Life after layoffs: How to move forward after a job loss

Suzanne Deffree - December 18, 2008

It’s not fair, but it’s a fact of life, or at least life as an engineer. Layoffs have been steadily on the rise since June and have soared since September in the semiconductor industry, with thousands of pink slips being handed out to qualified, capable EEs from companies including Advanced Micro Devices, Fairchild Semiconductor, and Motorola.

According to outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas, job cuts in the telecom, electronics, and computer sectors were up 31% over 2007, totaling some 140,422 jobs lost, as of October.

And while the national unemployment rate climbed to 6.7% in October (and ticked up to 6.9% in November), top tech state California saw its unemployment rate climb to 8.2% as of October versus 5.7% in October 2007, according to preliminary data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. Specifically in the San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara, California Metropolitan Statistical Area, the unemployment rate was at 6.9% in October. Statewide, more than 1.5 million people are unemployed.

"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,'" said Mike Demler, a former senior staff product marketing manger at Synopsys Inc, who was let go in late October. You can still be laid 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."

Demler's exit from Synopsys marked his fourth layoff since 1994 in a 32-year tech-industry career.
The top 10 A's of surviving job loss

Career Management Coaching's Kim Batson offers 10 points on how to survive and thrive after a layoff.

1. Accept your situation: "These things happen to most people at least once in their careers," Batson said. "Try not to take it personally, even if you were one of a few, or the only one in your department to lose your job. You may not know it yet, but it could be a blessing in disguise."

2. Adopt a future focus: "Look forward, not back. You cannot change yesterday, but you can change tomorrow. View yourself as having a new job - your new job is to get a job, so you need to get going," she said.

3. Avoid resentment, or self-pity about your current situation: "Don't hold onto grievances toward your former employer(s) or colleagues," Batson said. "Give yourself two to three days to process and grieve your loss, then let go of all grievances; they only drain you and you need to move forward energetically."

4. Analyze your current financial situation and sign up for unemployment if necessary.

5. Aim for a specific functional/industry/geographical target.

6. 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.

7. Assemble a job search plan and documents, including a resume.

8. Act on your plan: Take action in a structured, methodical manner, as you would with a full-time job, Batson advised.

9. Adopt a feeling of confidence: "Act as if you are a rising star - even if you have been demoralized by a layoff or firing," she said.

10. Adjust your course, if needed: Consider things like relocation, retooling, new certifications, or added education. "If you find yourself securing interviews, but not gaining offers, seek professional help to determine what might be an obstacle in your interviewing skills, work through it, alter your technique, and try again," Batson said.

The current downsizing trend is an issue of great concern to IEEE-USA, one that the group projects will continue into 2009 and beyond, and one that has encouraged it to gear up and make sure its members know what services are available to help them make successful employment transitions. Part of that will come through a soon to be released survey of unemployed IEEE members in the US, which found that employers are providing much less in the way of severance, placement services, and/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," IEEE-USA President Russell J Lefevre said.

It took Bill Betts, a 29-year industry veteran, 13 months to find a new job at Sun Microsystems Inc after suffering his first and only layoff from data center networking company Brocade in Q4 2007. "It's difficult to define and it may be paranoia, but my age [was an issue while job hunting]," he said. "I'm 59, and while you can scrub your resume 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, typically the larger the salary you have. Out here in the Bay Area, with such a start-up mentality, you'd like to get technically savvy people who can wear multiple hats and maybe not get paid as much," Betts said.

Deb Dib, founder of Executive Power Brand, a New York-based career strategy consultancy, agreed. "There is still ageism out there," Dib said, advising that industry veterans show that they are aligned with what millennials are doing -- be that the latest design strategies, the conferences they are attending, or the blogs they are following -- and then show how their years of experience adds 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 more economical or more accurate," she said.

Kim Batson, founder of Career Management Coaching, a Seattle-based career coaching and resume writing consultancy focused on the tech sector, and former recruiter for companies including Microsoft, also maintained 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," Batson said.

"A veteran must show passion. Passion shows in a way a veteran answers questions and in how they present themselves in an interview. All things being relatively equal as far as competency, the passionate candidate will win out the majority of the time," she said.

Veteran also have to show themselves as flexible, strong, and articulate. Image and manners matter, she said, 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 said, adding that professional help also should be sought if needed for creating job-hunt documents like a resume and cover letter.

Further, veterans need to be business oriented, Batson encouraged, as a means of proving worth. "It's not enough to be task oriented and forget the business. Show a results orientation. Everything they do needs to be tied to business results. Even if they are an engineer, not necessarily a manager, engineering a chip to go inside a laptop, they need to know how that innovation will affect the product, and how the product will affect sales, and how sales will affect the company or productivity. They need to figure out what the impact of what they do is on the business. Companies are looking for that now, even amongst non-managerial staff. In the very least, it will help them stand out from the crowd."

Both Dib and Batson specialize in personal branding, a career-coaching technique that encourages job seekers find their own "sweet spot," as Dib describes, or their own career niche, and then to communicate that as a value proposition to potential employers. Veteran or not, Dib and Batson advise the first thing job hunters need to do is establish their own personal brand.

"One of the first things someone should do, apart form the mindset issues of adopting a future focus and avoiding an attitude of resentment from getting laid off, is to ascertain who they are and what they have to offer. That's what personal branding is all about, uncovering and articulating their value proposition to the market," Batson said. (See sidebar "The top 10 A’s of surviving job loss" for more of Batson's advice.)

Get online

Beyond that, job seekers should tap their network immediately and stay connected -- and in today's career environment that means being online, as well as at in-person events.

"Networking has changed in that it has now expanded from human interaction, face-to-face or over the phone, to online social networking. It's not that the online social networking has replaced traditional social networking. But it has broadened it and supplements it. Networking, using all the different methodologies of networking, is still the way people find jobs," Dib said.
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," she said.

According to Batson, 50 to 60% of people get their jobs through networking, and she teaches that an affective job search strategy includes creating an online presence.

"Keep it professional. Keep the personal stuff off of there," she said as to setting up LinkedIn pages or personal Web sites, which should include keywords to grab recruiter attention.

Visit these sites to begin creating your online presence and for advice on career strategy:
LinkedIn
Dice.com
Plaxo
EDN's career center
IEEE-USA's employment and career services community

The majority of people will be Googled before they are called in for interviews," she said, suggesting job seekers should claim at least the first three pages of a name-based Google search.

"Engineers, especially, can establish themselves as an expert 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 said.

Accomplishing her three-page goal, she said, "doesn't take that much. You have to be proactive about it, but it's not that hard and it's a great way to get on the radar screen for recruiters in your field."

That's something Betts picked up along the way. In addition to establishing himself on sites like LinkedIn, he began blogging to create an online presence and for a period of his unemployment.

Demler, who like Betts worked as a designer for many years before transitioning to management, has also established himself as a knowledgeable blogger. As part of his career strategy, Demler is continuing a blog he writes for Synopsys called Analog Insights and started an independent blog called The World Is Analog post layoff. "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 said.

While no one would call a layoff a "positive," it can be a push in the right direction. Betts, for example, said that long term, Brocade would not have been a good fit for him.

"Inertia is the most powerful force in the universe," he said. "If they hadn't had laid me off, I might
still be there and be unhappy. But a month ago, being laid off for 12 months with no job, it 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. What happens is they start in one thing and two or three years an opportunity comes to them through somebody they know," Dib said.

"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. It isn't in reaction to someone picking them and saying 'I want you here,' as it happens in a company sometimes."

**Is anyone hiring?**

To be sure, although they are few and far between, some companies are hiring. Microsemi Corp, an analog and mixed-signal specialist based in Irvine, Calif, this month announced plans to add 315 jobs in Ireland.

And Synaptics Inc, a developer of human interface solutions for mobile computing, communications, and entertainment devices, is also looking for engineers.

The company, headquartered in Santa Clara and public since 2002, is hiring for 20 to 30 positions in the US, as well as in the Asia-Pacific. But the competition is stiff. Jim Harrington, VP of human resources at Synaptics, reported the company is receiving more than 600 fresh resumes each month and that it interviews more than 30 people for each position it fills.

Harrington said the company is looking for veterans, as well as recent college grads, and is focused 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, such as 'lunch 2.0,'" he said, describing lunch 2.0 as in-person meet and greets organized by social-networking sites like FaceBook and companies like Synaptics. "What's going on with the economy change has been very positive for Synaptics because we've been able to attract people and many of our employees that we've recruited in the last several years are getting calls from their friends."

### Featured EDN Hot Topic: H-1B visas

Loved by corporations that say they need an infusion of engineering talent, and reviled by homegrown US engineers who see importing foreign engineers as just another type of outsourcing, the H-1B visa program remains an explosive issue. **EDN's H-1B Hot Topic page aggregates H-1B content from EDN and from across the electronics-industry Web to form a comprehensive information source on this career-impacting program.**
Tech-focused online career hub Dice.com also featured about 2800 electrical engineers job openings as of late November. Outside of California, which has the most number of open positions on Dice.com, Texas, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, New York, and Maryland are top geographies by number of EE jobs at the time, according to Tom Silver, chief marketing officer for Dice.com.

"In terms of new resumes added, it is increasing substantially, and that’s been the case all year," Silver said. "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. In October it was north of 20% growth versus the same period last year."

Meanwhile, Dice.com job postings were down 20% year over year in October across Dice.com and specifically for EEs. "Demand for electrical engineers earlier this year had been running relatively flat year over year as measured by job postings on Dice. However, in the last two months [September and October], EE positions, along with all demand in general, seems to have shifted," Silver said. "A few types of experience are bucking that trend, including virtualization experience, which is still strongly in demand, as well as certain programming languages."

Silver reminded that many jobs never get posted, so it is important to have your resume in the database. "This 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 said.

With competition for jobs high and the value of engineers often under assessed, 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 said. "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. These are realities you need to be aware of."

As to the economic situation's impact on job searches, Demler said, "It's going to be tough. People need to be prepared to ride it out. Be prepared ahead of time. It's too late now for people who aren't prepared. [Being laid off is] going to happen at some point. You'll be extremely fortunate if it never does. And it'll probably happen more than once."