

By Justin James

When you have lost your job, there is a certain expectation from those who have never been unemployed that looking for work is a full-time gig. The reality is, after the first few weeks, it's mostly a waiting game: The resume is updated and posted to job boards, you've established your various search agents, and you have talked to all the relevant recruiters in the area. So what else can you do with your time to help you get back to work as quickly as possible? These tips will point you in the right direction.

1: Catch up on your learning

Something I hear time and time again from IT pros is that technology is constantly advancing, but too few jobs give you the training to keep up -- and it is just overwhelming to try to stay abreast while working a full time job. This is the perfect time to get caught up on those technologies! Of course, you will want to stick with the ones that require less up-front cost. Your unemployment office may even be able to help get you training. Not only will this keep you from getting bored, but it will give you some talking points in interviews and possibly some new skills to add to your resume. In addition, it looks *great* to an interviewer that you are the kind of person who keeps learning and growing, even when you are unemployed.

2: Work for free

One of the best things you can do for yourself right now is to start donating some of your skills and time to an open source project or a local charity or to perhaps start a personal project of your own. This will give you the opportunity to do some new things and explore different career directions, and it can also help you network. And who knows, maybe it will blossom into some sort of paid work. At the very least, you will know that you are doing something that helps someone else out and gaining more experience that will enhance your resume.

3: Be flexible on compensation

In a recession economy, you probably don't have the luxury of holding out for more money than a job offer is for. In my area, for example, there are a fair number of jobs out there, but the pay is about \$10,000 less than it was a few years ago. If you want to get back to work quickly, you are going to have to recognize this and be willing to take less money than you were making before, even if you were underpaid at your previous job. A few people with in-demand skills or rare experience may be able to push for a better compensation package, but you need to be realistic about whether you are one of them.

4: Expand your comfort zone

I recently talked to someone who was hungry for some work about giving him a small contract. It was nothing major, but it would have helped him out. He turned me down because even though he was skilled in that general line of work, he had no experience in the exact work I was asking him for. That really is the wrong attitude to have, and it will cost you in this economy.

Let's say you are a system administrator and you have been using Linux for a long time. If someone offers you a job, but their shop uses BSD, you are probably much better off trading your penguin for a little red daemon than holding out a few more months (or longer) for a Linux job. Some folks are very much in demand and have the freedom to stick only with the things they know well. But for most IT pros, being willing to work with a tech you are not familiar with (or maybe even dislike) is a necessity unless you have deep financial reserves you can rely upon.

5: Exercise

Let's face it: IT jobs are awful for our health, particularly our waistlines. We all know we should work out more, but we rarely do. This is a great time to get in shape, and all you need are some ratty old clothes, comfortable sneakers, and motivation -- you don't even need a gym membership for a basic exercise routine! Why exercise? For one thing, it will help relieve some of the stress you are probably feeling about your employment and financial situation. But it can also help in other ways. It will help you with your self-confidence and self-esteem, which shine through in interviews. And when you return to work, it is easier to sit at a desk for long hours when you are in shape than when you are not.

6: Get certified

One of the common themes in the IT industry is that the workers in the trenches have little regard for more IT certifications. I generally share this viewpoint (although there are exceptions, of course). But the gatekeepers in the hiring process, like HR and recruiters, place a fairly high value on IT certifications. A certification can make the difference between getting an interview and not getting one. Many states' unemployment systems have programs that may be able to assist you to get certified; you will want to talk with an unemployment agent and find out what your options are.

7: Become a consultant

Just because companies are laying off employees does not mean that they are not getting anything done. Many times, the decision to cut headcount is motivated by stock price issues (apparently, laying people off raises stock prices) or the costs associated with a full-time employee, not a lack of work. As a result, many companies are laying off employees while hiring consultants and contractors to fill the gaps left by the layoffs. This can provide you with an opportunity to go into consulting work, either for yourself or as a member of a firm. I've noticed that the more specialized your knowledge, the better your chances of getting a consultant gig. The odds of landing consultant work also go up when your skills are applicable to one-off projects, not just long-term operations.

8: Consider going abroad

I know, "There's no place like home," wherever that might be for you. At the same time, international companies often have a number of jobs in other countries, which they prefer to be done by someone from their home country (or a country in which they have a regional headquarters). There are a number of reasons why a company might need to hire into an expatriate position, but they are usually hard to fill and often pay quite well. Being willing to spend some time overseas not only opens up more jobs to you, but it also will give you a chance to travel. And in many cases, the employer handles your lodging overseas (and even if they do not, it is often quite inexpensive), so unlike a domestic move, you don't have to worry about trying to sell your house.

9: Don't neglect your networking

No, I don't mean TCP/IP and Cat5e cable. I mean talking to other people. Stay in touch with former co-workers and they may pass along word of a position. Another great place to learn about open jobs is at a local user's group for the technologies you are interested in. Also, sign up for their mailing list! At my local .NET user group, there are frequent job announcements, and the local Ruby group's mailing list often contains job postings. Even if you don't hear about a job, you can get a better idea of what the job market is like, which companies are likely to be hiring soon, and so on.

10: Go beyond the job boards

Not all companies post their open positions on the job boards, but they do post them on their own Web sites. Yes, it is a huge hassle to register with dozens of individual companies. At the same time, you are avoiding the issues with the job boards too, like scam sales jobs disguised as real jobs, multiple recruiters trying to hire for the same position, and whatnot. In addition, you actually know what company you are applying to, which is getting rather rare on the job boards. Think of the companies you would like to work for and see if they have jobs on their sites in your area or in a city you would be willing to move to. You will greatly expand your pool of jobs to look at, and if the company does not post these jobs on the job boards, you probably have much less competition for the jobs as well.

Additional resources

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- Sign up for our [10 Things Newsletter](#)
- Check out all of TechRepublic's [free newsletters](#)
- [10 things you should do if you get laid off](#)
- [Seven warning signs that you should turn down a job offer](#)
- [10 reasons you're not closing the deal in your job search](#)
- [10 mistakes to avoid when seeking a new job](#)
- [TechRepublic 2010 IT skills and salary report](#)
- [10 things you should know about creating a resume for a high-level IT position](#)
- [The 10 best ways to handle a job interview](#)

Version history

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