

2009: The year of reinventing livelihoods

Tavia Grant dissects the latest workplace and career trends

TAVIA GRANT
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Angelika Witkowski is one of a legion of Canadians switching gears after a layoff.

She was let go from her job at Chrysler Canada Inc.'s assembly plant in Brampton, Ont., last March. A few months later, her husband lost his job at a moulding plant.

Now, she's seeking a new career far, far from the auto industry: tourism and hospitality. She's halfway through a year-long community college program on human resources management, helped by funding from the provincial government.

She's rejigged her earnings expectations though, knowing she'll likely have to start with an entry-level job, such as front-desk clerk at a hotel.

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"I was making \$70,000 a year. So it's going to be a huge pay cut," the 26-year-old says. "I'm aware of that going into it, but with the [training] I'm doing, there's the opportunity to move up more quickly."

The Canadian economy shed more than 100,000 jobs in the last two months of 2008, and the losses will likely continue throughout this year. As a result, 2009 is likely to be known as the year of the career change. This week's federal budget pledged \$1.5-billion for retraining programs for laid off workers. Colleges and universities are already reporting a bump in enrolments, a trend that echoes previous economic downturns.

Almost everyone agrees that Canada needs a more highly skilled work force – so retraining is a good thing. The challenge in this environment, though, is ensuring people move to spots where labour will actually be needed, observers say.

PICK YOUR SPOTS

One chief concern with Ottawa's pledge is that many people might enter a retraining program only to find opportunities in their newfound field have dried up as the recession deepens.

"The big mystery is how do you predict what sectors are going to be strong?" says Phil Kling, who runs job workshops for laid-off or soon-to-be-laid-off engineers in the Ontario auto sector.

His last session in December was filled with people in their mid- to late-forties who learned everything from résumé writing to building an online presence – something many had never considered before.

He's redirecting some engineers into the aerospace and defence industries, and suggests alternative

careers, such as architecture or teaching.

Canadian jobs are expected to keep disappearing this year. But employment experts predict there still will be hiring in some sectors, such as health care, community colleges, engineering, environmental technology, social work, and – in a sign of the times – bankruptcy law.

PLAN STRATEGICALLY

Going back to school just because you're at loose ends is a bad idea, says Randall Craig, Toronto-based author of several career planning books. Rather, think more strategically about where you want to work, then research the best way to get there. This year at least, government funding may help pay the bills while you're retraining.

And don't wait for a layoff to get training and acquire new skills, he says. Even the employed should keep getting certifications, taking courses, reading trade magazines and newspapers, or doing research on the Internet.

"If you're doing that on an ongoing basis, and sometimes we forget about that, you will be more prepared if you do get laid off," Mr. Craig says.

Research any new career path before forking over money for tuition fees, he adds, and, if possible, test drive the career first by working part time or temporarily

CAREER COUNSELLING HOT

Companies that help people find second careers are now inundated with calls. Tim Cork, president of Toronto-based career transition company NexCareer Inc., says the volume of inquiries is about 40 per cent higher than last year.

A big part of his job is trying to shore up self-esteem and telling people that, even though prospects initially may seem bleak, there is life after a layoff.

"This is a time when self-confidence is really tested," he says. "We spend a lot of time telling people it's not just them. It's just a sign of the times."

Those contemplating retraining for a new job should first reflect on what makes them passionate and where their greatest strengths lie, he says. Pragmatism comes next, and he's seeing people hit the books, start their own businesses, or explore more recession-resilient jobs at consumer staples or pharmaceutical companies.

The other job in high demand these days? Career counsellors. "We are hiring," Mr. Cork says.

STARTING OVER

For some people stuck in a dead-end job, getting laid off is a chance to reinvent themselves.

"It was the best thing that ever happened to me," said Janice Rennick, 45, a former lift truck driver who was laid off from the auto industry in 2007 after 15 years of service.

The mother of five is now retraining as a law clerk, and receives provincial government funding to help ends meet through two years of study. She loathed her former job, and kept at it just to put food on the table. Now, she's anxious to pursue a career that requires more cerebral and social skills.

So is Saini Arvinder, who came to Canada from India in 1999, armed with a university economics degree. She wound up working as a machine operator at a Vaughan, Ont., plant – a job she took to put food on the table, until everyone was laid off in July.

Now, the single mother is taking courses in community work and would like to pursue social work – a field she says is much more suited to her interests.

"I was so depressed and didn't understand what to do," she says. "But I have new hope now."

UPSIDE

I'm scared about it because it's going to be so different, but also excited. Hopefully it will be a choice for the better.

Angelika Witkowski,

tourism and hospitality student

DOWNSIDE

My biggest fear is that we give people this hope and they pursue something with their interest and

passion, and there's no job at the end of it. There's no magic ticket.

Cammie Peirce, co-ordinator,

Brampton job action centre

Just what was said

Long-Tenured Workers

As the global economic slowdown has unfolded, a number of communities across the country have been particularly hard hit. Individuals who have spent years working in one industry or for one employer now face the

prospect of unemployment and the need to retrain for a new job, possibly in an entirely different industry.

To ensure that Canadian

workers have financial support while training for new

employment opportunities, the Government will provide \$500-million over two years to extend EI income benefits for individuals participating in longer-term

training.

This funding will give up to 10,000 long-tenured workers

additional time and financial support to allow them to gain the new skills needed to adapt to the changing economy. It will also

allow earlier access to EI benefits for workers who have received severance packages, if they use some or all of that severance to purchase skills upgrading or training for themselves.

From Canada's Economic Plan, Budget 2009, Chapter 3

Department of Finance

By the numbers

100,000 number of jobs lost in the last two weeks of 2008

175,000 net total of jobs that could be lost this year, according to the Conference Board.

From the federal budget

\$1-billion

to go to retraining for laid-off

Canadians over two years through the EI systems

\$60-million

to help keep older workers

in the work force

\$500-million

to help former small business owners and other self-employed workers transition to new jobs

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