

Job Hunting in a Recession

BY JACK MOLISANI, Associate Fellow

Editor's note: Part II of this series, "Recession-Proof Your Career," will appear in an upcoming issue of Intercom.

As the owner of a staffing company that specializes in technical writers, I was recently asked for advice about finding work during a recession. While I have many opinions on job hunting and much ad-

vice to share, I paused before answering. What, exactly, does "during a recession" mean? (See the sidebar on page 20 for a discussion of the meaning of *recession*.) And how *does* job hunting differ during a recession? This article addresses both of those questions.

Many of the suggestions I have given over the years address how to recession-proof your career. That is, there are ac-

tions you can take *before* a downturn in the economy that will maximize your chances of staying employed when such a downturn occurs. While that information is indeed valuable, it doesn't do much good if you are one of the many individuals who are struggling to find work *now*. So this is the first of a two-part series on job hunting: This article will address actions you can follow to help find work

now, and the next will address action you can take in the near future that will increase your employability before the next downturn comes along.

Where to Start

Fear of losing one's job is a deep and powerful emotion, even more so for those who have families to support. Some prey on that fear for their own advantage: the media to get ratings, politicians to get votes. So the first lesson for those concerned about their jobs is this: *Just because the media says something, doesn't necessarily mean it's true!*

An equally usable datum is: *Even if the media says something over and over, it still doesn't necessarily make it true!*

The never-ending doom and gloom in the media can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If enough companies stop hiring and begin laying off workers out of fear of a recession, their actions make the recession more likely.

Similarly, if you believe you will have a hard time finding a job because of the economy, you will. Why? *Because you can't fix something you feel you don't have control over.*

So what's a technical communicator in need of work to do?

The first and most important step is to stop thinking like a victim (if you have been) and realize that no matter how bad things seem, no matter how bad the media says things are, there are actions you can take right here, right now to increase your chances of finding work.

Steps to Take

Now that we have tackled the importance of keeping a positive outlook, let's look at five additional steps you can take to increase your chances of finding work when economic times are tough.

Proofread Your Resume

Actually, have someone else proofread it. Even better, have *many* people proofread it—you'd be surprised what one person will find that everyone else missed! While it is important to have a flawless resume in even the best economic times, it is absolutely essential to have zero defects in your resume if times are tough and you are compet-

What Is a Recession?

There is no universally accepted definition of "recession," but for the purposes of this article the following definitions of *recession* are useful:

- A period when the economy of a country is not successful and conditions for business are bad (from *The Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*)
- A decline in economic activity: a period, shorter than a depression, during which there is a decline in economic trade and prosperity (from *The Encarta World Dictionary*)
- A recession is generally associated with a decline in a country's real gross domestic product (GDP), or negative real economic growth. According to one widespread definition, a recession occurs when real growth is negative for two or more successive quarters of a year. However, there are differing definitions: In the United States, the National Bureau of Economic Research's (NBER) Business Cycle Dating Committee ultimately decides whether the economy has fallen into a recession. The NBER defines a recession as "a significant decline in economic activity spread across the economy, lasting more than a few months, normally visible in real GDP, real income, employment, industrial production and wholesale-retail sales." (from *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*)

ing against multiple applicants for one position. You will be judged based on the quality of your resume and will be rejected if defects are found.

And please note the use of the word "defects" instead of "typos." Hiring managers look for not only the absence of spelling errors, but also the application of good human factors (to aid readability), use of styles, consistent punctuation, and more. (For more information, see "Resume Secrets That May Surprise You" on the Resources page of www.ProspringStaffing.com.)

It's hard to overstate the importance of having a flawless resume. You may

not be able to change where you live or the number of hiring companies in your area, but you can control the quality of your resume. It's one thing to lose a job to a more qualified candidate, quite another to not even get an interview because you had defects in your resume.

Show How You Match the Job Requirements

The next effective tactic you can adopt is to show how you match what a hiring company is looking for—or what it *thinks* it is looking for. I've gone on plenty of interviews where what the client actually needed was not even close to the requirements listed in the job posting. But I landed the job because I showed I was a good match when I submitted my resume and cover letter, and again during the interview, using my portfolio.

(For more information on how to maximize your chance of getting the interview and then doing well *in* the interview, see "The Top 10 Mistakes Professionals Make When Looking for Work" and "How to Ace an Interview Using a Portfolio" on the Resources page of www.ProspringStaffing.com.)

Be Proactive

If your idea of finding work is to post your resume on Monster.com or to email it to just a few companies, you're in for a rude awakening. That is not finding work: it is sitting around waiting for work to find you.

Being proactive (*finding* work rather than waiting for it to find you) is a good idea in the best of times, and indispensable when times are tough.

So what can you do other than emailing your resume to resumes@BlackHoleNeverToBeHeardFromAgain.com? Plenty!

Make a list of all the companies for which you'd like to work, then brainstorm how you can make a personal contact at each company. For example, give yourself the task of writing an article about hiring trends in your area. Newsletters are always looking for articles like this, and not only will this assignment give you good firsthand information about trends, it will also help you establish contacts with local companies. Interview documentation managers,

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and send them a follow-up email after the article is published.

Another example of *finding* work is to make a list of all the companies in your area that are currently hiring core development-type people, such as engineers or programmers. Even if the company doesn't have a job posting for a technical writer now, chances are if it is hiring staff to develop a new product, it will eventually need someone to document that new product. So be proactive and contact a recruiter there *before* they post that pending tech writing job. And since advertising and job postings costs money, your well-timed resume submission might motivate the company to hire you and skip the trouble and expense of posting the job.

While these examples may sound overly simplistic or trivialize the difficulties of finding work in tough times, they do illustrate that you can do things to find work, good times or bad. Don't wait for a company to post a job so you can be one of 300 people emailing a resume. Be proactive, be original, get noticed!

Network, Network, Network

Another common mistake technical communicators make when looking for work is to network only at STC meetings. Don't get me wrong: STC meetings are a great place to hear about job openings. But keep in mind there are usually other writers at those same meetings who are *also* looking for work. Plus, most of the employed attendees present don't need technical writers—they *are* technical writers.

The people who need technical writers are engineers, programmers, project managers, etc. So go to the meetings *those* people attend and network *there*. Go to meetings of your local C++ users group or chapters of the ACM (Association of Computing Machinery) or IEEE (Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers). Bring your business cards and network. Talk to everyone there. Say, "Hi, I'm a technical writer. Here's my card. Call me if you need me!"

Better yet, ask if they (or anyone else in their company) could use your services now, and follow up the next day to schedule a meeting if they do.

A technical writer I know in Orange County, California, goes to the exhibit hall of every trade show held at the OC Convention Center, moving from booth to booth, looking at each company's marketing collateral (brochures, data sheets, etc.). If a company has less than perfect collateral, he asks for the head of sales or marketing (who is often in or around the booth), introduces himself, and says, "I can help make these better!" and hands the executive his business card. I don't think he's ever been out of work in the almost twenty years I've known him. (Not an easy feat considering half of California was laid off in the recession of the mid-1990s and again after the dot-com crash.)

Another great example: I know a technical writer who for years went to local user group meetings and gave presentations about how programmers who write their own manuals can make them better. She may not have received a job lead at each meeting, but she made sure everyone left with a copy of her business card. When they finally did need a technical writer, guess who they called! In fact, one programming language user group at which she spoke is all but extinct now, but to this day—years later—she still gets calls from people who saw her at those meetings and kept her business card on file until they finally needed her services.

—Jack Molisani

Become the Center of Attention

A company where I once worked bought into the recession panic of the mid-1990s and laid off much of its workforce (including me), so I know what it is like to lose your job and how challenging it can be to find work in hard times. But I also practice what I preach: I networked at meetings, I volunteered at events, I spoke at conferences. I made myself visible to people who might have jobs to fill. I knew there was work out there somewhere, I just had to *find* it. And I did. So can you.

The introverts reading this article might think that being proactive, networking, and public speaking are far be-

yond their abilities. The fact is that most professionals acquire public speaking skills by working at them. They learn, they practice.

Without a doubt, the public speaking I've done has helped me find work. Not only did meeting so many people help in terms of finding job leads, but the self-confidence it built was invaluable come interview time. Once you become comfortable addressing a group of 100-plus people, doing a one-on-one interview is easy!

Ready? Start!

Toastmasters International, a non-profit organization that helps people learn to be excellent public speakers, has more than 200,000 members in 11,500 clubs in 92 countries. Its mission is to help people improve their communication and leadership skills while fostering self-confidence and personal growth. See www.toastmasters.org to find a chapter near you and start working on your public speaking skills.

Then brainstorm about places you can prospect for work, create an action plan, and *start*.

Good luck, and let me know how it went! 📌

SUGGESTED READINGS

Campbell, Chellie. *The Wealthy Spirit: Daily Affirmations for Financial Stress Reduction* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2002).

Collins, Jim, and Jerry I. Porras. *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

Hubbard, L. Ron. *The Problems of Work* (Los Angeles: Bridge Publications, 2007).

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