

Conscious Careering



Unemployment statistics may be interesting, but are of little practical use to out-of-work professionals

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For the past several years, the job market in the Pacific Northwest has been positively atrocious. No, I mean it, really. It's been terribly, obscenely awful for the vast majority of talented technical, administrative, and corporate professionals who have found themselves between jobs or got caught up in one of the numerous corporate layoffs this region has experienced.

According to the Washington State Department of Labor, the unemployment rate peaked at 7.5% in the third quarter of 2003—and even that figure is misleadingly low given some of the rather questionable ways in which it is calculated. Now, however, things seem to be getting on track and we've reached a more historically "normal" unemployment rate of 5.3% here in the state.

This significant improvement in the economy makes it a reasonably appropriate time to stress a core principle that I teach all of my clients when we go through the career coaching process: that the state of the economy, at any given moment, is largely irrelevant to the needs and efforts of the serious job seeker.

A ridiculous contention, you say? If you feel this way, then I'd suggest you read the sentence carefully again. Because while I would agree wholeheartedly that economic conditions tend to affect the overall *success* of a job seeker, the point I'm making is that they shouldn't dictate the actual *effort* involved. In other words, whether we're in the boom times or sliding back into recession, the simple truth is that most of us have bills to pay, a family to feed, and other financial obligations that compel us to look hard for a new job at any point in time when we aren't lucky enough to have one—whether the economy chooses to cooperate or not. In the big picture, employment statistics will have as little influence on this reality as the moon has on the way we comb our hair. Which is to say, by way of poor analogy, "not much."

For any individual facing the need to find new employment, the recipe for success is no secret: you bear down and put in 40+ hours a week getting your name out there and tracking down potential leads. By treating your job search as a full-time job in and of itself, you'll not only

maximize your odds of finding a decent placement in the "bad times" but will also increase the number of options and choices you get to pick from in the "good times." Ultimately, the more time you put into the process, the more successful you'll be. And if you find it hard to believe that anybody could spend that much time per week looking for a job, you simply haven't picked up the phone book lately and noticed the thousands of companies that move in and out of this region every day, or have simply not explored the vast array of tactics that today's professionals can use to market themselves effectively into a new position.

To paraphrase the old saying, the more you put into the job search, the more—and the faster—you'll get out of it. It doesn't matter whether the economy is on record pace or bouncing along in the trenches. Effort trumps everything. So there's really very little point to tracking the day-to-day unemployment numbers, unless you're looking for a convenient excuse to avoid looking for work or your goal is to feel sorry for yourself.

On that note, I'm going to pick a minor bone with many of the public career information providers out there, including the unemployment office as well the occupation and career resource section at your local library. While these facilities have gotten more sophisticated in recent years, and the state's WorkSource system in particular has emerged as a shining star, they still (in my humble opinion) tend to bog job seekers down a little too much with macroeconomic data instead of providing specific, actionable data on local employers and hiring managers. In the majority of cases, for example, an unemployed machine shop technician is going to benefit far more from a complete, accurate list of local machine shops and metalworking companies than from a study showing that the state's manufacturing sector is likely to fluctuate plus or minus a few percentage points over the next biennium.

In the end, "big picture" numbers and high-level economic data simply don't play a big role in the immediate fortunes of the typical out-of-work professional. If you're a job seeker, I'd therefore encourage you to turn a blind eye to these numbers, whenever possible, and focus your attention on the important factor, instead—investing the time and effort needed to reach your employment goals.

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