

Conscious Careering



In troubled times, it's important to thank some unsung heroes

Matthew B. Youngquist

Boy, it's hard to stay positive these days. While the economy tantalizes us here and there with glimpses of improvement, there's still a fierce game of musical chairs going on out in the job market—and unfortunately this game is one in which lives, futures, homes, and other serious matters are at stake. If there's one thing that keeps me going, however, it's the heroic lengths I've seen so many wonderful folks going to in terms of lending a hand to their unemployed brethren. This story, to me, is the “unsung hero” of today's recessionary times.

For starters, I want to thank the hundreds of alumni of *my firm* who always seem willing to make the time to talk with the people I route along to them for networking purposes. I know you're busy. I know you're working too hard and not spending as much time with your family as you'd like. And I know that many of you are worried about your *own* employment futures, much of the time. So the fact that you'd drop everything to share a cup of coffee with a job seeker in need, or grant them an informational interview, or coach them through the tricky pathways of your company's hiring process is immensely appreciated. It would be so easy for you to turn a blind eye and blow off these requests “now that you've got yours.” And yet you don't. And I can't tell you how much that means to me—and more importantly, to them.

While we're at it, I also want to publicly thank the hundreds of individuals and groups around town who have stepped up and launched efforts designed to assist folks in transition. The list is a long one, but we're talking about entities like the Washington Technology Industry Association (WTIA) which recently hosted a free “Back to Work” event attended by over 300 tech industry professionals. Or the dozens of individuals out there like Jackie Petersen, Jenifer McMahon, Mike Salokas, Jeff Levy, and Lesa Keller (to name just a few) who have formed job search “support groups” and volunteer their time to help people job hunt more effectively. I'm not just giving a shout-out to my friends here. Some of these people I barely know. But word of their good deeds gets around, and in case they (and others like them) haven't already received the recognition they deserve, I wanted to do my part.

I'd even offer special congratulations to a fellow I've never met, Rich Daugherty, who I'm told challenged the members of a local executive networking group to make a difference—and call one unemployed person they knew, that day, to offer encouragement and proactively extend an offer of help. Many folks I know were highly moved by this presentation and seized upon the “helping hand” gauntlet Rich threw down. It's this kind of cooperative spirit that's going to get us through all this, if anything will.

So at the risk of sounding like that one annoying Natalie Merchant song, I just wanted to say “thank you” to all of the wonderful folks out there who are going to such extraordinary lengths to help job hunters in need.

What are some ways we can keep this engine of good will running? Here are a few tips on how to make yourself as “helpable” as possible if you, yourself, are in career transition.

1) Know what you want; If you ask somebody to coffee or reach out to them for networking help, it's your job, not theirs, to set the agenda for the meeting. You need to know what specific items you're looking for help with beyond vague statements like “Do you know of any job leads?” or “Are there any companies or people you think I should be talking to?”

2) Close the loop; Once somebody has done you a favor, have the courtesy to thank them for the favor immediately—as well as to circle back around in a week or two to thank them again and let them know how their referral or suggestion worked out. This gives the “helper” an emotional payoff and is what will motivate them to help you, and others, time and time again. It feels pretty terrific, after all, to help somebody and actually get confirmation that your suggestions made a difference!

3) Don't be a user; Unfortunately, too many people out there still think it's acceptable to ask a service professional (e.g. attorney, business consultant, career coach, etc.) out to coffee or lunch in order to “pick their brain” a bit—aka solicit some free advice. Remember, such professionals make their living by charging for their expertise and their fees usually run a bit beyond the price of a double-tall latte. So while there are exceptions, and you can certainly ask if the person would be up for a social call, don't imply that picking up the bill is a “fair trade” for their services. That's a huge turn-off.

Again, let's take a moment to celebrate this overlooked bright spot of the current business climate—helpfulness and human compassion are in abundance, if you look around!

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