

Tips for the Unemployed

Unemployed? Don't spend your days sending out resumes. In fact, maybe you should not E-mail, snail mail, post online, or hand deliver even one. And don't rise in the morning, put on a suit, and spend the day working from a desk in an outplacement center cold calling employers. Both activities will soon plunge you into a despair so deep that after 12 or 14 weeks you will have become a different person.

This advice comes from a man who sees more unemployed professionals in one week than most people encounter in a lifetime. Tom Brophy is an unemployment counselor for the state, and he is also an entrepreneur. Raw with empathy for the increasingly desperate out-of-work people he speaks with every day, he is developing a business to help them find jobs faster -- and with a lot less pain. He has a website (www.tombrophy.com), is planning a series of audio tapes, and gives motivational speeches.

Brophy speaks on "Transitional Layoff Counseling" on Thursday, June 27, at 7 p.m. at the Princeton Hyatt. Cost: \$25. Call 609-259-9539.

Brophy's empathy for those who find themselves suddenly out of work springs, at least in part, from his own experience. Beginning in 1896, his family owned and ran a shoe store under the family name in Palmer Square, first where PNC Bank is now located, and then across the street in the storefront now occupied by Bucks County Coffee. "I started to work in that store when I was nine years old," Brophy says. He was the third generation in his family to sell shoes to Princetonians.

"Have you seen the Images of America book?" he asks. "On the cover there is a man sitting in a doorway." The year is 1901, and the doorway is that of his family's shoe store.

In the early 1980s, says Brophy, "Collins [the development company that then owned Palmer Square] evicted us."

It was the beginning of a bleak period for him. "I went into real estate," he says. He found a world where he considered no one to be loyal, a world very different from the small town retail world he was used to. "It was two-and-a-half-years of hell," he says.

Someone suggested he apply to the department of labor. "I was not enthused," he recalls. "I remember the frustration and fear of becoming a state employee."

Now, some eight years later, he is exquisitely tuned into the emotional turmoil unemployed people suffer, and has developed programs -- some implemented, some in the proposal stage -- to help them. In short, Brophy appears to have found his niche. It is easy to see the entrepreneur under the skin of a state worker. His mind is constantly working, constantly devising strategies to let the unemployed know what he knows.

Here is the crux of what Brophy knows.

"Do you have children?" he asks. When the reply is affirmative, he says "okay," and settles into a routine he obviously has gone through many times before. "Your oldest is 29 now," he says, setting the stage. "Go back. It's 28 1/2 years ago. You just got back from the pediatrician. Are you married? Okay, you're married. So, you get home, and you tell your husband 'the doctor says our son has a rare disease. It has to be addressed quickly, and there are only three specialists in the world who can treat it.'

"That's all he tells you. That's it," says Brophy. "Is there any doubt in your mind that you're going to find one of those doctors?"

The answer, he knows, requires no thought whatsoever from any parent. "You'll go through walls," he says. And that is what job hunters need to do. Forget the formulas; forget the standard advice. "There's no formula for this deal," he declares.

Here is Brophy's description of what job hunters go through, and his advice on getting back to work before their self-esteem is too tattered to put back together.

The standard curve. "In the first three months, you're full of enthusiasm," says Brophy. Shoved out the door by an employer, and worried about how to pay the bills, he says, "adrenalin takes over." The newly-unemployed send out resumes and make phone calls like crazy. "Reflexes take over," he says. "You do everything you're told to do. But it doesn't work. You're in the new neighborhood of unemployment."

By the 10th or 11th week, says Brophy, who has spoken to tens of thousands of unemployed people at every stage of their job search, "symptoms begin to manifest." Within another two to three weeks, he says, "you're so weighed down from rejection that you're a different human being. Your world is full of employed people; it's all you can see."

By this point, personal relationships very likely have deteriorated. "If your husband or wife has never been unemployed, and says 'I understand how you're feeling,'" says Brophy, you want to scream -- or worse. You are living a lie, not telling friends and family how afraid and depressed you feel.

And it gets worse, by 26 weeks, says Brophy, the \$32,000-a-year secretary and the \$750,000-a-year CEO are indistinguishable in their agony. "They talk on the phone the same way," he says. "They construct sentences the same way." Constant rejection rules their lives, and forms their every waking minute.

The resume. Part of this unhappy state of affairs can be laid at the feet of that job-hunting staple, the resume. Standard advice is to spiff up and send out as many resumes as possible. Big, big mistake, says Brophy.

"The average person sends out 112 resumes in the first three months," he says. "They get 4.3 responses." For the unemployed, he says, those numbers quickly translate into "108 people think I suck."

"Ninety-two percent of resumes are not read," says Brophy. "A \$70,000 job advertised in The Wall Street Journal draws 3,600 resumes a week. That's more than 600 a day. What happens to the person who gets the resumes?"

What happens, he says, is that this person finds a way to make them go away, perhaps by instructing his staff to pick out two or three a day and get rid of the rest. Hovering near the phone, scanning the mail for responses, the job hunter, unaware that his resume most likely was not even read, feels more marginalized, more invisible, and more depressed.

The phone call. About as fruitful as a mass resume mailing, but a lot more uncomfortable, cold calls to employers depress job hunters' spirits further, and rarely result in a job offer, says Brophy.

He reels off a typical phone call opening: "I'm calling about the job in the paper for an ad sales regional manager. I'd like to speak to the HR manager." The reaction, says Brophy, is no different from the one a homeowner feels when he races to catch a ringing phone only to hear a polite voice ask "may I speak to the lady of the house?"

If you don't know the decision maker, if you don't know exactly what it is you can offer to solve a need the company has, the person answering the phone will think, says Brophy, "you're a pain in my neck."

Job hunters have a fantasy about these calls, he says. It goes something like this. The HR guy will come on the phone and say, "I have this job. It pays \$62,000, and it's waiting just for you."

As time goes on, and the fantasy does not come true, job hunters make matters worse, adopting a phone monotone that signals an ever-more-off-putting lack of hope. They're just going through the motions, and they know it.

The interview. If there is an upside to the despair of a months-long bout of unemployment, Brophy says it is that a keenness of perception kicks in. The unemployed, exhibiting behaviors not unlike those of abused children, are able to read volumes into the merest change in tone, expression, and shift in body language.

This skill can bag the prize.

Most job hunters blow their interviews. They use their precious hour, says Brophy, reciting the facts on their resumes, information the interviewer has already seen. Up against seven or eight other candidates, they end up sounding like all of the rest.

Stop, says Brophy. Analyze the interviewer. Scan his desk and his walls. Notice what he is wearing. Read his body language. And then take one minute of your interview time to connect with the thing that matters most to him, whether it be religion, his new baby, or his upcoming nuptials.

This has to be done subtly, says Brophy, and the reading of the interviewer has to be right on target. If it is, he says the candidate who makes that vital connection will get the job -- every time.

The strategy Do not set yourself up for failure. Do not spend a single minute on a job hunting task that is an odds-on favorite to lead to another rejection. Look for the back doors into the good jobs. Find out the names of the decision makers -- and their business philosophies, hobbies, and favorite shore towns and restaurants. Take on consulting jobs or freelance work that will get you into the mainstream fast. Mine your contacts. Make new contacts. And count every scrap of information as a victory.

It all comes down to ignoring standard job-hunting advice and thinking like the parent of a sick child who needs the help of an elusive doctor -- and needs it right away.