

LIFE AFTER LAYOFFS



How to move forward after a job loss

With the number of job cuts continuing to rise and competition for open positions becoming more intense by the week, industry experts and career strategists share their advice on continuing an engineering career after being laid off.

By Suzanne Deffree,
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It's not fair, but it's a fact of life—or at least an engineer's life. Layoffs have been steadily on the rise since June 2008 and have soared since the fourth quarter in the semiconductor industry, with qualified, capable EEs receiving thousands of pink slips from Advanced Micro Devices, Fairchild Semiconductor, Intel, Motorola, and other companies. And, although the national unemployment rate increased to 7.2% in December, top technology state California saw its unemployment rate climb to 9.3% in the final month of the year, losing 78,200 more jobs and recording the largest month-over-month decrease in the level of employment among the states, according to data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. Statewide, more than 1.73 billion people were unemployed at the end of 2008.

"It's disappointing that the realities are that you can be doing a good job and do all the right things and it's like that old saying: 'No good deed goes unpunished,'" says Mike Demler, a former senior-staff product-marketing manager at Synopsys Inc (www.synopsys.com), who received his walking papers in late October and who as of mid-January was still unemployed. Employers can lay you off for reasons that have absolutely nothing to do with your job performance or even the condition of

the company. "It's on my list of things they don't teach you in business school: how businesses are run and how decisions are made," he says. Demler's exit from Synopsys marked his fourth layoff since 1994 in a 32-year tech-industry career.

The current downsizing trend is an issue of great concern to IEEE-USA (www.ieee.org), one that the group projects will continue beyond 2009 and one that has encouraged it to gear up and advise its members on what services are available to help them make successful employment transitions. Part of that help will come through a survey of unemployed IEEE members in the United States, which found that employers are providing less in the way of severance, placement services, or retraining for laid-off workers than they did in the past. "Our survey also suggests that age is an increasing handicap in finding new employment, with each additional year of age adding about 3.5 weeks to the duration of unemployment," says Russell J Lefevre, IEEE-USA president.

It took Bill Betts, a 29-year industry veteran, 13 months to find a new job at Sun Microsystems Inc (www.sun.com) after suffering his first and only layoff from data-center-networking company Brocade in the fourth quarter of 2007. "It's difficult

to define, and it may be paranoia, but my age [was an issue while job hunting]," he says. "I'm 59, and, while you can scrub your résumé pretty cleanly, people can get a hint of how long you've been around. The skill sets in high tech quickly drop out of fashion. I think there's this perception that, the older you are, the less technical savvy you have. Also, the older you are, the larger the salary you typically have," he says.

Deb Dib, founder of Executive Power Brand (www.executivepowerbrand.com), a career-strategy consultancy, agrees. "There is still ageism out there," Dib says, advising that industry veterans show that they are aligned with what their younger counterparts are doing—knowing the latest design strategies, attending relevant conferences, or following pertinent blogs—and then show how their years of experience add to their own value proposition. "They have to prove that, even though they cost more, they are really a bargain because what they can produce is going to be so much more useful and perhaps happen faster or be more economical or more accurate," she says.

Kim Batson, founder of Career Management Coaching (www.careermanagementcoaching.com), a career-coaching and résumé-writing consultancy focusing on the tech sector, also maintains that industry vets can compete with lower-salaried newcomers. "If a company can see that a veteran candidate has something extra that they can bring to the table, they are more likely to pick the veteran over the grad," says Batson, a former recruiter for companies including Microsoft. "A veteran must show passion. All things being relatively equal as far as competency, the passionate candidate will win out the majority of the time," she says.

Veterans also must present themselves as flexible, strong, and articulate. Image and manners matter, she says, as do interview skills. "It's one thing to get in the door, but if they haven't interviewed in a long time, I suggest they get coaching from a professional on how to conduct a super interview, what companies are looking for, how to ask probing questions, how to work through the interview," Batson says, adding that the job seeker should look for professional help if neces-

sary for creating job-hunting documents, such as a résumé and cover letter.

Further, veterans must be business-oriented. "It's not enough to be task-oriented and forget the business. Show a results-[driven] orientation. Everything they do needs to be tied to business results. Even if they are engineers, not necessarily managers, engineering a chip to go inside a laptop, they need to know how that innovation will affect the product, how the product will affect sales, and how sales will affect the company or productivity," she says. "They need to figure out what the impact of what they do is on the business. Companies are looking for that [skill] now, even among nonmanagerial staff. At the very least, it will help them

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stand out from the crowd."

Both Dib and Batson specialize in personal branding, a career-coaching technique that encourages job seekers to find their own "sweet spot," or career niche, and then to communicate that niche as a value proposition to potential employers.

"One of the first things someone should do, apart from the mindset issues of adopting a future focus and avoiding an attitude of resentment about getting laid off, is to ascertain who they are and what they have to offer," says Batson. "That's what personal branding is all about: uncovering and articulating their value proposition to the market." (See **sidebar** "Advice for surviving job loss.")

Get online

Beyond that advice, job seekers should immediately tap their network and remain in connection with it. In today's career environment, that connection means being online and attending events in person. "Networking has changed in that it has now expanded from human interaction, face to face or over the phone, to online social networking," says Dib. "It's not that the online social networking has replaced traditional social networking, but it has broadened it and supplements it." The big mistake people make with networking is to ask everyone they know for job leads, according to Dib. "That's the kiss of death. What they need to do—and this is going to sound crazy to someone who is out of work—is go into networking as a 'give-to-get' gig. It's all about service. It is about being useful to other people. Build your relationship, developing that bank account of goodwill so that when you need something you don't feel shy about asking. Even more than that, it's letting people get to know you in a way that you become top of mind when they hear of something."

According to Batson, 50 to 60% of people get their jobs through networking, and she teaches that an effective job-search strategy includes creating an online presence. "Keep it professional. Keep the personal stuff off of there," she says, concerning LinkedIn pages or personal Web sites, which should include keywords to grab recruiters' attentions. Prospective employers will Google most people before calling them in for interviews, she says, suggesting that job seekers should claim at least the first three pages of a name-based Google search.

"Engineers, especially, can establish themselves as experts in their field by writing some articles, submitting them to Web sites, getting some speaking gigs—anything that will strengthen the real estate that is taken up when their name is Googled," Batson says.

Betts picked up that knowledge along the way. In addition to establishing himself on sites such as LinkedIn, he began blogging to create an online presence and contributed to *EDN* for a period of his unemployment.

Demler, who, like Betts, worked as a

designer for many years before moving into management, has also established himself as a knowledgeable blogger. As part of his career strategy, Demler is continuing "Analog Insights" (synopsysoc.org/analoginsights), a blog he writes for Synopsys, and, after his layoff, he started an independent blog, "The World Is Analog" (the-world-is-analog.blogspot.com). "I'm finding right now that my blog helps a lot. To some extent, people already know me, and I've never met them," he says.

Although no one would call a layoff a positive thing, it can be a push in the right direction. Betts, for example, says that, in the long term, Brocade would not have been a good fit for him. "Inertia is the most powerful force in the universe," he says. "If they hadn't had laid me off, I might still be there and be unhappy. But ... being laid off for 13 months with no job ... was pretty nerve-racking."

Meanwhile, planning career changes is somewhat of a rarity. "If you think about most people's career paths, they have a kind of zigzag path and typically through no planning. They start in one thing, and in two or three years, an opportunity comes to them through somebody they know," Dib says. "People flip all the time, but mostly in reaction—someone seeing something and saying they'd be great for it. With layoffs, the same thing can happen, but it has to be self-driven."

Is anyone hiring?

Although they are few and far between, some companies are hiring. For example, Synaptics Inc (www.synaptics.com), a developer of human-interface products, is looking for engineers. The company had more than 25 positions in the United States and Asia-Pacific to fill as of January, but the competition is stiff. Jim Harrington, vice president of human resources at Synaptics, reports the company is receiving more than 600 fresh résumés each month and that it interviews more than 20 people for each position it fills.

Harrington says that the company is looking for both veterans and recent college grads and is focusing on using its own Web site, as well as the major job boards and employee referrals, for candidate recruitment. "We're being much more aggressive in social networking and areas of recruitment," he adds.

Tech-focused online-career hub Dice.com (www.dice.com) also featured about

been the case all year [2008]," Silver says. "The anxiety associated with the economy has been with us for a while, and tech professionals seemed to be ahead of the curve in terms of their concerns."

Silver reports that new résumés posted on Dice.com in the fourth quarter of last year grew 67% versus the same period of 2007. Meanwhile, overall job postings in December decreased 25%, and, in January,

the job count slipped further—a decline of 35%. "Demand for electrical engineers in early 2008 had been running relatively flat year over year as measured by job postings on Dice," Silver says. "However, in the last quarter of 2008 and at the start of 2009, EE positions, along with all demand in general, shifted."

Silver notes that many jobs never get posted, so it is important to have your résumé in the database. "This [step] becomes particularly important in a downturn because companies that may be having layoffs on the one hand need to fill critical open positions on the other. They will use the database but don't want to be seen advertising open positions," he says.

With competition for jobs high and the value of engineers often underassessed, one has to ask why educated and experienced industry veterans stick with the tech sector. "Why do I stay in this business? I've enjoyed the second half of my career moving from engineering to the business side of things," Demler says. "It's just an unfortunate fact of life that everybody in engineering, semiconductor, EDA, whatever,

needs to be aware of: This is not a profession where you are likely to stay in one position or one job for any length of time."

Regarding the economic situation's impact on job searches, Demler says, "It's going to be tough. ... It's too late now for people who aren't prepared. [A layoff is] going to happen at some point. You'll be extremely fortunate if it never does. And it'll probably happen more than once." ■

ADVICE FOR SURVIVING JOB LOSS

Career Management Coaching's Kim Batson offers the following points on how to survive and thrive after a layoff:

- > **Accept your situation:** "These things happen to most people at least once in their careers," Batson says. "You may not know it yet, but it could be a blessing in disguise."
- > **Adopt a future focus:** "Look forward, not back. View yourself as having a new job; your new job is to get a job, so you need to get going," she says.
- > **Avoid resentment or self-pity about your current situation:** "Give yourself two to three days to process and grieve your loss," Batson says. "Then let go of all grievances; they only drain you."
- > **Analyze your current financial situation** and sign up for unemployment if necessary.
- > **Aim for a specific** functional, industrial, or geographical target.
- > **Ascertain the value** that you bring to the marketplace or a potential employer by documenting your career accomplishments and creating a personal brand/value proposition.
- > **Assemble a job search plan and documents**, including a résumé.
- > **Act on your plan:** Take action in a structured, methodical manner, as you would with a full-time job.
- > **Adopt a feeling of confidence:** "Act as if you are a rising star—even if you have been demoralized by a layoff or firing," Batson says.
- > **Adjust your course if necessary:** Consider relocation, retooling, new certifications, or added education.

2600 electrical-engineer job openings as of mid-January, down from the 2800 it had in late November. Outside California, which has the most open positions on Dice.com, Maryland, Texas, and New York were the top geographies by volume of open EE positions at the time, according to Tom Silver, chief marketing officer for the company. "In terms of new résumés added, it is increasing substantially, and that's