

GETTING ON WITH IT ... OR WHAT I LEARNED ON MY UNPLANNED SUMMER VACATION

by Jim McElgunn

I already knew it would be one of the worst days of my life. The well-respected but financially struggling magazine where I'd worked for 15 years was about to make brutal cuts, laying off 20% of its staff in a single day. As the magazine's editor, I would have to carry out some of the bloodletting myself, then try to rally the survivors after the biggest layoffs in the publication's history.

What I didn't know was that senior management had decided 20% wasn't enough. They wanted 25%. I also didn't know that my name had been added to the list.

The business logic was cruel but clear: get rid of one of the higher-paid people (me) by in effect demoting the person one rung above me back to his old job as editor. The imperative to slash costs sharply in response to a long, deep slump in ad sales outweighed all my hard work and excellent performance reviews.

So I was out the door. That came as such a shock that the world seemed to freeze. But you can't stay frozen forever. I had to move on, to figure out what to do next with my life.

Fortunately, I had two things going for me. One was that I understood that managers really mean it when they say "it's nothing personal, it's just business." Of course I was upset and angry, but I knew enough about business to realize that when managers plan mass layoffs their main focus is on which job titles to axe, not the performance of the people in those jobs.

The other was the enormous help I got from CPI/Hazell & Associates. (I know reading this on Hazell's Web site makes me sound like a shill for the company. All I can say is that I mean what I'm writing here. Oh, and did I mention that even though I'm a professional writer they're not paying me for this?)

My 17 years at my former employer meant I received a package that would maintain my salary and benefits for an extensive period. That gave me the luxury of not having to rush

into anything. I could relax a bit, work on the garden, repaint the shed, go for drinks with friends, spend a week on a bed-and-breakfast tour of Ontario.

But mostly I've worked on my job search. It's daunting how much you have to do upfront before you're truly ready to head out into the job market. I was astonished by how long it took to assemble a strong resume, which isn't even the most important element in a job search. Oh sure, you can quickly throw together a dull recitation of your past jobs and duties, but what good is that? I spent long hours learning how to turn my skills and experience into a compelling sales tool. I read three books on the subject and had my counsellor and half a dozen friends and ex-colleagues help me refine my resume over several drafts. I've also put in many hours in areas such as self-assessment, networking, interviewing and negotiation.

Don't get me wrong: I hate looking for work. But I knew I had to hone these skills if I were to find a decent job, and it was a nice bonus to realize that you can apply these skills to many other aspects of your life. For me, the power of networking to make your life better in all kinds of ways was the single most important lesson I learned from my work through CPI/Hazell.

Okay, this article's headline promised some lessons learned. I wouldn't want to disappoint readers, so here's some of what I learned from my unplanned summer vacation:

- **You only get out of it what you put into it.** My terrific counsellor, Nancy Anderson, has been endlessly helpful. But she'd be the first to agree that I've only learned so much because I've worked hard at it. (Not all the time, mind you: did I mention how nice my garden looks these days?) Hazell and the CPI network offer a remarkable array of resources, so if you ask tons of questions, do your homework and keep at it, you'll soon figure things out.



But if you can't be bothered, no one will force you to learn this stuff.

- **This is an opportunity to learn skills they don't teach in school.** Actually, a few schools now offer courses in job-search skills, but too late for most of us. In my own experience hiring people, I've never seen a resume as well-crafted as the one I learned to write through this program, nor interviewed anyone who seemed to have been taught how to handle one. What you learn here will give you an edge over most of the competition.
- **This gives you a rare chance to consider what you want to do with your life.** Take it.
- **Stay focused and positive.** A friend who landed a great job after being laid off keeps telling me this. Yes, it's corny, but it's good advice. That's not to say you should deny you're going through a tough time. Don't be surprised if you wake up in the middle of the night with irrational fears that you'll never work again and will wind up sleeping on a park bench. Share your fears with a few people who know you well. But there's no need to tell everyone you're

riding an emotional roller coaster. Tell them losing your job was tough but you'll be fine. And tell yourself that too. For some reason, people who see the glass as half full seem to have better luck than those who see it as half empty.

- **Approach finding a job like other major projects, such as buying a house, planning a wedding or raising a child.** You can become paralyzed if you think about the enormity of the task. So break it into small steps, take a deep breath and get on with it.

Oh, and I can't forget my postscript...

P.S. I did in fact land a really good job. And all the stuff I learned about self-assessment, resume writing, networking, interviewing, negotiating and so on proved essential to finding and landing that job. Sometimes it does pay to do your homework..

JIM McELGUNN (jmcclgunn@rogers.com) has more than 20 years' experience as a magazine writer and editor. He is currently seeking a job in the consumer press.

