

Newly Unemployed Look to the Past

By Kris Maher

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Two years ago, Mary Palmer worked as a public-relations manager for Kasenna Inc., a software-technology company in Mountain View, Calif. Soon after she left to join another company, Kasenna laid off the entire marketing department -- a move that would have left Ms. Palmer without a job.

Late last year, Kasenna approached Ms. Palmer about working as its public-relations consultant. She jumped at the chance. Her new employer had just gone out of business, and she thought contract work would be safer in some ways than a full-time job. "I don't have to worry about layoffs," she says.

Now Ms. Palmer, who is 39 years old and lives in San Diego, says she is "having a good time" in her new role at her old company. Her history at the company allows her to have a better understanding of her employer's needs and how to approach them. Because she works on an hourly basis, moreover, Kasenna is more conscientious and respectful of her time, she says. "When there's a meeting scheduled, I'm not left waiting in an empty conference room," says Ms. Palmer.

It's a familiar situation. Many newly unemployed people turn to consulting as a way to pay the bills during down times. And it isn't uncommon for their old employers to ask them whether they would consider coming back in that capacity.

In some ways, it can be a plus. Consultants who have been full-timers know the company well and can hit the ground running. It also helps eliminate a potential black mark. "Consulting demonstrates a good relationship with a former employer and verifies that the layoff wasn't due to incompetence," says Barbara LaRock, a Reston, Va., career coach. "These can be attractive to a future employer and in securing other consulting work."

But nothing should be taken for granted, some career coaches say. Any pre-existing problems should be addressed and cleared up prior to the beginning of any consulting assignment, says Lynn Berger, a New York career coach. Expectations, benefits, wages and hours also should be established and communicated to others in the department.

The person also should broaden his or her horizons by working on difficult projects or by implementing changes that they otherwise would do before. The consultant also should try working in a different department or for another manager. "This would allow the consultant the opportunity to learn different skill sets and exposure to other areas within the company," says Ken Taunton, managing partner at Royster Group Inc., an Atlanta search firm.

Although consultants shouldn't assume their jobs with an ex-employer will lead to a full-time position, "organizational changes within your former company may occur while you are consulting there and create an opportunity for you to return," says William Morin, chief executive of WJM

Associates Inc., a New York executive- and organizational-development concern.

But others who are still looking for a job might want to consider consulting part of the time. After all, sticking around may make you feel stuck in an old rut that isn't satisfying to you professionally. This is "clearly related to and influenced by the situation that caused the layoff and how well that was handled by the employer," says Odette Pollar, owner of Smart Ways to Work, an Oakland, Calif., firm specializing in improving workplace productivity.