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Unemployed, and in denial

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New movie illustrates how not coming to terms with being laid off can hamper the job hunt

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They are self-confident, doing stellar work and soaring in their careers. Then, without warning, corporate downsizing yanks away their jobs and sends them into an emotional freefall.

As suggested by the title of *The Company Men*, which hits movie screens on Friday, life and career can become inseparable. When uncontrollable events erase your career identity, as happens in the film to Bobby Walker (played by Ben Affleck), Phil Woodward (Chris Cooper) and Gene McClary (Tommy Lee Jones), you may find yourself compelled to completely redefine your life and professional goals.

It's certainly an experience being shared by many in real life these days. The average duration of unemployment in Canada is now running at 19.4 weeks – a 10-year high. The number of workers who have been jobless for at least 12 months has swelled by a third in the past year, according to figures from Statistics Canada.

That's not only because jobs are scarce. Career experts are also finding that unemployed professionals are dealing themselves setbacks by being unprepared to face up to their situation and lacking a strategy to regroup. This delays their return to a satisfying job and career identity.

Although fictional, experts say *The Company Men* offers clear lessons on how to reinvent yourself if your job disappears from under you :

DON'T HIDE THE FACTS

In the movie: Bobby tells his wife not to even tell the kids or friends he's looking for a new position. "I don't want to tell anybody until I get another job," he says.

In real life: That's a bad move, says Tim Cork, president of career transition company NEXCareer Inc. in Toronto and author of an advice book, *Tapping the Iceberg*. "People in transition have to let people know," he says. "They can't help you unless they know."

BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF

In the movie: Bobby is initially in denial about the reality of his situation and job loss. He continues to play golf at his country club and clings to a lifestyle he can no longer afford. "I need to look successful," he tells his wife. "I can't just look like another asshole with a résumé." To which she replies: "You *are* just another asshole with a résumé."

In real life: You need to face the realities of your job predicament and its financial consequences. While they may be scary and require sacrifice, it is better to confront them head-on, Mr. Cork says.

ACCEPT OFFERS OF HELP

In the movie: In their severance offers, the fired executives are offered career-search assistance at a job placement centre. But Bobby rejects the offer, and when he later attends seminars he holds back because he believes he can find a job without asking for help.

In real life: The average person in transition needs to do at least two hours a day networking, Mr. Cork advises. "If you are not out there ... prospecting, having face time and following up on potential leads, you're setting yourself up for a long stint of joblessness." Plan a daily agenda that gets you out of the house, in front of people and follow up every lead immediately.

EMBRACE CHANGE

In the movie: Bobby eventually swallows his pride and accepts a job as a carpenter. While it boosts his morale, it also increases his desire to escape and get back into a more satisfying career.

In real life: You have to shed your old identity if you want to move forward, advises Rick Lash, Toronto-based national practice director of leadership coaching company Hay Group. "When people lose their

jobs, they often stick tenaciously to their comfortable old identity. But by continuing to define themselves by the past, they unconsciously limit their options and remain locked in old ways of thinking and behaving."

This can lead to a painfully long job search, Mr. Lash notes. He recalls a senior executive he coached who lost her job with a software company and searched, to no avail, for a job in the same role. "She was unwilling to consider options because she was clinging to the 20 years of industry experience and the reputation she once had." When she considered alternative roles, she found contract positions in related industries; that helped her build a track record to return to a full-time position.

SHAKE UP YOUR SOCIAL TIES

In the movie: The jobless group keeps getting together to commiserate about their situation.

In real life: It may feel good to hang out with other job hunters, but you also need to find people who will give you a different perspective and provide different ways of behaving and thinking, Mr. Lash says. Push yourself toward recovery: Take a course, investigate other types of positions or industries, do things you aren't completely comfortable about doing.

"Hang out with people who don't think of the world as terrifying and falling apart, go to industry events where people are talking about opportunities, and seek out people who have shifted from one career to another," he advises.

STAY UP-TO-DATE

In the movie: Phil can't see a way to reinvent his career and he gives up on a job search. Meanwhile, Gene is able to reconnect with what motivated him to get into business and becomes an entrepreneur.

In real life: If you let yourself become out-of-date, you can unwittingly set yourself up for a long, frustrating job search, Mr. Lash says. "You may have moved up through good work and experience, but if you don't have the degrees and upgraded professional certifications currently expected of candidates, it can become a huge barrier [to a new job]." Think ahead and stay up-to-date even if you don't anticipate a career change, he advises.

"If you don't have the needed credentials, at least be able to lay out a scenario in which you will make getting them a priority."

STAY CONFIDENT

In the movie: After being kept waiting for a job interview, Bobby is offered a position that pays less than half his former salary. He explodes at the interviewer, effectively ending any chance of being hired.

In real life: At the executive level especially, people can become frustrated because there seems to be no new roles on offer for them, which can lead to anger and depression.

"I often see people get down on themselves as the hunt drags on, questioning whether they still have what it takes and whether they can still offer value to an employer," says Lou Clements, managing director of career consultancy Clements United Inc. in Toronto.

That attitude becomes its own barrier, he adds. Interviewers will sense your self-doubt and start to ask themselves questions about whether you have the energy and abilities to set goals and meet expectations.

Keep telling yourself that you can contribute and be relevant, he says, even if it means taking a pay cut or shifting to a new position or sector.