

Tables Turned, Former Hirers Can't Get Hired



Photographs by Chris Hartlove for The New York Times

LOOKING Among the people at a Columbia, Md. work-force center that serves highly skilled unemployed people were, from left, Kevin Johnson, Dave Kozlowski, Nancy Gober and Mark Roper.

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By [MICHAEL WINERIP](#)

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COLUMBIA, Md.



NANCY FINK is a career coach for Maryland's department of labor, running seminars for the most skilled unemployed workers.

For 17 years, she has counseled professionals, business managers, engineers, accountants, scientists — people who are mature, middle-aged, highly motivated, well-educated, well-spoken. But in all that time, she's never seen so many of the jobless with such impressive skills as this last year. "Last week I had seven lawyers in this room," she said. "I've had lots of folks from TV and The Baltimore Sun. This week I've got five human resources directors — I've never had that."

The number of professionals and managers in unemployment programs at this suburban work-force center halfway between Baltimore and Washington is the highest it has been since the state first made this group a target for outplacement support in 1992.

They ask questions young workers don't. David Kozlowski, 52, a systems vice president laid off in June, wanted to know how far back to go when an interviewer inquires about his work experience in information technology. "I've had 30 years in I.T.," he said. Many of the 53 people at a recent two-day seminar had themselves hired employees before being fired. When Ms. Fink quizzed them on the first question

interviewers ask, Jim Chrzanowski, 45, a systems engineer who once oversaw 83 workers, knew immediately. “ ‘Tell me about yourself’ — it was the first question I always asked,” he said.

During a discussion on cover letters, Ms. Fink wondered if the human resources directors in the room had any thoughts. “It can make a big difference,” said Hal Hamil Jr., 56, unemployed since August, but before then, a senior vice president of PNC Bank making \$130,000 a year. Mr. Hamil said that last March he posted three openings for tellers paying \$10 an hour and got 1,008 applications. “I hired two of them because of their cover letters,” he said.

Ms. Fink urged rehearsing before an interview, and Arlene Hernandez, 44, who was a human resources director doing the hiring for a 150-person retail company until last month, agreed. “People who took too long to make their point, I’d be thinking about what I was cooking for dinner,” she said.

They strategized about befriending the receptionist when going for an interview. “You get that receptionist on your side, it frames the interview,” Ms. Fink said. “ ‘Nancy is here,’ versus ‘Your 10 o’clock is here.’ And later you write the receptionist a thank-you note. She’ll show her boss. It will make an impression.”

“So,” Ms. Fink continued, “you’ve made friends with the receptionist. Now, what do you do while you’re waiting to be interviewed?”

“Start working on your thank-you note,” said Ellen James, 49, a contractor whose home-improvement business collapsed in March.

Shelley Nituama, 50, an unemployed librarian with two master’s degrees, said, “We could start a new society with all the talent in this room.”

Maryland, with its proximity to the federal government, is usually insulated from severe downturns, but even here in the Baltimore-Washington corridor, unemployment is the highest in decades. The number of jobless professionals taking these seminars at the work-force center — one of 34 statewide — has doubled in a year, to 210 a month. Nationally, the unemployment rate for managers and professionals increased to 5.2 percent in September, from 2.8 percent the year before, according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#).

Many, like Mr. Hamil, who as a human resources director provided services for 3,500 workers at PNC Bank, had never needed a government program before. “I find it useful to be with other people and hear their ideas,” he said. “I’ve had all the time I needed at home cutting the lawn and reseeding the lawn.”

They were wowed by their fellow jobless. “It’s wonderful to be with people of this caliber,” said Ms. Nituama, the librarian, who said she never went for an interview without memorizing the employer’s mission statement.

There were handouts galore: 12 tips for making small talk; the Noel Smith-Wenkle salary negotiation method; inspirational quotes [Victor Borge](#): “The shortest distance between two people is a smile”); advice from the man Ms. Fink described as, “the father of modern job search, Richard Nelson Bolles.”

Some exercises let them vent. Ms. Fink asked them to list what kind of workers employers wanted and several shouted, “Cheap.”

“Young,” said Jeffrey DeBois, 58, who had been a construction manager with the same company for 21 years.

“They want experience but they want youth,” said Steven Dembo, a photographer dressed in coat and tie.

“They want a senior player at entry level pay,” said Mark Roper, 50, an information technology specialist whose daughter had to move home and transfer to a local community college after he lost his job.

“I don’t think they know what they want, the job description doesn’t match the interview,” said Pamela Robb, who was taking down Ms. Fink’s tips on her laptop.

Ms. Fink warned: “You could find yourself being interviewed by a millennial. As a boomer, you’re thinking that could be my kid. Your instinct is to use their first name. Don’t. They could have an M.B.A. from Wharton. It should be Ms. or Mr.”

They posed questions Ms. Fink had no answers for. “Why do they bring me in, then tell me I’m overqualified?” asked Amy Studnitz, 59, a former accounting manager who made \$68,000 in her last job.

“How do you know,” Ms. Nituama asked, “if you’re being brought in and they already have an insider for the job?”

They discussed how to respond when an interviewer asked them to describe a weakness.

“I say, ‘Sometimes my expectations are too high,’ ” said Marlene Manley, an analyst with T. Rowe Price making \$73,900 until she was laid off in April.

“Absolutely,” Ms. Fink said.

"Can you say 'I don't have a weakness,' " Ms. James, the contractor said. "'I'm just even-keeled'?"

"No, no," Ms. Fink said, "you need a weakness that's not really a weakness — they want to see you dance around the question."

As a group they joked, but one-on-one many sounded scared. "I've been discouraged these last few days," said Ms. Nituama, a single mother of 9-year-old twins. "In job interviews, I try not to come across as desperate. I try to seem relaxed."

Jim Hess, 46, a former comptroller for a construction company, said he had cashed in his 401(k).

"If something doesn't happen soon," said Ms. Studnitz, the former accounting manager, "I'm in real trouble."

Richard Mantsch, 52, who was projects manager for an engineering firm that closed in July, said he was hoping that he, his wife and their children, 10 and 12, could hold onto their home. "It's the only house we've known as a family," he said. When he first lost his job he was embarrassed when people found out, he said, but lately, he's stopped trying to hide it.

After the seminar, Ms. Fink said a lot of what she does is therapy — helping worried people feel less isolated.

Her boss, Stephen Gallison, who directs the program for skilled workers known as the Professional Outplacement Assistance Center, said that in the past people typically found jobs within five months, but in this economy that's not a reliable gauge. Asked if he saw any hopeful signs, he said: "No. Nothing. Not yet."

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