

Just been fired or RIF'd?

Termination is more than just a personal trauma.

With many people, it shatters their sense of security, their plans and their confidence. It impacts their family, both financially and personally. They feel disenfranchised and betrayed. Is this wrong? Absolutely not. Thousands of people go through it everyday.

Routine downsizings have become commonplace in the United States – and being terminated or RIF'd does not reduce your employability. If you handle this traumatic event properly, being fired with a severance package can actually provide you with the resources to energize your future. Follow these nine steps through the first weeks.

1. Get your finances in order.

You need an accurate accounting of your net worth... what you owe, what you need to maintain your present lifestyle and what you can go without, if necessary, Work with the family to prepare a realistic budget for the next 3 - 6 months (worst case).

2. Audit your severance package.

Severance is not a reward for long or loyal service. Some companies do not even provide severance. It is a reasonable bridge to future employment, and is usually a five part formula computed on:

- position (responsibility)
- length of service
- age
- anticipated employability
- industry

If you're a 50-year-old technical manager with 28 years service in an affluent industry, you would expect a larger severance offer than a 33-year-old professional from the not-for-profit sector.

Your severance should provide some coverage for continued benefits and out placement counseling. If you are concerned with the fairness of your settlement, contact an employment attorney. He or she can determine immediately if you have any grounds for negotiation. Your "generalist" family attorney (who does your real estate closings) should be avoided, get expert advice from a specialist. Resist the urge to sue. You will usually get a better result by seeking amicable resolution through negotiation (either by you or your employment attorney).

3. Maintain your professionalism.

It is important that you maintain your public image as a competent professional who can handle adversity. Sharing you pain and frustration with your immediate family is fine, with outsiders and "the relatives" – absolutely not acceptable. Even if you were a political scapegoat, terminated without what you feel was just cause, on the wrong project at the wrong time... whatever the reason, you don't need to share it with outsiders.

Behaving like a "victim" can damage your future opportunities.

4. Don't leap into a job search immediately.

Resist sending out resumes, setting up interviews or "jumping on the first thing that comes along". When you have just been terminated, your anger and frustration can show through in interviews. You need a couple of weeks for strategizing, self reflection and research. Cool down.

Career decisions are too important to be made when you are still off balance. Regroup. Don't try to prove to others –or yourself – that you are instantly employable.

5. Evaluate yourself.

Take this opportunity to reassess your most marketable strengths, and work towards a "best fit" situation. While you may feel stigmatized, your severance has actually provided you with a month or two of "sabbatical space". This will permit time for a planned, strategic approach.

6. Upgrade your techniques.

Bring your job search strategy up to your present level, and understand the current market. Mailing out 200 resumes or registering with a dozen headhunters may have worked for you years ago, but these strategies are no longer effective – or even appropriate.

Develop a game plan with someone that understands your industry... a recruiter that specializes in placing people with your specific skills... and can open doors that you have no access to. Let him/her advise you on strategies, current market demands and compensation issues.

You should ask about your recruiter's professional background, the type of clients they represent... and determine if they have the contacts (relative to your experience) that will lead to interviews. Don't assume anything, get the facts. Many recruiters will ask you to work with them exclusively – unless you feel 100% about them, give a two week exclusive and move on if they are not stirring up activity.

7. Educate yourself.

Understand the major changes in your specialty and how best you can fit in. Once you understand completely how to market your present skills, and how to integrate them with new employers, you have cleared one of the largest hurdles.

Don't make the typical mistake of deciding to start a new career that has no connection to your previous experience. Unless you have substantial financial resources, time and immediately applicable skills (not to mention potential clients or customers), stay on track.

We are not discouraging creativity, just reminding you that 99 out of 100 people threaten to do something radically different upon being fired.

"I will never work for anyone again, I'm going to start my own business and be my own boss".

Very few actually follow through, and the one's that do discover that its much harder than they expected, many times with lower financial rewards, and no resources - unless you create them. And prepare for high risk, long days, no weekends or vacations for at least a couple of years, while you're establishing the foundation and recovering your investment. Is it worth it? Only you know.

If you decide that a new career in a non-related field is the way to go...

Whatever you do, don't call a recruiter to ask them to find you a position in an area you are really interested in, but have no experience with. Recruiters work for their clients (the companies that retain and pay them to find you), and you're wasting their time. The odds of them placing you out of your demonstrated sphere of experience is slim and none - which results in no revenue to them. If your going to change careers in mid stream, you're on your own.

8. Maintain a normal lifestyle.

Your current job is to find your next job. While this is a full-time endeavor, it should not a be a 24-hour-a-day obsession. You need to keep things in perspective.

Many times, people will become withdrawn because they feel inadequate. They avoid their family, relatives (who all want to know what happened and why), friends and social obligations. Being reclusive equals no explanations.

Talk to your immediate family about your successes, strategy and concerns. Friends and relatives are a different story.

The first rule of dealing with friends and relatives is: answer nothing. Explain that you were downsized (a common national problem), you are evaluating a number of opportunities that look promising, and that your severance package is giving you the breathing room to make an informed decision. Then change the subject.

9. Use your contacts.

Everybody has contacts – people that work in and understand your industry, will point you in the right direction, make introductions for you, slip you crucial information and provide you with a reference. Call in favors owed, even call competitors... anyone who can provide a source of information you can act on.

Note: if you are in dialog with competitors, don't offer or give up any proprietary information. This is absolutely unprofessional. Don't get even.

Don't call contacts to dump on your ex-employer or ex-boss (even if they deserve it)... they usually don't want to hear it. Don't use their time this way. Extract information (leads), ask for their help and keep lines of communications open. This may be your most powerful source for information leading directly to new employment.

Companies understand downsizing, and are not afraid to take a chance on "downsized" good people. It's basically about **how you present yourself, how well you market (sell) your skills and abilities, compensation and availability.**

The only challenge is identifying them.

Good hunting.