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What to do if you are laid off

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SPOKANE, Wash. - It has been a tough time for U.S. employment. More than 3.6 million Americans have lost their jobs since early 2008, with nearly 600,000 of those jobs cut in January. While some people have found new positions, the nation's unemployment rate stands at 7.6 percent. What should you do if you have lost (or are at risk of losing) a job?

Negotiate smartly. If you have any reason to suspect your company might do layoffs, keep an ear to the ground to

be aware of the severance packages being offered in your company and others. Then, if you are laid off, negotiate for a layoff package just as you would for a salary. Ask if you can cash in vacation, sick or personal days; determine how long insurance will run; and look into extension of any other benefits.



HOW TO HELP THE NEWLY JOBLESS

Jenny Schade, president of JRS Consulting, offers these tips for talking with people who have been laid off.

2. **File for unemployment.** Those who were employees should qualify for unemployment benefits from their states. File as soon as possible, because it might take weeks to receive a check. Contractors and part-time workers cannot receive unemployment benefits.
3. **Talk it out.** Tell others what you are going through so they can commiserate -- and perhaps refer you to your next job. If possible, find a support group to get you out of the house for coffee and mutual advice - or at least an online support group for advice and networking.
4. **Do not sign up for COBRA immediately.** You have 60 days after leaving a job to apply for COBRA, and it applies retroactively. You might get a job within those 60 days. If not, you can submit your notice to continue coverage on day 55. Make sure to set aside the amount of the first premium just in case. Also find out what it would cost to be added to a spouse's insurance policy or to purchase an individual policy. Typically, COBRA is an expensive option, best for heads of household or those who cannot qualify for individual coverage due to pre-existing conditions.
5. **Maintain old contacts.** Write thank-you notes to your supervisor and key colleagues, enclosing your contact information. With luck, they will keep you in mind if they hear of an appropriate opportunity.
6. **Prime the networking pump.** If you have not joined online sites such as LinkedIn, consider doing so. Create a professional profile that mentions your most recent experience. Update your resume. Attend networking events in your career area. Write
 - Acknowledge the situation and offer to help. By saying, "I was sorry to hear about your job. Anything I can do to help?" you're moving the conversation beyond the job loss and toward a supportive action.
 - Don't assume you can't do anything to help just because you don't have a job to offer. You might offer to baby sit while the job

down your professional contacts' information and take those home with you. When possible, obtain personal e-mail addresses (rather than work addresses alone) for your most valued colleagues so you can stay in touch no matter where they go.

7. **Tighten your belt.** Without a paycheck, perspectives shift. What are your must-pay bills? Cut out other costs, whether it is cable TV or a magazine subscription. Generate extra cash by means ranging from a yard sale to sale of an extra car. If you have student loans, you can probably defer them while you are out of work. If you will have trouble paying your mortgage, talk with your lender about options. If you absolutely cannot pay the bills after significant budget-tightening, seek out a reputable debt resolution firm to discuss options.
8. **Leave retirement alone.** Many people reflexively reach for a 401(k) withdrawal form when laid off. But remember that early withdrawals come with income tax and penalties. Your nest egg is probably already cracked from recently stock market upheaval; avoid tapping it unless absolutely necessary.
9. **Stay positive.** Easier said than done, but get up every day, get dressed and get some exercise. Dedicate time every weekday to networking, applying for jobs and attending work-related events.

The news these days is all about the recession, but every recession comes to an end eventually. Stay professional, stay calm and stay prepared -- so that you can survive whatever the job market throws your way.



Andrew Housser is a co-founder and CEO of [Bills.com](#), a free one-stop online portal where consumers can educate themselves about personal finance issues and compare financial products and services. He also is co-CEO of [Freedom Financial Network, LLC](#) and its wholly owned subsidiary, [Freedom Debt Relief](#), a national consumer debt resolution firm that has served more than 40,000 clients and manages more than \$1 billion in consumer debt. Housser holds a Master of Business Administration degree

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candidate goes to an interview, or you may know someone who can help make a connection.

- Be sensitive about asking too many questions. Asking, 'How many job interviews do you have lined up?' can sound intrusive. Avoid questions that may make him or her feel pressured or stressed. Take your cues from the person with whom you're talking. If he or she changes the subject, let it go. But if he or she wants to talk, be ready to listen and offer support.

● Never underestimate the value of being a sounding board. It's not necessary to offer advice. Just reflecting the other person's feelings can make them feel supported.



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