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Job loss puts crimp in social ties

By Claire Bushey
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The recession lurked at the party like an uninvited guest.

Chris Campbell, 58, was standing in a knot of five people at a wine tasting. Though four of the five were out of work, nobody mentioned it. The situation, he says, reminded him of a scene from an Austin Powers movie where no one is supposed to notice the giant mole studding a character's face.

"You tend to dance around the fact that neither of you is working, because there's a bit of ego and social stigma involved," says Mr. Campbell, of Long Grove. "You feel a little bit like the scarlet letter, like you're somehow tainted. You tend to talk about almost anything else — your kids and golf and the weather and the wine."

Mr. Campbell, executive director of the Executive Network Group of Greater Chicago, spends half his time consulting for consumer products companies and the other half searching for a full-time position. His social life has changed in other ways since Lincolnwood-based Publications International Ltd. laid him off in 2006. He entertains at home more often, and when he meets a friend for lunch, it's more likely to be at Applebee's than at a Lettuce Entertain You restaurant.

He and his wife used to attend about six charity fundraisers a year, where tickets ranged from \$50 to \$100, including casino night for Arlington Heights-based Clearbrook, a non-profit for the developmentally disabled. They've cut back to two, and instead of buying tickets to the most recent casino night, they volunteered to work the roulette and blackjack tables.

"Once the money stops coming in," he says, "you have to modify your lifestyle."

As the recession continues, layoffs are rearranging social lives along with companies' bottom lines. According to preliminary reports from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Illinois' unemployment rate was 9.1% in March. But there's a Catch-22 for job-seekers: Just when they need to lean on friends to fight isolation and on professional networks to find work, they have less money to spend on drinks, lunch, entertainment — all the routine expenses of social circulation.



SKIPPING OUT

Suddenly, money intrudes: Where to drink and dine, who picks up the check and how much to spend on any given Friday night may no longer be matters of unspoken agreement.

James Epstein-Reeves, 31, of Chicago, was laid off in November from his position as director of community affairs at Naperville-based OfficeMax Inc. As he looks for work in philanthropy, he balances time with friends against some of the costly extras.

"Seeing people is the easiest way to keep your sanity," he says, not to mention critical for finding the next job.

He recently interviewed for a position that an acquaintance told him about two weeks before it was officially posted.

But finances still pose limits. One recent night, he gathered with a half-dozen others at Rokit Bar & Grill in River North to celebrate a friend's new job. Like any good night out, the after-work drinks seemed poised to become appetizers, which naturally would lead to dinner, which of course would be washed down with more drinks.

Mr. Epstein-Reeves had never been the type to duck out early, but he saw the tab that would loom by the end of the night and headed home instead. He also has suspended taking jujitsu classes and probably won't sign up for softball this spring: "Every little decision you make does add up to a lot," he says. "It's a luxury at this point."

For 40-year-old Nick Lozaro of Chicago, time with friends is simply a lower priority these days. He's intensely aware of the need to provide for his wife and 11-year-old son and to pay the mortgage on their condo. When his employer, Chicago-based Information Resources Inc., told him in January that he would lose his job as a client database manager, he went home and started applying for new jobs that same day.

A few weeks ago, he skipped the party of a friend who also was leaving the company: The unemployed just can't afford to "throw \$75 or \$100 out the window for the night," he says.

Not everyone understands that reality. On the el's Purple Line one day, Mr. Lozaro overheard a young woman talking on the phone. Apparently, a friend had lost her job and disappeared from social gatherings; the speaker seemed oblivious to the fact her friend had lost a paycheck.

"She was saying, 'She's so miserable now, and she doesn't want to go out,' and you can just tell that this girl who was talking on the phone doesn't understand," Mr. Lozaro says. "I wanted to say something so bad. But I kept my mouth shut."

Another stumbling block is that many people are unsure how to act with jobless friends who may be shocked, depressed or worried about the future. That's how 31-year-old Amy Hill felt when her company, Chicago-based Marketing Connections, laid off her friend in December.

"I didn't even know what to say," Ms. Hill says. " 'I'm sorry' doesn't seem like enough, and, 'Is there anything I can do?' seems too early."

But friends absolutely should express sympathy, business author Alexandra Levit says. They shouldn't let misplaced guilt over their continued employment stop them from doing so, nor should they assume they can't understand their friend's plight.

"They don't want to feel like pariahs, and they don't want to feel like they've lost their friends as well as their jobs," she says. "Be a friend. Get over your survivor's guilt."

OFFERS OF HELP

The laid-off need to reach out too, and can find lower-cost ways to do so, experts say: meet contacts for coffee instead of lunch; e-mail stories from the day's papers with a note, and let people pick up the tab if they offer.

Four of Ms. Levit's friends have been laid off since September; one recently found a new job. The layoffs didn't change their regular brunches at Ann Sather's, but she and her husband started offering to treat, which she says her friends appreciated. She also role-played a job interview with one and helped three of them update their résumés.

Specific offers of help are the best kind, says Jenny Schade, president of JRS Consulting Inc. in Evanston, which works with companies that are reorganizing.



Susan Lyne, formerly of Cole Taylor Bank, says parties were dreadful right after she was laid off, but now she enjoys entertaining at home. Photo: John R. Boehm

Ms. Schade recalls when her father died and a friend offered to make dinner — the only decision Ms. Schade needed to make was to choose the day. Indefinite offers of "help," while sincere, force the friend to reach out and request a specific favor when he or she may not be comfortable doing so.

"If you make a specific offer, the person knows you're serious, and they're much more likely to take you up on it," she says.

Once Susan Lyne, 50, began telling people exactly how they could help her, socializing became less awkward. Ms. Lyne was a senior vice-president at Rosemont-based Cole Taylor Bank until January, and for the first month after the layoff, parties were dreadful.

"As I was preparing for the evening, it felt like an act," she says. "It felt like I was not only putting on my makeup, I was putting on my game face. I wasn't just putting on my jacket, I was putting on my shield."

But recently she learned to ask people to look over her résumé or furnish networking contacts, and she's found it bridges the awkwardness at social gatherings.

Ms. Lyne, of Arlington Heights, also has discovered new pleasure in entertaining at home. She cooks more, and conversations last longer and go deeper; unlike at a restaurant, she says, they're not "cut short because the bread came." And instead of just acquiring bottles of wine to add to her rack at home, she and her friends are starting to enjoy emptying them.

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