

Time out? Or time well spent?

Once upon a time, taking “time out” was a radical thing to do and applicants were asked to explain the motivation behind their decision. Nowadays its popularity means applicants are more likely to be asked how they used their experience to differentiate themselves in the employment market. Widespread redundancy during a recession has forced the option on many individuals who had never considered the idea before.

It's key that applicants focus less on justifying why they were made redundant and more on what they have done with their (enforced) “time out” says Michelle Lucas, Career Coach at greenfields. Here she offers her view on how some of her clients have turned this difficult situation to their advantage.

People in employment who have not experienced redundancy first hand are unlikely to appreciate just how difficult it is to get work at the moment. They may also have stereotyped views about the work ethic of a redundant person. How you approach your job search will say something about your work ethic when you are “unsupervised”. So imagine the positive impression you can create if you talk about how you organise and structure your week, compared to describing an ad hoc “see how it goes” approach ... who would you employ?

Help the recruiter understand just how tough the market is, keep a log of the number of job applications you've applied for, especially where you have made progress. These facts will help them put your success (or failure) into perspective.

If you have been employed by one company for a while, it's likely that whilst you have experience you don't have qualifications that “prove” it. Volume applications tend to be processed by “tick boxes” – including electronic sifting by key word search! Investing in one or two key qualifications or an accreditation from a professional body helps tick the box by demonstrating you have been “busy” improving yourself. Try to find flexible study options too as you don't want to turn a dream job down because you are part way through a course you've fully paid for!

Similarly, most markets and sectors are continually changing and if you are out of work there is a danger that an employer will think you are “out of touch”. So consider what you can do to counteract their perception. Whilst conferences and seminars can be costly, networking with former colleagues may only cost you a cup of coffee and on-line forums are usually free. Prepare examples for your interview to demonstrate you know “what's hot” in your field and remember that on-line media can be useful for raising your profile as an expert – attracting opportunities to you!

During time out many people consider whether they were in the right industry in the first place and if finances are less of a driver they may consider working in a more “worthy” sector. Volunteering is a popular option and may offer more than just a chance to “get out more” or help a worthy cause. If your history is in the private sector and you would like to get a future job in the public sector, voluntary work is an ideal opportunity to gain an insight into the organisation e.g. If volunteering in a charity shop, find out how your professional skills could be useful to the wider organisation and what kind of staff they employ. Deduce information about the culture and the administration of the organisation to see if it's somewhere you could thrive in.

Ideally you should access the organisation at the easiest point, start to build some relationships and from there offer your professional skills to the organisation “pro-bono” – this will enable you to test out the reality of working in the public/voluntary sector and some real experience to offer a similar organisation in future.

Finally, although some of your “time out” experience might be painful, all of it is valuable – so consider how you can turn this life experience into a positive force for business. Increasingly we turn to technology to record and communicate our experiences –so think about how it could help you. Perhaps you could create a forum which provides hints and tips from your experience, setting you apart from the rest and giving a positive impression that you are willing to both learn and share your experiences. Or if you are more of a face to face person – why not set up a local support group?

Creating success out of adversity is an essential skill whatever business you are in. So take the time to divorce yourself from the reality of your job searching and take a look at how you will describe your time to a future employer – will you be able to differentiate yourself or will you just be another number?

If you would like more hints and tips whilst you are job searching take a look at Michelle’s website or follow her on twitter. And if you would like to talk to Michelle about how you can turn your situation to your advantage simply contact her on michelle@greenfieldsconsultancy.co.uk

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