Getting back to work: Returning to the labor force after an absence

by Elka Jones

Theresa Green understands the ups and downs of employment. She was promoted quickly and then fired by one employer. For her next employer, she worked only a short time before quitting. She found yet another position, had to leave it for a few weeks, and then returned—only to walk off the job after working in it for 5 years.

Green admits to making some mistakes, and her mental illness contributed to a rocky start early in her career. She's also taken time off to raise her kids. But throughout her changing circumstances, Green has, when ready, re-entered the labor force.

For the millions of Americans who decide to return to work after any type of absence, there is good news: having an imperfect employment history may not be the problem it once was. "People are more willing to show a resume that's been through stormy weather," says Boston career counselor Ed Colozzi. Over the years, he says, he has noticed a positive change in people's determination to stand up for themselves and their right to balance work with their personal lives.

Knowing what to do and what to expect when returning to the labor force can help ease the transition back to work. Keep reading to find out what Green and others have done—and what employment counselors advise—for a successful re-entry. The first part of this article offers tips on how to identify, and prepare for, your ideal job. The second part helps you get set for the workforce. The third part suggests ways to make your dream job a reality without letting your time off interfere with your plans. In sidebars throughout the article, you'll find suggestions for some special re-entry situations. Additional information is available in the resources section beginning on page 42.

Get ready for re-entry

"It was a scary time," says Brian Trott of his 9 months without a job. "I was unemployed with no benefits and no income during the worst possible time in the job market." The experience was a humbling one. "You find yourself just sitting in the coffee shop, reading the paper," says Trott. "You get to that point where you get very down and depressed."

As Trott discovered, there are challenges to being out of work. But if re-entering the workforce is your goal, make the most of your downtime. The earlier that you invest extra effort in career planning, the better off you'll be later when you begin the job hunt.

Sara Rix, senior policy advisor for AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons) in Washington, DC, says most successful re-entrants do three

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things that contribute to their satisfaction: They determine what they want to do, look to see if that type of work is available in their communities, and do what they need to do to qualify for a job.

Consider what you want to do

Jobseekers should think about their interests and skills—and how to apply them in a work setting. Employment counselors agree that assessing both what you like to do and what you are able to do is critical to making a good job match. See the resources section at the end of this article for information about self-assessment guides.

Employment counselors also suggest that jobseekers look at how the world of work is constructed. Nearly all jobs involve working with some combination of people, data, things, and ideas. Knowing what your preferences are can help you decide which types of work environments are likely to be a better fit.

Trott began exploring careers when he got discouraged in his initial job search. With the help of a career coach, Trott started identifying some employment choices. He referred to the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* for detailed occupational descriptions, which include information on working conditions and employment settings. Studying occupations in detail helped Trott identify several that might be good for him, based on his interests and skills.

Know what's out there

Once you know what you want to do, you need to know whether you can find a job doing it. Examine your local job market to see where opportunities exist. In the course of your research, you might find a job you want to apply for. But generally, job-market exploration is your chance to learn about possibilities rather than to search for a specific position.

Conduct a search using common jobseeking methods, including reviewing help-wanted listings, researching employers, "cold calling," and networking. By combining several activities, you can gain insight into jobs in your community.

Informational interviewing is a way of combining research techniques. Find employers that interest you, set up an appointment with as many as you can, and then meet with workers who have jobs that you think you might enjoy. Informational interviews provide an opportunity to ask specific questions about occupations

Re-entry strategies for jobseekers who have...

Spotty work histories

Jobseekers who have not maintained steady employment should pause to think about why. It may be that the types of jobs a person has held have not been well suited to him or her. This is one reason that employment counselors stress the importance of jobseekers exploring what they want to do as a step toward finding a job for the long term.

Jobseekers need self-knowledge so that they can be advocates for themselves. Most employers are reluctant to hire and train someone who will not stay in the position very long. Being able to explain job hopping or gaps in employment, and providing assurance that the pattern is not likely to continue, improves the chances of getting a job.

Additionally, jobseekers can avoid having to reveal the full extent of an intermittent employment past. Counselors note that there are a lot of different ways to write a resume, so jobseekers need to create one that makes the most of their skills without emphasizing their employment history—using a functional rather than a chronological format, perhaps, or providing only years of employment instead of including months and days. After all, a person does not have to account for every minute of his or her time.

Re-entry strategies for jobseekers who are...

Seeking skills

Everyone has abilities that are valuable in the workplace. Some people just need to recognize their work-related abilities, both those that they have and those that they need to develop.

Often, skills are transferable from one experience to another. By describing their performances on similar tasks in the past, jobseekers can demonstrate that they will be able to do what is required in a new job.

Re-entrants who lack recent work experience should evaluate areas of their lives in which they have been successful—such as raising children, maintaining a household, or making ends meet—to identify their skills. Organizational, personal management, decisionmaking, and negotiation skills are just a few of the strengths that people can discuss outside of an employment context.

Some people might need to update their skills. Certain types of jobs—including those dealing with technology, computer science, and engineering—change more rapidly than others. As a result, these fields are more difficult to re-enter after an absence. But jobseekers who find themselves in this situation should identify the skills needed and work toward getting them.

The U.S. Department of Education has information and resources for aspiring students on a variety of topics, including choosing and paying for career or technical training; planning for, enrolling in, and paying for college; and returning to school. For more information, write to the U.S. Department of Education, 400 Maryland Avenue SW., Washington, DC 20202; call toll-free, 1 (800) USA-LEARN (872-5327) or TTY 1(800) 437-0833; or visit online, **www.ed.gov/students**.

and employers. For example, you might learn about a job's educational requirements and whether the employer provides training, how people typically get started in the occupation, and what's required to be promoted.

Trott found informational interviewing valuable and recommends it for other jobseekers. But, he cautions, remember that arranging for these interviews usually involves cold calling—contacting workers or employers who don't know you—and that cold calling often is unsuccessful. "If I got 2 out of 10 people to talk to me, I was doing really well," says Trott. "You've got to deal with some rejection. It's not easy, but you have to keep at it."

In addition to helping you learn about occupations and employers, informational interviews help you to network. And networking, discussed in more detail later, is a crucial tool for scoping out the "hidden" job market.

Meet job qualifications

The more you learn about what you want to do and what your local job market offers, the more you should learn about the qualifications needed for the types of positions you want. Consider testing your interests in a "real world" work situation before launching into a full-fledged pursuit of a new career. Volunteering, job shadowing, or similar hands-on opportunities might help you to discover whether a job that seems just right on paper is all wrong in reality.

If you determine that you need some training or retraining, employment counselors suggest pausing to make sure that you're ready to invest the required effort and money. When you're prepared to commit to training, the next step is to find out how much to get and where to get it. Employers are one source of training; some occupations involve employer-provided training specific to a company or a job.

Community colleges are another possible training source. See the resources section at the end of the article for information about community colleges and other training courses and programs, including where to find them.

Training varies, depending on the type and complexity of a subject area. Some people might have to take only a class or two. Other people, especially those who are retraining to enter a different occupation, might need to enroll in a lengthy program. Ultimately, only you can decide what's right for you. When Julie Pearson realized

how unhappy she was in her previous job, she stepped off the work path and went to school full time for 2½ years. "I won't lie: it was hard," she says. "But I haven't looked back."

Pearson's decision to go back to school was an informed one. With the help of a career counselor, she considered what her skills were and what she wanted from a job. Pearson researched careers and concluded that the occupation of dental hygienist seemed a perfect fit.

The self-assessment made a difference; Pearson now thoroughly enjoys what she does. "You spend a lot of time at work," she says, "but if you can find the right job, it's almost like you're not working."

Get set for the workforce

For many jobseekers, especially re-entrants, getting ready to join the working world can seem daunting. After all, most workers want more than just a paycheck, says Troy Justesen, deputy commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration in Washington, DC. "It's one of the first questions someone asks when you meet: 'So what do you do?'" he says. "Work defines our identity. It contributes to our self-worth and sense of pride."

Minimize the stress of looking for work by knowing what to expect. Help prepare yourself by finding out where to get career assistance, being ready to work hard to find a job, and thinking about ways to balance work with life.

Seek help…

When Brian Trott was ready to re-enter the workforce, he didn't go it alone—he had help in the form of career resources, assessments, and counseling. You, too, can benefit from many types of assistance. A lot of career help is available, and much of it is free. You just need to know where to look.

Federally funded One-Stop Career Centers are located throughout the country and offer many free resources for jobseekers. These resources include informational materials, resume-writing seminars, and Internet access for online jobseeking. Some people qualify for additional services, such as individualized counseling and job training.

There are a variety of other options for employment assistance. Most colleges and universities, for example, provide career counseling services to their alumni as well as to their students.

Individuals with special re-entry situations may have specific sources of help. What is available at a given employment center and what is offered to you may vary, depending on your situation and where you live.

In addition to employment centers, look into other options within your community. For example, some religious organizations sponsor seminars or support groups for people who are returning to work. Individualized career guidance is also offered, for a fee, by private employment counselors.

To find publicly funded employment centers, check the blue pages of your telephone book; for private employment centers, check the yellow pages. Program offerings, including contact information, also may be available online. See the resources section at the end of the article for more information.

…But take the lead

Employment offices, employment counselors, and community organizations provide valuable assistance to jobseekers. Still, it is important to recognize that these resources have limitations—and the success of your job hunt depends, primarily, on your efforts. "A lot of places offer help, but it's up to you to take control of your job search," says Grant Collins, a former welfare coach and current chief of staff for the Office of Family Assistance in Washington, DC.

Collins and other counselors stress that the most successful jobseekers are those who are proactive. Trott, for example, didn't just sit in the coffee shop; he took action that led to results. "I've been at my job 11 months now—and I love it!" he says. "I enjoy what I do, but I spent a lot of time getting here."

Dedicating a great deal of time and effort to a job search is not only recommended, it's essential. Most employment counselors suggest that people look for work in an organized way, as if the search itself were a full-time job. Begin each morning just as you would if you were going to work: get up early, get dressed, and have breakfast. Then, approach the day's regimen of job-hunting tasks with the same interest and professionalism that an employer would expect.

Taking charge and approaching a career search seriously can help you focus on the importance of finding a job. And as Trott and others have discovered, staying focused increases the likelihood that jobseeking efforts pay off.

Re-entry strategies for jobseekers who have...

Criminal records

Ex-offenders are not much different from other jobseekers. But they do have some special issues to consider.

When first thinking about employment options, these jobseekers might be more focused on getting a job quickly than on finding a long-term career. Any job done well can help establish solid, post-conviction employment performance and thereby pave the way for better future opportunities. Jobseekers should also find out if having a criminal record prevents them from entering or resuming work in any occupations that interest them. Federal and State laws differ in barring licensure of convicted felons in some occupations, such as security guard.

There are also some things that ex-offender jobseekers can do to help themselves. If they do not have these documents already, jobseekers should get a birth certificate, a Social Security card, and photo identification as soon as possible because proof of identification is required for employment. Some employment counselors suggest that jobseeking ex-offenders get a copy of their criminal arrest record, or "rap sheet," to review what is on it and to check it for mistakes. In addition, jobseekers might want to consult their State's repository of criminal records or contact an attorney about the possibility of having a criminal record sealed or expunged.

When applying for a job, ex-offenders should tell the truth about their criminal record. Being truthful might cause difficulty in the short run, but the alternative—lying to get a job, only to have an employer later discover a conviction—can cause more difficulty in the long run. Honesty does not, however, mean that jobseekers need to put specifics about a conviction on an application. Instead, counselors recommend writing something like, "I welcome the opportunity to explain the circumstances surrounding my conviction during an interview."

It is best not to go into too much detail during a job interview when talking about criminal history. State the nature of the offense, perhaps acknowledge having made a mistake, and then redirect the discussion toward the positive, such as completion of coursework or proof of skills relevant to the job.

There are also benefits available to employers—such as tax credits and Federal bonding—to encourage them to hire ex-offenders. During an interview, a jobseeker should first discuss his or her work history, skills, and abilities. Then, the added incentives can be mentioned.

Many of the rules and procedures that ex-offenders need to follow when seeking a job are State-specific. The National H.I.R.E. Network offers a listing of these resources by State. Information is available by writing the National H.I.R.E. Network, Legal Action Center, 153 Waverly Place, 8th Floor, New York, NY 10014; by calling (212) 243-1313; or by visiting online at **www.hirenetwork.org**.

Balancing work with life

Life isn't just about work. If you haven't had a job for a while, though, it might be harder to draw a line between your work and your life. This is because the absence of a job has allowed you to do other things and fulfill other commitments. Managing your life has become your job.

In preparing to re-enter the workforce, it is important to recognize that balancing life and work involves making tradeoffs. "It's a matter of figuring out what part you want a job to play in your life," says Chris Olson, a counselor at the New Ulm, Minnesota, Life-Work Planning Center, which assists homemakers in their return to work. This is important whether you're starting over or just sorting things out.

Starting over. For some people, getting back to work is part of beginning anew. Larry Matthews wanted to make a fresh start of his life when he was released from prison after serving a 7-year sentence. "The hardest part is when you first come out," says Matthews. "No one accepts you. You need to get back into society."

One of the first things Matthews did toward that effort was to get a job. He credits his success to his decision to stay strong, keep focused, and not look back. "I kept to my plan to get a job and stay out of trouble," he says. And his determination has helped him to excel at work, get his own place, and be a good role model for his son.

Sorting it all out. Knowing how work fits into your life also helps you to define yourself. "It's important to develop a work identity," says Suzanne Wagner, research associate of Project Match, a Chicago-based organization that has developed the Pathways Case Management System for State and local welfare agencies. "Everyone develops various identities, based on the relationships they have and the roles they play. Often, nonwork identities, such as that of a parent, spouse, or significant other, are stronger and take priority. So when there are problems, the work part of a person's life is the first to go."

Wagner illustrates by citing Sarah, a Pathways participant in New York who was ready to return to work despite being a single mom with many demands on her time. When Sarah first went back to work, says Wagner, she was overwhelmed to the point of being nearly unable to function. But with the help of her Pathways counselors, Sarah was able to create a specific, step-by-step plan each month to address her problems and focus on getting a better job.

Sarah separated her personal life from her jobseeking

efforts. After she sorted out many of her personal problems, Sarah pursued a longstanding interest by enrolling in an auto mechanics course and getting a part-time job on an assembly line. Sarah and her counselors broke down bigger goals into mini-goals, helping Sarah to see her life as manageable and her goals as achievable.

Go land a job!

Finding job openings, completing applications, writing resumes and cover letters, and interviewing—the basic steps to getting a job probably sound familiar. But the details of what these steps entail, and how to handle them in light of re-entry, may be less clear. This section provides an overview on the basics of getting a job and is geared toward jobseekers who have been out of work for a while.

Jobseekers and employment counselors say it's important to remember that success will come, but it might take time. Try not to get discouraged as applications or resumes are rejected or go unanswered, as they sometimes will be. Don't worry about whether your prior employment record, or lack of one, is a hindrance. Instead, throughout the jobseeking process, picture yourself doing work you enjoy. As Theresa Green says, "Really, it's your performance once you start the job that matters—not your past."

The 21st century job search

Often, one of the hardest things about getting a job is finding one that's available. Employment counselors suggest conducting a search that uncovers both advertised and unadvertised job openings.

Networking. Employers fill the majority of job openings through the unadvertised, or hidden, job market. Once you realize that almost all job openings are announced through word of mouth, says career counselor Ed Colozzi, you can adjust your job search accordingly. And that can lead to a more productive quest.

Jobseekers should spend a significant amount of time networking—talking to people, and then asking those people for names of others to talk to—to learn about any

Computers—available at career centers and public libraries—can help jobseekers.

Re-entry strategies for jobseekers who have...

Too little or too much work experience

When applying for some positions, jobseekers who do not have much practical experience may feel that they lack options. The same is often true for jobseekers who have more experience than a position requires. In both situations, jobseekers should show a willingness to acquire new skills.

Too little work experience. People who have a limited employment history can still have a significant work history. Jobseekers should think about the skills they use in what they do and where they go in their everyday lives. Some of those skills might qualify as experience that can be applied in a job. Unpaid work, such as volunteering or performing community service, often allows people to gain experience.

Employment counselors say that jobseekers who have little or no employment history should look for an entry-level position—especially one that provides an opportunity for some on-the-job training—and should try to convey to employers that they are eager to learn new skills.

Too much work experience. The opposite problem of having too little experience is having too much. In an interview, an employer might say something offputting, such as, "You're overqualified" or "We can't pay you what you're accustomed to." When responding to comments of this nature, jobseekers might want to let the interviewer know that they are aware of what the job involves or what its general level of pay is, that they want the job, and that they are a good fit for it—and why.

Jobseekers who have significant experience may encounter some degree of age bias. One way in which more experienced jobseekers can respond is to redirect the prospective employer's attention by discussing how their skills can benefit the employer's organization. Counselors suggest saying something like, "I have experience, but I also have enthusiasm and up-to-date skills, and I learn new tasks quickly."

Older workers may want to keep some dates off their resume. For example, by the time jobseekers are in their 50s, they probably do not need to include the date they graduated from high school or college. It is important, however, to highlight recent classes or skill upgrades. As is the case for jobseekers who have little work experience, experienced jobseekers can demonstrate their motivation and ability to pick up new skills.

More information for workers aged 50 and older is available by writing to AARP, 601 E Street NW., Washington, DC, 20049; calling toll-free, 1 (888) OUR-AARP (687-2277); or visiting online at **www.aarp.org/careers**. The U.S. Department of Labor's Senior Community Service Employment Plan offers help for economically disadvantaged senior citizens. To learn more, write to the Division of Older Worker Programs, U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, 200 Constitution Avenue NW., Room N-5306, Washington, DC 20210; call (202) 693-3842; or visit online at **www.doleta.gov/seniors**.

available positions. In some communities, job clubs provide a way to network.

Another way to network that is recommended by employment counselors is to keep active in your desired career field even if you aren't working in it. Attending association meetings, contributing to a newsletter, volunteering, or working part time can help you maintain or expand your group of contacts. While Julie Pearson was still training for her new career, for example, she got a part-time job in a dental office. That position later turned into a full-time job after she completed her studies in dental hygiene.

Internships and co-operative work arrangements are other ways in which people gain experience and make connections. Many employers hire directly from these programs. They provide another avenue into the unadvertised job market.

Traditional and contemporary methods. In addition to uncovering hidden jobs, search for ones that are advertised. Help-wanted postings are everywhere—in storefront windows, on library bulletin boards, and in local newspapers, for example. But some advertisements are misleading, and not all are for legitimate jobs. Be suspicious of ads that promise high earnings in a short time, require a purchase, or charge fees, for example.

Traditional media are no longer the only venue for publicizing job vacancies. Deborah Russell, manager of Economic Security and Work at AARP, says that people who haven't looked for a job in a while might notice some differences. "The computer age has in many ways changed job searching," she says. For example, the Internet can be a valuable source of information about employers and the types of positions that they offer. And because employers frequently use their Web sites or online job banks to post openings, jobseekers may want to investigate these options. Most aspects of looking for jobs remain the same, however.

Effective presentation

Employers want to know some important information about you before they invite you for a job interview or offer you a position. In addition to providing your name and contact information, you are asked to describe your experience, skills, and education. You also should expect to supply the names and phone numbers of people who can act as references.

Obviously, you want to present your history (both

good and bad) to potential employers in the best possible light. Well-crafted applications, resumes, and cover letters help you to do this. And strong references reinforce a solid presentation.

Different jobs have different procedures for candidates seeking a job. Some employers require jobseekers to submit an application; other employers require a resume and cover letter. Still others require both.

Acing applications. Fitting your background and accomplishments into an application sometimes requires a little creativity, especially if you're returning to work after a long absence.

If you don't have much paid experience, counselors say that you can give job titles to volunteer work or academic pursuits. For example, current or recent students who have little job history may want to list "student" as a job title and then describe a school project or assignment that relates to the job they're applying for.

Throughout the jobseeking process, however, don't succumb to dishonesty. If you think employers might have a problem with your past, you can be sure they'll have a bigger problem with your lying about it. "When you fill out applications, tell the truth," says Larry Matthews. Matthews acknowledged his criminal record on his job application—and was hired by his current employer the same day.

Your reason for leaving a former job might be problematic, but employment counselors say you should address it rather than ignore it. "Leaving sections blank for any reason is often a red flag for employers, so you'll need to give an explanation," says Grant Collins of the Office of Family Assistance. Collins and other counselors say it's a matter of phrasing. Some circumstances, such as stopping employment to raise a family, get a better job, or return to school, are fine to state directly, they say. Other circumstances, particularly those that may be seen as negative, are better if described less specifically.

Theresa Green had been promoted quickly and then fired at a time when her performance was affected by then-undiagnosed bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depressive illness. While in a manic state, Green impressed her employer, who expedited her promotion. But when she fell into a depressive state—related to the illness and unrelated to the job—Green was unable to perform basic functions at work. She was fired after a couple of months.

Now that Green has been diagnosed, she knows that

Re-entry strategies for jobseekers who've been...

Fired or laid off

It is never easy to lose a job, but there is an upside, employment counselors say: job loss provides an opportunity to find something better.

Fired. Often, a firing is a sign of a poor job match. Understanding the reasons behind a termination can help people avoid similar situations in the future.

Counselors advise against using the word "fired" during the hunt for the next job. "Job ended" or "involuntary separation" are alternative answers jobseekers can put on an application that asks about the reason for leaving. Using these less volatile terms increases the likelihood of being invited for an interview, during which an employer has the option of asking for more details.

It is a good idea to be honest during an interview. No matter what the reason behind the firing—even if it's something serious, such as stealing, abusing drugs or alcohol, or doing a bad job—it is better to be upfront. Mention the cause of the problem without going into too much detail, and then return to solid ground by talking confidently about personal strengths and the skills obtained at the job prior to the termination.

Jobseekers are also advised never to speak poorly of a former employer. In fact, fired jobseekers should try to remain on good terms. Even if the circumstances surrounding a departure were less than favorable, some employers may still be willing to act as a reference or write a letter of recommendation for former employees.

Laid off. Many people have experienced involuntary layoffs, so future employers are likely to understand and sympathize with jobseekers who are in this situation. However, laid-off workers should probably look for another job as soon as possible to avoid large gaps in employment, as such gaps may be negatively construed.

The U.S. Department of Labor and State Unemployment Insurance agencies offer help and information to those who have been, or anticipate being, laid off. Retraining might be an option for some people and, in certain cases, this training may be provided at no cost through One-Stop Career Centers. For more information, write to the U.S. Department of Labor, 200 Constitution Avenue NW., Washington, DC 20210. Jobseekers may also call toll-free, 1 (877) US-2JOBS (872-5627) or TTY 1 (877) 889-5627, or visit the Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration online, **www.doleta.gov/jobseekers/laidoff_workers.cfm**.

her mental illness was the reason behind her rapid ascent and decline. But because she successfully manages her disorder, she doesn't want subsequent employers to hold the difficulties of her past against her. On job applications when she began looking for work again, Green was selective but truthful in reporting what happened. "I didn't come right out and say I was fired," she says. "When I did have to explain why I left the other job, I simply said that I was promoted really quickly and was unhappy with the increased job responsibilities."

Resumes for re-entry. A resume provides much of the same information as an application, but it allows greater flexibility. This flexibility extends to the ease with which resumes are created on personal computers. Gone are the days when jobseekers could send out multiple copies of the same resume; most employers now expect resumes to be tailored to each advertised vacancy. The one-type-fits-all resume is no longer very effective.

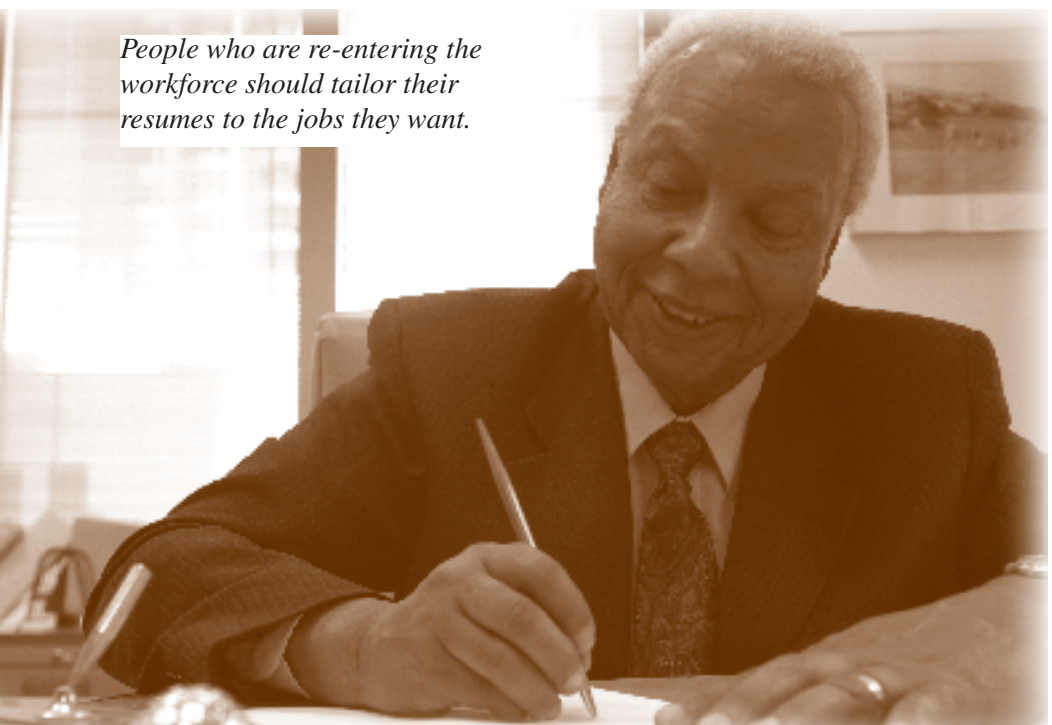
Employment counselors point out that there are many different resume styles, although some may be more appropriate than others for re-entry situations. The most common styles are functional and chronological. How you decide to structure your resume, counselors say, depends on which style is best for emphasizing your strengths and downplaying your weaknesses.

A functional resume—one that focuses on skills rather than work history—is usually preferred if you've been out of the workforce for a while. When creating a functional resume, focus on tasks or skills you're good at, such as budgeting or management, and then build your resume around them. Tailor these skill sets to the job you're applying for; in other words, find out what types of skills the employer is looking for, and then find concrete examples of when or how you have demonstrated the skills. A brief summary of work history usually follows this skills presentation.

When Julie Pearson applied for a job in her new field, she focused on the skills she gained in her previous job. "It became a really big selling feature," she says. "You always have some sort of transferable skill, and my old job gave me good communication and computer skills. It showed that I was professional and knew how an office works, and employers were interested in what I could do for their business environment." Pearson's resume helped convince herself as well as her employer. "Making the switch wasn't as hard as I thought," she says.

The functional resume is not for everyone, however. If you have a relatively solid record of employment, you might want to highlight it by using the chronological resume, a more traditional format in which a listing of jobs held is presented from most recent to least. Even if you choose this format, you may still want to include a short skills summary at the top of your resume to focus on your greatest selling points.

Within any type of resume, small gaps in employment often can be easily overcome. Brian Trott says that he got around having to mention his unemployment by using years only, instead of including months, when giving the time periods for his former jobs.



People who are re-entering the workforce should tailor their resumes to the jobs they want.

Cover letters for a callback. Resumes generally require an introduction, and the cover letter serves this purpose. Additionally, a well-written cover letter can help you to stand out from your competition.

Use your cover letter to convey the kinds of traits that employers seek in workers, such as competence, professionalism, enthusiasm, and courtesy. You might also call attention to some experience or skill you have that makes you a good choice for the job. As you did in completing applications and writing your resume, take the time neces-

sary to ensure that your cover letter is neat and accurate. A sloppy, error-filled letter isn't likely to convince an employer that you would do a good job.

Employment counselors say that the cover letter might also be a good place for re-entrants to explain any noteworthy gaps in job history that employers might otherwise view with suspicion. But counselors stress that jobseekers should keep this explanation short and not mention any unnecessary negatives. Keep the focus on your abilities and the reasons why you'd be an ideal person to hire.

Work references for the jobless. At some point in the job search, you will likely be asked for the names and contact information of several people who can vouch for your character and work ethic. It's a good idea to think about these references before you're asked for them. As a courtesy, you should also inform people before you use them as references and explain that potential employers might be contacting them to discuss you.

If possible, employment counselors say, try and reconnect with people you used to work with. Green says that she has asked former employers to be references for her, and all—even the one who fired her—were willing to help.

If you haven't had a job recently, there are other options. Green isn't currently employed, opting instead to volunteer for a nonprofit organization. And although she says she would be able to get a recommendation from her last employer, she doesn't plan on using old references when she is ready to go back to work. "I am active in my volunteer work for the nonprofit, on the PTA and PTO boards, and at church," she says. "So now I'd probably use recommendations from these activities."

Employment counselors agree with this approach. "Volunteering shows that you are able to get somewhere on time and be there on a regular basis," says Suzanne Wagner of Project Match, "and this is what employers are looking for."

To identify possible references, think about people you've come in contact with who might be able to convey to employers that you are dependable and hardworking. For example, recent graduates might want to ask a former instructor, coach, or mentor to serve as a reference.

The job interview

Most employers want to meet applicants before deciding whether to hire them. Making a good impression when you're face to face with an employer is the next step in getting back to work. Preparing for this meeting is one of the best ways to ensure success.

Prepare and rehearse. It is important, employment counselors say, to do your homework and know something about the job before going into the interview. Employers want to know how well your skills and abilities match those required for the position they're looking to fill. So, the more you know about what they want, the easier it will be to demonstrate that you're a good fit.

Finding out about the job should include finding out about the company, suggests Francina Carter, correctional program specialist for the National Institute of Corrections in Washington, DC. "If you have time, do some research," she says. "Find out what the company does or what it makes." Researching the company enables you to better explain to employers why you want to do the job, she adds. Many public libraries have reference materials available, and most companies provide general information about themselves on their Web sites.

Brian Trott agrees that research is important. When he finally got a job, he says, it was largely due to the work he put in upfront. "I went in to my interview with a file full of research on the company, and they were, like, 'Wow!'" he says.

Employment counselors also say that practicing for an interview really helps. This practice includes thinking about how you will answer some of the questions you are likely to be asked. It also includes doing mock interviews or rehearsing your answers aloud. In addition, consider the interview itself as practice: you may not get the first (or second or third or more) job you interview for, but each interview gives you an opportunity to get better at presenting yourself to employers. Evaluate your performance after each unsuccessful interview—contact the employer, if you can—to find ways to improve for the next time.

Interview questions fall into three general categories, say counselors: Employers want to know if you can do the job, if you will do the job, and if you will fit in. In the interview, you need to affirmatively and proactively communicate your answers to these questions.

Re-entrants should also realize that some techniques may have changed since they last interviewed for a job. "An interview is no longer just to tell your story," says AARP's Deborah Russell. "Employers want to know

Re-entry strategies for jobseekers with...

Disabilities

When (or whether) to disclose a disability to a potential employer depends on the individual and his or her situation. People who have a noticeable impairment should be prepared to talk about it within the context of convincing an employer that they will be able to do the job.

Like all jobseekers preparing for an interview, individuals with disabilities should find out as much as possible about a position for which they are applying. This is particularly important for people who might require workplace accommodations, so that they can better explain their specific needs to the employer.

Generally, employment counselors say it is not necessary to mention a disability in a cover letter or resume unless the disability directly relates to a person's work qualifications. The jobseeker should focus on his or her abilities and how they relate to a position.

Resources that are mentioned in the article can be helpful to people with disabilities who are returning to work. Vocational Rehabilitation agencies help people with disabilities through a variety of services, including job placement, on-the-job training, and financial assistance with education-related or job-training expenses for eligible jobseekers. For information, write to the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, U.S. Department of Education, 400 Maryland Avenue SW., Washington, DC 20202-7100; or call (202) 245-7468 or TTY (202) 205-5637. A list of State Vocational Rehabilitation agencies is available online at **bcol02.ed.gov/Programs/EROD/org_list.cfm?category_ID=SVR**.

The Department of Veterans Affairs Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service provides a variety of employment services for veterans who have U.S. Armed Forces-connected disabilities. A list of offices by State is available online at **www.vba.va.gov/bln/vre/emp_resources.htm**.

Other significant employment support includes both individualized counseling (through the Ticket to Work program) and financial work incentives (for people who receive Social Security income). For more information, write to the Social Security Administration, Office of Public Inquiries, Windsor Park Building, 6401 Security Boulevard, Baltimore, MD 21235; call toll-free, 1 (800) 772-1213 or TTY 1 (800) 325-0778; or visit online, **www.ssa.gov/work**.

A comprehensive, Government-sponsored Web portal, managed by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy as part of the President's New Freedom Initiative, is available at **www.disabilityinfo.gov**. The Job Accommodation Network (JAN), a free service of the Office of Disability Employment Policy, assists in the employment and retention of people with disabilities by providing information about job accommodation, self-employment and small business opportunities, and related subjects. For more information, contact JAN by mail, P.O. Box 6080, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV 26506-6080; by telephone toll-free, 1 (800) 526-7234 (voice and TTY); or online, **www.jan.wvu.edu**.

who you are, how your skills fit, and how you will handle yourself."

Russell explains by describing the behavioral interview, a common technique in which interviewers propose a hypothetical situation and ask how an applicant would react. The scenario might be intended to reveal your approach to having multiple deadlines to meet or the role you would take when working in a group.

Overall, you want the employer to come away from the interview with a clear understanding of why you would be a valuable employee. To convey this, discuss what you're offering and why you're the best person for the position. In other words, show self-confidence. "I had to believe in myself," says Trott.

Time off, not wasted time. When preparing for an interview, you should also think about what to say about your time spent not working. Addressing employment gaps yourself, instead of letting the interviewer raise them, gives you a chance to head off any misconceptions an employer might have about your work history.

Employment counselors suggest that you not lead with an explanation of your time off, but rather embed it within discussions about your experiences or accomplishments. Mentioning experiences that are directly relevant to the job for which you are interviewing helps you take control of the situation.

Trott says that during interviews, his period of unemployment did come up. "I explained to them, 'I've done a lot of work to get here today,'" he says. His effort—exploring careers; determining his skills, interests, and values; and researching the company and the positions he interviewed for—gave him the confidence that he was right for the job.

It's perfectly OK to stand up for yourself and your decisions when talking about why you stopped working, say counselors. And, they add, if not all of your choices were wise ones, it's often a good idea to acknowledge this. Then move on to talking about improvements you've made and things you've accomplished.

"If you're talking to employers and explaining a gap in your resume, it may be for raising a family, or traveling to Europe for a year," says Troy Justesen of the Rehabilitation Services Administration. "If there are other reasons, be clear, but stress, 'It will have no bearing on my ability from this point forward.'"

Difficult or illegal questions. Personal questions that don't have anything to do with your ability to do

a job, such as questions about your age, marital status, or disability, are often illegal. However, employment counselors say that employers sometimes don't know the law. So, if you're asked illegal personal questions during interviews, you should probably assume that the employers don't have bad intentions. "If they did, you wouldn't want to work for them anyway," says Linda Batiste, a consultant at the Job Accommodation Network in Morgantown, West Virginia.

Employment counselors say that it's usually best not to respond "That's illegal!" when asked an inappropriate question; such a reply would reduce your chances of getting the job. Batiste says that some people find a way of addressing the question, while others brush over it and use the opportunity to provide supplemental information. "Each individual should respond in the way he or she is most comfortable with," she says.

But no matter how you choose to handle difficult questions, try to respond in a way that redirects the conversation toward your skills and abilities as they relate to the job.

Interview day. On the big day, remember to gravitate toward the positive. If you've made it to the interview, it means the employer likes what you have to offer. Your preparation has given you an added advantage. Stay positive, keep focused, and try to relax.

It's normal to feel stressed when you're in a job interview, say employment counselors. Even if you're anxious, try not to display this outwardly with nervous habits, such as tapping your feet. You should also dress professionally, shake hands, smile, and look the interviewer in the eyes when communicating. Arriving early or on time is also important, so you may want to practice getting to the site before the day of the interview if you aren't sure where you're going or how long it will take you to get there.

When it came time for Trott's interview, he was ready. "You sell them," he said. "You've got to show them that you're sincerely interested." But don't overdo it. Although you want to impress the interviewer, counselors say, you should not try to present yourself beyond where you are in either your training or your career.

Follow up the interview with a thank-you letter, which provides another opportunity to highlight why you would be a good choice for the position. Continue the job hunt while waiting to hear back, and you're well on your way toward re-employment.

Putting it all together

Getting back to work may take awhile, even if you do everything right. But try not to get discouraged. "Know that there is something out there for you," says career counselor Ed Colozzi. "Success may not come on the first try, but it will come."

Counselors say that sometimes, if people are having trouble, they may need to re-evaluate their expectations and desires. Instead of seeking to enter a new career at the same level you were in your previous field, for example, you might consider seeking an entry-level position to gain experience. "It may not be your dream job," says Francina Carter of the National Institute of Corrections, "but it can lead to a better one."

Take Larry Matthews, for example. When he was first released from prison, Matthews took a job in food services. After 2 weeks, he was promoted to a warehouse position; after another month, he became a supervisor. "Now, I run the place," says Matthews.

One-Stop Career Centers have employment counselors who may be able to help you examine what you've been doing and suggest modifications to your plan. Private employment counselors can help in this way, too.

Supportive discussion groups can also be helpful. "If people have been out of work a long time," says Chris Olson of the Life-Work Planning Center, "it's important for them to find out that what they're going through is normal, that they're not alone."

Matthews agrees. "You can't let your self-esteem get low," he says. "Get together with others who are going through the same thing, and start talking about it."

Words of experience. Brian Trott offers encouragement for jobseekers who might feel discouraged, as he once did. "Keep going, because it will come together," he says. "It's a generic thing to say, but it's true."

Larry Matthews offers similar advice. "Be strong and keep your head up," he says. "Have faith."

Your options are more numerous than you might think, adds Julie Pearson: "You'd be surprised at what you can swing. I never would've thought I could do it."

Your journey to re-entry will give you personal insight and job-search knowledge that will remain a valuable tool as you manage your future career and the changes it may bring. "Now that I'm not working again, it will be me deciding what I want to do when I'm ready to get a job," says Theresa Green. "And I look forward to that challenge."

Re-entry resources

When getting ready to re-enter the workforce, you might feel overwhelmed thinking about all the resources you need to find. Your employment or career counselor and local library should be at the top of your list of people and places to visit. Counseling offices and libraries provide career resources and, often, access to equipment—such as computers, printers, and the Internet—that are helpful to jobseekers.

Along with general references, such as telephone books and business reports, many public libraries have a career-reference section that includes books, magazines, locations of employment offices, and other resource materials on a wide range of topics. Employment or counseling offices may also have contact information to help you start networking with local employers.

On either visit, look for publications from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), including the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, the *Career Guide to Industries*, and the *Occupational Outlook Quarterly*. The *Handbook* (also available online at **www.bls.gov/oco**), describes in detail the job duties, employment, earnings, outlook, and more for nearly 300 occupations. The *Career Guide* (**www.bls.gov/oco/cg**) is arranged similarly from an industry perspective. Articles in the *Quarterly* (**www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/ooqhome.htm**) cover a variety of career topics.

The following *Quarterly* articles are among many that are directly relevant to topics discussed in this article:

- "Matching yourself with the world of work: 2004," fall 2004 (**www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2004/fall/art01.pdf**)
- "Job search in the age of Internet: Six jobseekers in search of employers," summer 2003 (**www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2003/summer/art01.pdf**)
- "Associate degree: Two years to a career or a jump start to a bachelor's degree," winter 2002-03 (**www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2002/winter/art01.pdf**)
- "The changing role of community college," winter 2002-03 (**www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2002/winter/art02.pdf**)
- "Apprenticeships: Career training, credentials—and a paycheck in your pocket," summer 2002 (**www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2002/summer/art01.pdf**)
- "Informational interviewing: Get the inside scoop on careers," summer 2002 (**www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2002/summer/art03.pdf**)
- "Employment interviewing: Seizing the opportunity and the job," summer 2000 (**www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2000/summer/art02.pdf**)
- "Resumes, applications, and cover letters," summer 1999 (**www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/1999/summer/art01.pdf**)

For personal assistance or additional information, visit a One-Stop Career Center. One-Stop centers can direct you to resources on training, labor-market trends, job-search strategies, and more. Details are available online at **www.careeronestop.org**. Or, write the Career One-Stop Service Center, 390 North Robert Street, Suite 1200, St. Paul, MN 55101; or, call toll-free, 1 (877) 348-0502 or TTY toll-free, 1 (877) 348-0501.

America's Career InfoNet, online at **www.acinet.org**, has a tool—the skills profiler—that is designed to help jobseekers identify their abilities and relate them to the skills required in a variety of occupations. The site also offers information on many employment resources, including State demographics and occupational certification requirements. Check out the Career Resource Library, **www.acinet.org/acinet/library.asp**, for links to local, State, and national career and labor market information sites.

America's Career InfoNet also has links to O*Net, the Occupational Information Network (**online.onetcenter.org**), which provides detailed information about the skills required in hundreds of occupations, and to America's Job Bank (**www.ajb.org**), a resume and job bank. You can also find a One-Stop Career Center or other services for which you might be eligible (**www.servicelocator.org**).

If you want individualized guidance and don't qualify for free counseling through a One-Stop Career Center, private employment counselors can help. To find a counselor, check the yellow pages of the telephone book and call or interview several counselors to find one who's right for you. Or, to find a counselor certified by the National Career Development Association, write to the association at 10820 East 45th Street, Suite 210, Tulsa, OK 74146; call (866) 367-6232; or visit the association online at **www.ncda.org**.