
Bouncing Back

Nine Lessons in Resilience and Reemployment

Carl Van Horn, Ph.D. and Maria Heidkamp

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Your job or career form a big part of your identity. But what happens when you lose your job? Even in the current historically tight labor market, in July 2022, there were 1.1 million individuals in the United States – nearly one in five job seekers – who were long-term unemployed, or out of work for 27 weeks or more. As the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University learned through its New Start Career Network (NSCN) program, which served over 6,000 older, long-term unemployed New Jersey job seekers between October 2015 and June 2022, the financial and emotional toll of being long-term unemployed and feeling “unemployable” is distressing to individuals, families, and communities. This brief contains lessons for job seekers who are struggling with long-term joblessness. (For additional context and findings, see [Helping Older, Long-term Unemployed Job Seekers: A Report on the Heldrich Center’s New Start Career Network](#).) Here, in their own words, older, long-term unemployed New Jerseyans share the lessons they learned in being resilient while reinventing themselves in the aftermath of the Great Recession and during the first several years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lesson 1: Know Yourself

One of the hardest things to do when you’ve lost your job and are starting down the road to reemployment is to take the time to be thoughtful. Know or research the type of work you want to apply for, said Lourdes, a NSCN member. Be honest with yourself and really understand what your strongest skills are and where those skills fit in with your desired path, echoed another member, Dana, who shared, “If additional training or certifications would assist in moving the ball forward, get the training or the certifications.” When NSCN member Beth applied for a job on Indeed.com, she “provided a detailed cover letter explaining how I was a good fit for the position and why I wanted the job.”

Lesson 2: Filter Out the “Noise”

One of the most challenging things about the job search process according to NSCN member Rich was “the research and time taken to filter out bad fits.” With a lot of information and data to comb through and analyze, dedicate uninterrupted time to your job search. This includes the time to network, join discussion groups, and refine and customized your résumé for every job application. Dana remained positive and patient and refused to let the negativity around her affect her plan.

Lesson 3: Your Network is Your Key

Porter Gale, author of *Your Network is Your Net Worth*, says, “I believe that your social capital, or your ability to build a network of authentic personal and professional relationships, not your financial capital, is your most important asset in your portfolio.” In other words, start and keep networking. As NSCN member Beth said, “I told everyone I knew that I was in transition.” We all have internal networks (people we know directly) and external networks (people we are referred to from people we know). Use both types of networks because you never know when something will click. One of the services NSCN offered was being part of a Facebook networking group, where job seekers could share their stories, make connections, and get feedback from peers. Many members noted that interacting with other job seekers helped improve their morale.

Lesson 4: One-on-One Coaching Can Be a Game Changer

When going through a job search, many job seekers benefit from guidance and encouragement. NSCN’s free coaching service was deeply valued by members. NSCN member Andrea said, “I can’t even imagine doing a job search without a coach.” Although she was willing to learn from her own job hunting mistakes, Andrea lacked the feedback to inform a change in strategy. “It was like hearing my own echo on a lonely mountaintop,” she said. Working with an NSCN career coach changed that dynamic. Similarly, Dana cautioned that you must be in a place where you are “open” to the strategy your coach is suggesting for you. Dana shared, “As I was actively looking for a job for a year, I felt that I exhausted my knowledge and needed a new strategy or a fresh perspective.” Dana’s coach took the time to understand her values and where they fit into her career search. Patricia’s coach suggested networking strategies and ways to get noticed on LinkedIn. Working in IT support jobs that didn’t involve revenue or sales, Patricia didn’t know how to quantify her work on her résumé, as is often advised. “I couldn’t figure out how I was accomplishing anything that increased revenue until my coach had me creating CAR/PAR stories,” said Patricia. (For more on the CAR [Challenge, Action, Results] and PAR [Problem, Action, Results] techniques, watch the archived NSCN webinar: [Using CARs/PARs to Sell Your Accomplishments to Employers](#). Other NSCN [webinars](#) are also available.)

NSCN coaches helped members with many parts of the job search, from helping to revise résumés to preparing for upcoming interviews. Most important according to many job seekers, the coaches provided empathy and encouragement, helped them step out of their comfort zone, and helped them be accountable for their actions and progress.

Lesson 5: Don't Sit Idle, Pursue Qualifications and Certifications

Many members recommended using the time out of work to learn new skills. Right before NSCN member Kathleen started a job, she received a certificate in "Managing Customer Service" from a community college. This was the reason the recruiter thought of her for a particular role. Soon after starting her new job, Kathleen took additional customer service classes on LinkedIn Learning and watched YouTube videos to further enhance her skill set. There are ways to "skill up" inexpensively and in your own time by using LinkedIn educational videos, YouTube, and Meetup groups, said NSCN members Lourdes and Marc.

Lesson 6: Use Online Tools and Resources for Your Search

NSCN's robust online resources gave members access to webinars, support groups, author Zoom sessions, and premium job search tools like Big Interview and Jobscan. According to Jon, "Jobscan was an invaluable tool that I used to customize every résumé I sent out. If you are not applying for a job with a known contact, you need to get through the initial hurdle of any job screening software, and Jobscan is excellent for that. It also presents your qualifications highly tailored to the position [for which] you are applying."

Lesson 7: Practice Your Interviewing Skills

If you are looking for a job as a mid-career or older worker, especially if you held your previous job for years (or even decades), you may have a lot of work experience, but your interviewing skills could be rusty. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the trend to virtual interviewing instead of in-person, face-to-face interviewing, which many NSCN members found challenging. According to Andrea, interview preparation was vital to landing her new role. Lourdes also had practical advice when interviewing: Prepare for the interview process by practicing interview questions and answers; project positive, not negative energy; and if interviewing virtually, have good lighting, ensure your background is presentable, or have a blank wall.

Lesson 8: Dealing with Rejection

"It is easier said than done, but don't take hearing 'no' personally," said Patricia. "Be brave and ask for feedback from the hiring manager. Also be realistic about what works and what isn't working. For example, if your résumé isn't getting views, revisit your résumé to see how you can improve it." Being part of NSCN's Resilience Circle and an NSCN Accountability Group that focused on job search helped Patricia realize that she wasn't alone in the struggle. "The most challenging part was learning that the entire job searching process has changed, and how much it depends on networking and marketing yourself. Don't give up." Marc constantly reminded himself that "each 'no' was a step closer to a 'yes.'"

Lesson 9: Work-Values Alignment

Coming back into the professional fold in the second half of your life is challenging, but some NSCN members noted that their experience and wisdom made them think hard about the type of role and company they wanted to work at. As Dana said, "My new position is in the same industry, but with a smaller firm, which I feel is a great fit for me as their values align nicely with mine." Dana was open and honest about what she was looking for with the search firm and remained patient throughout the year-long interview process.

NSCN committed to helping older, long-term unemployed New Jersey residents find a job and to do so in as positive and healthy a way as possible. Through webinars, online tools, job fairs, and community partnerships, NSCN provided helpful information, networking opportunities, and resources for those struggling with their job search. More than anything, NSCN's volunteer career coaches were a lifeline to members during a challenging time in their lives. NSCN member Dana was so inspired by her coach and other volunteers she met and worked with that she has committed to helping others herself. Bouncing back from long-term unemployment can be challenging, but as Dana and other NSCN members learned, supporting each other can help job seekers be resilient on the way to reemployment.

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About the Heldrich Center

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As captured in its slogan, "Solutions at Work," the Heldrich Center is guided by a commitment to translate the strongest research and analysis into practices and programs that companies, community-based organizations, philanthropy, and government officials can use to strengthen their workforce and workforce readiness programs, create jobs, and remain competitive. The Center's work strives to build an efficient labor market that matches workers' skills and knowledge with the evolving demands of employers. The Center's projects are grounded in a core set of research priorities:

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