

For unemployed, recession's not over



Paul Furiga and his wife Brenda review their newly installed DSL line in their home office. The two have started their own public relations firm called WordWrite Communications.

By [Anne Michaud](#)
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John Stafford's father, an executive who traveled three days out of four, said on his deathbed that he wished he had spent more time with his family. Stafford got that chance himself when he was laid off in October 2000 and didn't find another job for a full year.

He says he will never look at life the same way. "For such a bad thing, it has ended up maturing me in ways I never would have expected," said Stafford, 47, of Mt. Lebanon.

Even as experts say the economy has turned a corner, many in greater Pittsburgh have been out of work for six months or more. Nationally, unemployment is expected to climb from 5.7 percent in March to 6.5 percent by summer. In the six counties surrounding Pittsburgh, 67,800 people were out of work last month.

A job search that took three to four months in the past is taking at least twice as long, experts say, as companies watch warily for signs of an economic recovery. Engineers, technology experts and highly paid managers are especially likely to be looking for work.

The strain is changing lives and business culture in unexpected ways. For example, three out-of-work retail sales managers ó natural competitors ó recently joined forces to share job leads.

Job seekers say they have awakened to how interconnected they are ó especially in a "big small town" like Pittsburgh ó and they vow that even when they find a job, they will help others, a practice called networking. For now, many who are unemployed are returning to spiritual pursuits, exercising, reading and walking their kids to school.

If only they knew when the job offer was going to come, this could be the best time of their lives," said Bill Wolfe, vice president of outplacement services for The Callos Cos.. Wolfe volunteers at the Priority Two networking group, which meets in Wexford.

As networking grows, it may usher in the future envisioned by former Labor Secretary Robert Reich in his 2000 book, "The Future of Success." Reich describes a global employment force in which job security is old-fashioned and people are hired project-by-project. Networking skills will be essential. Indeed, Stafford said he was hired by Crouse & Co. in Monroeville especially for the networking skills he learned while unemployed.

"They wanted somebody who could go out, meet people and drum up business," he said.

Reich's vision could level off hiring-firing cycles, Wolfe said, which would be an improvement: "The money and waste and human suffering caused by that (layoffs) is just tremendous."

Ripple effect

Edward Smith, 46, an executive sales manager who's been out of work for about six months, describes unemployment as "a crucible." In the past, he's been able to find a job by checking classified ads and Internet sites and by calling a few friends to tell them he was looking.

Now the North Hills resident said he makes cold calls, asking people for 15 to 20 minutes of their time. These face-to-face meetings are at the core of networking.

Smith said his job search has been protracted because he wants to stay in Pittsburgh and has been unwilling to accept a deep cut in pay or responsibility. Keith Marshall, a Wexford headhunter, said salaries are discounted about 20 percent to 30 percent in today's market.

Smith started a Bible study group to help himself cope.

"My faith has dramatically deepened," he said. "I feel God brought me to the point of unemployment because I wasn't listening to him. Now we have plenty of time to talk."

Stephen Paulson, 45, is another job seeker who's been out of work for several months. He said his "cheapskate" nature has allowed the family to carry on while his wife stays home, raising and home-schooling their three children in Franklin Park. Others looking for jobs say that severance payments, short-term consulting work and two-income households are easing the blow of a layoff.

Paulson worked in marketing for PPG Industries. He believes the economy is shifting fundamentally.

"From what I'm gathering, this is not a conventional boom-bust cycle," he said. "What we're seeing is the ripple effect of the information economy. The marketplace is shifting, and we don't know exactly where it's going to shake out."

Paulson is busy daily, meeting with people and keeping a regular schedule. But he has also found time to teach his 7-year-old daughter to ride a bike. He belongs to a men's book club and breakfast club, and he is careful to break out regularly from the isolation of his home office.

"With no people contact, I'd go crazy," he said. "Instead of having a water cooler conversation, you have a couple of e-mails going back and forth at 10 in the morning."

Networking helps

Many of the unemployed in Pittsburgh are white-collar workers, said Roberta Wilson, an industry and business analyst for the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry. Often, openings for those jobs don't show up in the classified ads or on the Internet. Wilson said PAPEN or the Pennsylvania Professional Employment Network or was formed a decade ago, during the last recession, to answer the need for a job network outside traditional sources. Today, the organization has four chapters meeting weekly.

By contrast, Priority Two grew out of the steel-industry layoffs in the 1980s and is celebrating its 20th anniversary. Leader Charlie Beck said technology and engineering workers have been hit particularly hard this year and last. He is amazed by the qualifications of the people being laid off.

"I use the word 'escary,'" Beck said. "Before, you used to see people (out of work) who were not keeping up with technology, but that's not true any more. It's unbelievable, the quality of people out there, compared with two to five years ago."

Beck is a big believer in networking and claims many jobs advertised on the Internet are not really jobs at all; companies post them to impress investors and customers. And, remembering worker shortages just 18 months ago, they are building a database of resumes just in case.

Brian McKeever, an executive search consultant with O'Connor, O'Connor, Lordi Ltd., says the sheer number of people in the job market slows hiring. A job opening might draw 400 resumes, he said, and some companies hire his firm just to sort through them.

"There are a boatload of good candidates," McKeever said. "It's difficult to benchmark and assess them when you have such numbers to go through."

Many people have quit looking for a job at all, deciding to become their own bosses. That's the case for Paul Furiga, 43, who was laid off by the Ketchum public relations firm in December. He orchestrated the first two rounds of layoffs at the public relations firm, but in the third round, he was one of the people let go.

"I knew how the script was going to end," he said.

In March, Furiga formed WordWrite Communications from his Wexford home, where he shares an office in a spare bedroom with his wife, Brenda, a proofreader and copy editor.

Furiga, a former editor of the Pittsburgh Business Times, likens today's economy to a dog paddle: What you see on the surface is not what's going on underneath. One sees a lot of gray hair at networking meetings, but that's not necessarily age discrimination, he said; it's more like high-salary discrimination.

"Again and again, I hear people say they were the highest-paid person in their group," he said.

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