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# Labor Day advice: Surviving a layoff

As layoffs mount, a look at how others survived the experience.

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After being laid off three times in 20 years, Jan Gissel looked for yet another corporate job for more than six months until she finally asked herself, "Do I really want to do this?"

The first layoff, from a mom-and-pop public relations firm, "came as a total shock," said Gissel, who now owns a CM IT Solutions franchise in Tustin providing computer services to small- to mid-sized companies. "I had become part of the family; how could they lay off 'family'?"

The second layoff was also a shock, but by the third time, Gissel expected to be laid off as soon as the pharmaceutical company announced that it was becoming an "at-will" employer, meaning employees do not have work contracts and can be terminated at any time.

"I understood employees had become expendable commodities," she said.

Today may be called Labor Day, but a growing number of Orange County residents aren't laboring because they have been laid off. The local unemployment rate is 5.7 percent, highest in 13 years. Companies nationwide have announced their intention to lay off more than 579,000 employees so far this year.

While a layoff is difficult and sometimes traumatic, several Orange County people who have re-established their careers after the experience say they gained from it.

## **NOT THE END OF THE WORLD**

"My world didn't end just because my job did," Gissel said. "In fact, each time I was laid off, my subsequent position was bigger, better and paid more money. A layoff can be a blessing in disguise. It may force you to do what you know you should have done on your own."

Audrienne Adams Lee, who was laid off as human resources director from an Internet company in 2001, agreed.

"Facing this situation usually propels us to take stock of what is important and valuable in both a job and employer," said Lee, now the owner of HR NETworks, a Garden Grove consulting firm. "For years, I had been toying with the idea of starting a business to assist small businesses that had few options and resources. Getting laid off finally pushed me to check out the market conditions for such an idea."

## **PREPARE YOURSELF**

If a company is continually laying people off, workers should start looking around and getting prepared.

The Irvine Company had layoffs for three years before it finally terminated Coralee Newman.

"When everyone below me, above me and beside me was gone, and my complete department disappeared, I knew being laid off was a certainty," said Newman, now president of Government Solutions, a Newport Beach media relations company. "One of the things I did (before being laid off) was to interview many remaining key executives to get feedback on my professional strengths and weaknesses."

Lee said every worker in today's corporate climate ought to have a backup plan for their careers.

With the current market conditions, it can take months to find another job, and you don't want to take a job for the sake of a paycheck," she said. "Be open to ideas you may not have considered before. Write a business plan. Even if you never look at it again, it charts the course to get things moving. Funny, once you write it down on paper, it's amazing how things start coming together."

### **TAKE ACTION**

Once a layoff occurs, don't wallow in worry and self-pity, Gissel added.

"You're used to working a full eight-plus hours, so continue to do so, only now work all day to find work." she said. "You owe it to yourself to work at least as hard to find yourself a new job as you did for the employer who just gave you the boot."

As soon as Fountain Valley resident Addy Perez-Mau was laid off as a corporate recruiter for Electron Data Services in 2003, she posted her resume on various job sites.

Two companies called her, one in El Segundo and one in Rancho Santa Margarita. As a mother with two young children, she didn't want the long commute either job would have required. So she started making jewelry, finally starting Heaven Sent Jewelry.

"Too often people lose their confidence when they're laid off," she said. "Recruiters are looking for passion (in job applicants). Do your homework on the company before you interview and describe how you can help that company."

### **MAKE CONNECTIONS**

When job hunting, Perez-Mau also joined business groups to make connections. "Work through your contacts. Use LinkedIn and other social media sites online. They don't cost anything."

Every worker should build relationships, said Irvine attorney Richard Usher, who was laid off from a Long Beach oil company in 1993.

"Develop and maintain a network of contacts," he advised. "Keep an updated list of your business accomplishments and make certain that personal documents or data are not just available on the company's computer."

Newman said she did everything she could to maintain friendships and contacts at the Irvine Company after she left. The company became her first client when she started her media relations firm.

### **POLISH THE RESUME**

Those who are laid off need to blow the dust off their resumes, Lee said. "Clean up your resume. It should be neat, easy to read. Don't make the reader work to know who you are," she said. "Have a friend forward your resume to someone who doesn't know you. Then have the reader give a synopsis of how he visualizes you, what you are looking for. It may be quite surprising."

Gissel added, "Never, never let your resume get out of date, no matter how secure you think your job is. Update it at least once a year. Then if the unthinkable happens, you won't have to scramble to reconstruct history at a time when your brain refuses to function."

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