant. Say something like: "I look forward to hearing from you."

Meanwhile, show employers you're flexible and not fussy. A candidate for a senior consulting job at [International Business Machines Corp.](#) recently indicated to hiring manager Mayank Shah that she was willing to travel locally and abroad, as well as undergo training. "There were many candidates with the same skills and experience, but what differentiated her was her can-do attitude," he says. Many of her competitors made specific demands or agreed to adhere to certain requirements only in exchange for higher pay. Keep your requests for concessions -- like working only out of a particular office or during certain hours -- to a minimum. You can work up to those perks after you've proven yourself in the position.

Still, don't go overboard. Offering to do things you really don't want to do -- such as relocate anywhere or travel up to 100% of the time -- can turn off recruiters, warns Russ Riendeau, a senior partner at East Wing Search Group, an executive-recruiting firm in Barrington, Ill. "When I hear that, I know it's not true," he says. "I know I'm dealing with a desperate candidate." What's more, you could damage the relationship you have with a recruiter if he or she believes you and you later renege on your promises.

### *Salary Issues*

Some unemployed job hunters also hurt their chances by volunteering to take a significantly lower salary than what they earned in their last job. An offer to take a pay cut of more than 20% can suggest to employers that you're biding your time and would re-enter the job market in search of higher-paying positions once the economy improves, says Jeff Joerres, chief executive officer of outplacement firm Manpower Inc. Or, you might unwittingly imply that you're going to ask for a raise soon after coming on board.

A better strategy is to wait for the hiring manager to raise the subject of salary. If the job pays less than what you previously made, respond with a plausible reason for accepting it. For example, you might say that you recognize what's going on in the economy and cite reasons why you're attracted to the position and the company. "You want to project that you are facing reality and are comfortable with the situation," says Mr. Joerres.

Finally, prepare an explanation about what led to your layoff. For example, you might tell the interviewer that your skill set wasn't critical to your last employer's survival, but that you believe it is for the organization you're now targeting -- and then explain why, suggests Mr. Joerres.

If you've been unemployed for a long period of time and a recruiter asks why, consider pointing out that you're being selective about your next move, says Mr. Joerres. Then describe how the position is a strong fit. Or you might explain that you opted to delay your search to spend time with family or take a class, suggests Ms. Shapiro. "You have to make those last months sound like a conscious choice," she says.

**Write to** Sarah E. Needleman at [sarah.needleman@wsj.com](mailto:sarah.needleman@wsj.com)

Copyright 2008 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved  
This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com)