

Career makeover

Layoff slip jump-starts intensive job search

By BRIAN J. O'CONNOR
The Detroit News

There's no shortage of cliches that aim to put a positive spin on losing a job, from semantic banalities ("Change is just another word for opportunity") to meta-physical platitudes ("Every time one door closes another one opens").

But cliches are obvious and overused for a very good reason: They're true.

Case in point: Susan Hiltz. After 15 years of working for a small nonprofit agency, she had thought about looking for another position, but never got serious about it. But when she got a pink slip, it turned out to be her silver lining.

After months of searching, she was hired to run a regional office for the Ad Council, the nonprofit group that creates and distributes public service ads, including Smokey The Bear's

"Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires" message to the United Negro College Fund's "A Mind is a Terrible Thing to Waste" campaign

"It really jump-started my job search," says Hiltz. This was a blessing in disguise."

Where she came from: Hiltz, 46, had been on the downside of a job-change once before, and that had a happy ending, too. After graduating from Macomb Community College, she worked in

marketing and communications, eventually landing a headquarters job with Domino's Pizza. A layoff there in 1990 helped move her into working with nonprofits, setting up the newly opened Prevention Coalition of Southeast Michigan.

"I was fortunate," the Macomb Township resident recalls. "In two weeks I got that job through networking. It got me interested in the nonprofit world and making a positive difference in the world. Once you get hooked on that you don't want to go back to the corporate world."

What changed: For 15 years, Hiltz was a one-woman organization, moving through four different donated offices, building relationships with media organizations and the community for the Prevention Coalition, an organization working to curb substance abuse.

Last August, though, financial shortfalls led the group to lose its financial support. In one two-minute cell phone call, she was

told to switch 15 years of growth to a few months of shutting the operation down.

"It was quick," she recalls. "There was a lot of paperwork, shutting down bank accounts and making sure your books are in order. I had to be taking care of all that and be searching for a job at the same time."

Work tips

"This story says it all about looking for a job," says career coach

Prudence Cole of Grosse Pointe, co-author of "Finding Power, Passion and Joy Being at Work" and author of the Web site www.beingat-work.com.



Cole

"Finding a job is hard work. But rather than waiting for lightning to strike, you always should be prepared for a job change by taking these steps now:"

■ **Create a portfolio:** Can you quickly put your hands on your diplomas or certificates, work examples, letters of recognition and

acknowledgements for awards and honors? Collect it all in your portfolio so that you are always ready when an opportunity comes up.

■ **Keep your resume updated:** I've seen people lose valuable search time trying to craft a resume, so do your homework now. Write your "story" and test market it with friends and colleagues.

■ **Build your network:** Networking is still hands-down the most productive means to find the right job, especially if you are in an unusual career or pursuing a leadership position. But networks are not built overnight. Join professional associations, attend and participate in conferences and help others who network with you to find a job.

Although she went on some interviews and networked through her extensive community contacts, the job hunt still was a challenge, Hiltz says. She was paid while she wound down operations for the Prevention Council but knew her severance wouldn't last beyond the end of the year.

"When we finally shut down in October, I really went like gangbusters to look for a job," she adds.

Moment of truth: While networking was helpful, Hiltz said that her best job-hunting tool was the Internet. She made a point of finding sites dedicated to nonprofit operations, as well as larger help wanted and resume sites, such as HotJobs.com and Monster.com. Often, she says, she found herself checking the Web several times a day. Last December, her online work paid off.

"When I went on HotJobs and saw the opening for the Ad Council, I couldn't believe it," she recalls. She had always respected the organization, and thought her skills in the nonprofit world would be a perfect match. "Those opportunities don't always happen. It was like the stars were aligned."

And the timing couldn't have been better, she adds.

"My severance was going to run out at the end of December and I was offered the job just before Christmas, so I had very happy holidays last year."

Stumbling blocks: Sending

out resumes and prospecting for job openings is a numbers game, but it's also a waiting game, Hiltz notes.

"People who knew I was looking for a job, now they're telling me about all these things are available," Hiltz notes, nearly eight months after she landed a new position. "You have to be patient when you go through these things."

Another surprise was seeing how many employers don't even bother to send response letters acknowledging that they've received a resume and job application.

"Just getting yourself into the game of a job search is a game in itself," she adds. "It's really time-consuming. You've got to be dedicated to looking at sites every day, checking on opportunities and calling people."

Words of wisdom: Hiltz says her experience underscores the fact that any job search today has to include extensive use of online resources.

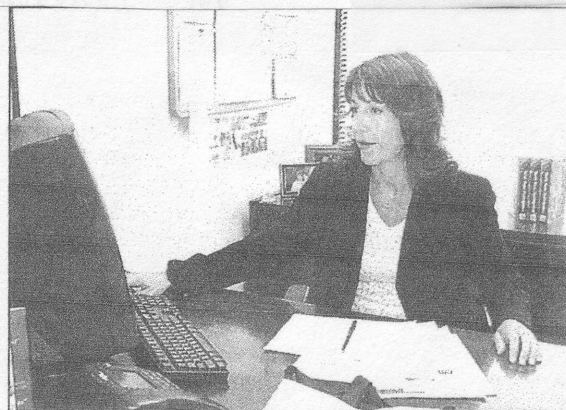
"Networking is great, but I found that most employers are using the Internet to reach people," she notes. "Never underestimate the power of the Internet. It is probably the best source for finding a better opportunity."

Another point she emphasizes is to acknowledge that a job change can come at any time.

"I think the bottom line is to always update your job skills because we live in such a changing environment," she notes.

Besides managing the technical aspects of a job hunt, it's also important to manage your emotions.

"That little taste of being unemployed, it was very weird," she says. "I think the best advice I can give people is to hold on to your hope and really put your effort into looking for a job. Look at it as a good opportunity and don't dwell on the negative part of losing your job. You're not going to get anywhere by being vindictive or concentrating on your hurt feelings."



W. Edwin Smith / The Detroit News

Susan Hiltz said a little taste of being unemployed spurred her to work hard in finding a job through the Internet and networking with friends.

Susan Hiltz

Home: Macomb Township, single with two teenagers.

Born: Detroit, 1959.

Education: Center Line High School, 1977; Macomb Community College; Baker College, 2003.

Old career: Executive director for the nonprofit Prevention Coalition of Southeast Michigan.

New career: Managing director of the central region office of The Advertising Council, a nonprofit that produces and distributes public service messages.