

Tips for handling a recent lay off

As see on The Wall Street Journal.com

PARIS -- Perhaps you came into work this morning and found out you've been laid off.

How ghastly.

Now what?

Given the slew of layoffs in Europe in recent weeks, this seemed a good time to come up with some advice on how to get through such a difficult moment.

First, as much as you may want to, don't argue with your bosses about being laid off, recruiting and outplacement professionals unanimously agreed. The decision has been made.

Don't panic and send out a flurry of CVs, they said.

Get over it quickly, they stressed, and start looking to the future. (They conceded that is easier said than done.)

Be straightforward. And positive. Network and job hunt smartly, they said. And told us how.

"It's a hard slog," warned Randy White, a laid-off 48-year-old packaging executive who just spent four months looking for a job.

Not even upper-level bosses are going to be exempt in the current downsizing, said Keith Mackay, managing director for the executive recruiting firm Christian & Timbers in London. "Everybody thinks it doesn't happen to top execs," he said. "But it does."

For many ladder climbers, this will be the first time they've had to look for a job. "I've never been unemployed before," said Mr. White, an American who has worked in Britain, France, Germany and Switzerland in the past 20 years or so. "I didn't know how to do it."

The good news is that cutbacks have become so common that there is little stigma to being laid off today, said Rob Rowe, a senior consultant with the outplacement firm Drake Beam Morin in London. If you have the skills and the determination, you will find a new job, the experts said.

Unless you have real reason to believe that you are being unfairly discriminated against, don't launch any appeals, Mr. Rowe said. There's no point in focusing on "Why me?" he said, adding that you shouldn't hang out with the handwringers.

"Yes, take time to lick your wounds," Mr. Mackay said. "But not too long. The longer you leave it, the harder it gets." (That means that if you're comfortable financially, and tempted to take six months off, fight the temptation.)

Mr. White recalled the maelstrom: Denial, anger at his employer, attaining some degree of acceptance.

"Everyone goes through that," he said. "There is a period of grieving and you have to make it as short as possible."

Don't hide the news from your spouse or partner and pretend to be working, Mr. Rowe said. A surprising number of people do this. But it is important that you get your partner's support.

Just in case, seek legal advice -- employers sometimes provide it -- to make sure your severance package conforms with your own personal contract or with your country's legal minimums, which vary widely in Europe, said Hilary Sears, a vice president with A.T. Kearney Executive Search in London.

Daniel Jouve, president of executive recruiters Directorship France S.A. in Paris, recommended that you never actually sue your employer because nobody else will want to employ you. But in case of a problem, let your former employer believe that you might, by sending a letter that has been drafted by a lawyer but signed by you.

In 99.9% of cases, severance payouts aren't negotiable, Mr. Rowe said. According to Hewitt Associates, they can exceed the minimum required, which in Britain can be a payout equal to a week's salary for each year of service. In France, salaried workers get one-tenth of monthly salary for each of the first 10 years of service, one-fifteenth beyond that.

In Germany, employers aren't legally required to provide severance pay, Hewitt said. However, they are obliged to consult with the Work Councils that represent workers, and together devise a "social plan." These plans covering severance arrangements vary greatly.

Sometimes health coverage is extended for three months to six months to provide a bridge to personal arrangements, Mr. Rowe said.

In your exit interviews, stay on good terms and line up your references. At the highest levels, make sure you have a conversation with the CEO and board and ask for their support.

Snap up an offer of outplacement services or career counseling. And contact the headhunters. (They would say this.) The less well known you are, the more you should contact, Ms. Sears said.

Outplacement services, which help clients hunt for a new job as effectively as possible, can vary from a workshop for three days, to a 3- to 12-month package, to an open-ended one for the most senior executives. High salaries make it more difficult for them to find a new job quickly, Mr. Rowe said.

If you are offered time, and office space and a desk and chair: "Take it with both hands and really go for it," Mr. Mackay said. "Your new job now is to find the new opportunity and do it full

time."

Mr. White, who just accepted a job running the European operations of a specialty marine products company as of Sept. 1, said the more you put into your job search, the better your chances. "It's directly proportionate," he said.

In any case, make sure people can reach you through a secretary, Mr. Jouve said. If you need to, hire secretarial services. You don't want potential employers reaching a voicemail box or a child at home, he said.

But don't do anything until you talk to your outplacement consultant. "That person will really help you understand your strengths and help you get them across," Ms. Sears said. "The important thing is not to delude yourself. And the last thing one wants to sense in a candidate is a feeling of panic and loss of self-confidence."

A recently laid-off Europe-based executive, who didn't want to be identified, highly recommended outplacement services. His professional advisers have helped him grapple with his sense of failure, turned his CV into "a real marketing document" and trained him in interviewing techniques, where he was weak.

Networking is crucial. But don't jump straight in and start talking with your contacts until you know what it is you want from them, Ms. Sears said. In a month you might have different ideas than in the days after being made redundant, she said.

When you are networking, rather than specifically asking for a job, seek information about your industry, find out which companies are growing, changing, Ms. Sears said.

Request 20 minutes in the office -- not during lunch or over a drink after work -- and aim to come away with two other names you can follow up with, Ms. Sears said. You want the person to meet you in a business environment, not a social one, because you want them to remember you as a professional. "Some people may feel doing this is a bit desperate," Ms. Sears said. "They must look at it like it's getting market information."

Yes, you might feel like hiding in a closet, but you have to make yourself visible, and not be modest, Mr. Mackay said.

If you are given, say, three months' notice, don't pretend to still be employed by your employer during its interval, Mr. Jouve said. It's misleading.

Make yourself available for interviews, and for an actual job, at any time, Mr. Jouve said. Forget that vacation.

You never gain anything by criticizing your former employers, especially if you worked for them for a long time, Mr. Jouve said.

Be open to temporary assignments. They add to your visibility and can lead to full-time jobs, he

said. And they are better -- in the eyes of prospective employers -- than being unemployed.

Be ready to compromise on the size of the job but not on the reputation of the new employer, Mr. Jouve said. "If you go down in the quality of the company, you never come back," he said.

Be prepared for the stress of the common bird-in-the-hand vs. bird-in-the-bush problem. Successful job hunter Mr. White said this was the hardest part of the process for him.

"You can end up with nothing if you're not careful," Mr. White said. He had two offers -- the one he accepted in the marine industry, another in his packaging sector -- and other possibilities. "You can spend another six or eight months looking around for something that may be 10% better and is it really worth the effort? In the end you have to draw the line."

So take the first decent job, Mr. Jouve said. You can later abandon it if a better offer comes though. If you do that once in your career or before you actually start the less attractive job, you probably won't harm your reputation, he said.

Very importantly, choose friends -- preferably an older ally you don't compete with -- to confide in during this tough time, Mr. Jouve said. Especially for moments such as when that job you had high hopes for doesn't come through.

"The failures are really killing for people," Mr. Jouve said. "It's good to have somebody to go to confession."