



How Can SWE Better Assist Our Unemployed Members *White paper discussing the dynamics of unemployment and SWE's services for our unemployed members*

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Introduction

At some point in your engineering career, statistics say that you will be faced with losing your job. Staff reductions have become a normal part of corporate life; a necessary tool that companies use to control costs. Most often, the loss of your job will not be your fault. Layoffs, mergers, bankruptcies, acquisitions, product obsolescence and outsourcing are all corporate economic realities that may result in the loss of your employment. In past years, it was the manufacturing labor force that bore the brunt of the staff reductions; however, today, engineers, scientists, skilled technicians, mid and upper level managers and other highly educated employees are at risk. At one point in 2003, the unemployment rate for electrical engineers exceeded the national unemployment rate. A technical career is no longer as secure as it once was. The job world of our fathers (and perhaps of our mothers) is no longer the norm. We can no longer expect to work forty plus years with one company. Employment specialists say that we will have many jobs and potentially three or more careers before we retire.

For many, the loss of a job may not be an involuntary act, but rather a purposeful action. Many of us will choose to leave our jobs and by doing so will find ourselves in a period of unemployment. Whether unemployed by choice or not, we may have a need for encouragement and support while out of work and career planning resources to assist us when we're ready to begin looking for work again.

Leaving a job is usually a very stressful event in one's life. An estimated 75% of Americans have been affected by the loss of employment; either directly or when a family member loses a job. Employment provides structure to life and a certain amount of social interaction. Because unemployed people lose that structure, they often suffer from loneliness and depression. Self-esteem and self-confidence can also be greatly affected and social interactions are reduced or stopped altogether. Financial concerns can produce a tremendous strain in households. Money must be managed carefully and financial plans must be changed to reflect the loss of a paycheck.

The personal computer and the Internet have drastically changed the modern employment search. An individual can now instantly answer a large number of employment ads without even leaving her home. Corporate HR offices are drowning in resumes sent through the

Internet and struggle to identify the qualified talent amongst the hundreds of resumes they receive. Job seekers find that it is not enough to answer ads and send resumes. In the current market, successful job seekers must use networking skills and specific strategies, as well as persistence and people skills to land a job.

Career Planning Services Offered by Companies and Technical Organizations

Some employers offer outplacement services to their workers when the company downsizes. The company's HR department may provide these services or the company may contract with an independent outplacement company to provide these services. Basic services can include resume writing workshops; access to various books, magazines, and other employment publications; and access to recruiters and job lists. More comprehensive services can also be offered. One major corporation created a service, *Talent 2 Talent*, for its displaced employees. This service turned its recruiters into outplacement counselors. *Talent 2 Talent* offers workshops and classes including "Organizing Your Career Search", "Working with Headhunters", "Networking", and "Volunteer Your Way to Your Next Job". *Talent 2 Talent* also offers a resume consulting service, mock interviews, job fairs, career consultants, and access to local Department of Labor people. Outplacement services are typically only offered by larger corporations. Small to medium sized companies generally cannot afford to provide such services to their employees; therefore, only a small percentage of technical workers have access to outplacement services. Outplacement services are also not available to those who voluntarily leave their job when their employer is not in a downsizing mode.

There are innumerable career planning and job search companies now available on the Internet. Some offer free services and some offer services for a fee. Some provide useful articles on resume and cover letter writing, but tend to have career planning strategies that emphasize and promote the use of their services. And, of course, highly qualified career planning professionals are available to those with the financial resources to employ their services.

Most engineering and technical societies offer some type of career planning and employment resources to their members and most have career fairs during their regional or national conferences. The American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME), the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), the American Chemical Society (ACS), and the American Institute of Chemical Engineers (AIChE), just to name a few, offer extensive career planning services through their websites. These services range from resume posting and job listings, articles related to the employment outlook of their industry, Internet-based workshops on interviewing skills and other essential job searching skills. IEEE offers a web page dedicated to their unemployed members and provides forms an engineer can use to track their accomplishments throughout their career, making it easier to create resumes. These organizations and several others are also members of a larger umbrella organization called the Sloan Career Cornerstone Center (SCCC). The SCCC offers extensive free services including career planning CD's and videos, job listings, resume posting and Internet-based workshops.

What SWE Currently Provides to our Unemployed Members

SWE offers many beneficial employment services to our members. At local section meetings, regional meetings and the National Conference, members can share their employment

strategies. SWE hosts an extensive career fair at the National Conference, and smaller career fairs at some regional meetings, where unemployed members can meet with company recruiters. SWE offers reduced dues to unemployed members to ease some of the financial burdens. There are also workshops in resume writing and the SWE web-based career center contains a number of excellent articles, as well as providing a place to post resumes and search job listings.

Additional Services SWE Could Provide to our Unemployed Members

SWE is a relatively small engineering society and as with all organizations, SWE has limited financial resources. While the Society offers a number of excellent services to our unemployed members, we could do more to provide temporary assistance to ease some of the financial burdens of unemployment. More importantly, we could provide opportunities for members to learn the necessary skills and strategies required to find that next path in life after they voluntarily or involuntarily leave their job. That path maybe finding another similar job with a different employer, but that new path may also lead them in a totally new direction; moving from industry to government or academia or starting their own business. Providing more services to unemployed members is desirable because it will increase the value of membership to our members and will also help persuade our unemployed members to retain their membership at a time when they need it most.

Possible services SWE could provide include:

- Offer workshops at conferences and on the SWE website for our unemployed members searching for new jobs. Topics could include “How to Network”, “Working With Headhunters”, “Organizing a Career Search”, “Gathering Information for Resumes”, and “Cover Letters that Get Results”.
- Offer workshops at conferences and on the SWE website for our unemployed members thinking about starting their own business including: “Running a Home Based Business”, “Business Accounting”, “Business Taxes” and “Incorporating a Business”
- Provide downloadable presentations of career planning workshops.
- Create web forums specifically for our unemployed members.
- Provide downloadable forms that will help unemployed members organize their career search.
- Invite career counselors or outplacement counselors to present workshops at the National Conference.
- Form alliances with other engineering societies that would permit sharing of resources.
- Provide a roommate locator for unemployed members at all SWE conferences.
- Provide reduced or free conference fees for unemployed members.
- Encourage companies who host student receptions at conferences to host similar receptions for professional members.

Conclusion

SWE offers excellent services to our unemployed members, but we could do more. Our Society focuses on helping our members gain professional and leadership skills, but we also need to recognize that navigating unemployment is a skill that *all* our members require in this economy. Whether unemployed by choice or not, whether seeking a new job in industry, government, academia or in living rooms, specific skills and strategies are required that SWE can provide with limited financial input. By reaching out to the resources currently available in other organizations and within the existing membership of SWE itself, the necessary skills can be made available to all unemployed members of SWE.

References:

Ruth Luban (2001) *Are You a Corporate Refugee?*, Penguin Books.

Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers <http://www.ieee.org>

IEEE-USA "Building Careers and Shaping Public Policy" <http://www.ieeeusa.org>

Talent 2 Talent <http://www.talent2talent.net>

Links:

IEEE: <http://www.ieeeusa.org/careers/help/>
<http://www.ieeeusa.org/newspubs/presidentscolumn/archive/bryant/bryantsep02.html>

Unemployed Voluntary Action Fund (This is interesting): <http://www.uvaf.org.uk/main.html>

Club Managers Association of America: <http://www.cmaa.org/ecs/transition/page9.html>

Society of Human Resources Managers: <http://www.shrm.org/members/transitioning/>

Sacramento Professional Network: <http://www.sacpronet.org/about.php>

Info from America's Job Bank: <http://www.acinet.org/acinet/library.asp>

Career Planning: <http://www.careerplanning.about.com/>

New York Society of Security Analysts:
http://www.nyssa.org/Content/NavigationMenu/membership/dues/Unemployed_Renewal_Program.htm