



Managing Unexpected Employment Transitions (Coping with Job Loss)

U.S. industry in general, and the chemical industry in particular, continue to undergo dramatic streamlining in a drive for improved efficiency and a greater competitive edge. This streamlining translates into job loss for many employees, often with little notice.

The information below will help you manage your transition, and perhaps to provide advice to colleagues who find themselves in a career transition. As with all career advice, the ideas provided herein must be tailored to your particular employment situation, as well as to your personal and professional goals.

WHEN YOU GET THE NEWS

When you get the news, your initial reaction is most likely shock (though perhaps also some relief if you have been dreading this day). This is the prelude to a grieving process that parallels mourning a divorce, death, or other traumatic loss. You are faced with three primary sets of concerns—emotional, financial, and professional—as you work to

- put your job loss in perspective,
- seek and receive support and assistance, and
- organize your job search.

You will go through several distinct emotional stages such as shock and denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance, and hope (not necessarily in that order), lasting for varying durations and intensities. This brochure suggests strategies for coping with the emotional, practical, and professional effects of job loss. Increased awareness of the emotional repercussions in particular will help you recover from the trauma and make a new beginning.

MOURNING YOUR LOSS

There is no set schedule for mourning your job loss. Some people complete the process in a matter of days or weeks. Others need more time. If you are finding it difficult to work through your termination, find someone who can help you get moving again, such as an ACS Career counselor or a psychologist. Also, be prepared to experience some unpleasant emotions again—you may find that you are repeating the grieving process—as you negotiate the ups and downs of job hunting. At the end of the grief cycle, there is hope and renewal. This is a time to make a new beginning. No matter how traumatic, losing your job need not be catastrophic. You can turn what may feel like a devastating personal tragedy into a personal and professional triumph. The vast majority of professionals not only will survive termination, but end up in a position that is at least as, if not more, satisfying.

PUTTING YOUR JOB LOSS IN PERSPECTIVE

During the first stages of mourning your job loss, you may struggle to put what has happened to you in perspective. It may feel like the end of the world, and you most likely will experience

- *Shock and Denial*—“This can’t be happening to me.” Denial functions as a buffer, initially protecting you from strong emotions, such as anger, and allowing you to continue functioning. If you anticipated your termination, you may feel relief at no longer having to work under stressful conditions.
- *Anger*—“How can they do this to me? How did I let this happen?” You may be angry at your boss and at the company for rejecting you and, perhaps, for treating you unfairly. You may be angry at yourself, feeling frustrated or even guilty that you didn’t see the handwriting on the wall.

MAINTAIN CONTROL

As hard as it may be, your first priority is to control your emotions so that you can deal effectively with the immediate financial impact and professional concerns. Although it is extremely difficult, weigh your words and actions against their potential effect on your future during the critical time between getting the news and permanently leaving your workplace. Although the duration of this period varies, it is typically brief. It may be difficult to leave behind projects, not to mention a company, in which you have invested so much—especially on short notice. Wrapping up your professional responsibilities may be a topic you wish to explore with your boss. Keeping your head is important to obtain the best possible termination package and securing favorable references, which are key to your future employment. Here are some things you can do as soon as you get the news:

- Check your company handbook for a formal termination policy. Know what it is.
- Request a little time to collect your thoughts before discussing your termination package, severance pay, and other benefits. If possible, make an appointment for another day.
- Ask for outplacement assistance to help you get re-employed.
- Go home. No one expects you to finish out the day. There’s no need to immediately explain to co-workers what has happened.
- Prepare a written agenda for your final meeting. Include all your concerns and information needs.

COPING WITH THE NEWS

It is vital to your professional concerns to control your emotions at the workplace, so you need a safe means of venting your feelings outside the workplace. Take time out after getting the news to cope with your emotions. It helps to talk things out within the confidence of a trusted listener. Choose someone who is not involved in your professional life, will be discreet, and

- lets you do the talking,
- makes reflective statements,
- encourages you to open up,

- refrains from making judgmental remarks, and
- doesn't rush you into making decisions.

Talk to a friend or family member with these listening skills or schedule time with a professional counselor. Then say what you feel—even if you think it sounds stupid. Don't censor yourself.

Don't hesitate to seek professional help. You are undergoing a major life trauma and may need special help in coping with your understandable distress and anguish in putting your job loss in perspective. Alcohol and other drugs do not help. Avoid them. Facing termination in your employment is stressful, but there are steps you can take to improve your separation package, minimize the disruption in your life, and land a new position more quickly. Take advantage of all available resources, from ACS or other sources.

ON THE HOME FRONT

How do you break the news that you have been let go to family members? Don't delay. Be direct and try to remain calm.

- Explain first to your spouse, and then to your children, what has happened, using the same “reason for leaving” language you agreed to with your supervisor.
- Reassure them that the family will make it through this crisis.
- Be honest about any anticipated changes in lifestyle.

You should be able to expect support and concern from your family. One of the unexpected bonuses of this trying experience may be a rediscovery of loved ones and an affirmation of your intrinsic self-worth. Family and friends love you for who you are, not for what you do.

The post-termination period can be highly stressful for everyone, especially as financial pressures mount. Remember, all members of the family are affected by the job loss. They, as well as you, will go through their own grieving process—at their own pace and intensity. It is important to keep the lines of communication open. Family members need to be prepared to answer questions—why you're home, for instance. Talk through problems as they arise. When included in the problem solving, children can learn valuable life lessons that better prepare them to cope with adversity as adults.

YOURS IS TO REASON WHY

Ask your boss why you are being let go. As you try to put your termination in perspective, it helps to have a clear understanding of why it happened to you. The need for corporate restructuring may be influenced by conflicts of personality, strategy, or philosophy. It may help in your next job to know the role any such conflicts played in your termination.

Establish an acceptable explanation of your termination with your employer to use in job interviews and in reference statements. Get it in writing, if possible. Be sure that the key contacts at your former workplace have the explanation and stick to it. When prospective employers check your references—and they will—they will be looking for agreement between your story and that given by others. Use the same “reason for leaving statement” with everyone, starting with your family.

TAKE CARE OF BUSINESS— THE TERMINATION PACKAGE

The final meeting to discuss this package is your most important opportunity to ask questions and to receive the best terms. ACS discusses components of the termination package in its publications, [Professional Employment Guidelines](#) and [Academic Employment Guidelines](#), both available at chemistry.org.

Consider the following subjects in formulating your written agenda:

- **Advance notice.** How much? What about pay in lieu of notice?
- **Severance pay.** How much? How is it paid? Some experts advise periodic payments instead of lump-sum payments, if possible. This relieves you of the responsibility of handling a lump sum during the initial phase of the crisis, and it simulates a paycheck.
- **Vacation pay.** How much accumulated leave do you have? Are you entitled to payment for unused vacation time? What about unused sick leave, overtime, or compensatory time?
- **Pension/profit-sharing/thrift plans.** What benefits are due you? Check out protection afforded by the federal Employment Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA).
- **Health insurance coverage.** How long will it last? What will it cost? Review your policy regarding any grace period. Investigate applications of the federal Comprehensive Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (COBRA), which requires most employers to allow you to continue receiving group benefits for up to 18 months after leaving your job, providing you pick up the entire premium plus a 2% administrative fee. This could save you money over purchasing individual health insurance. If you have a spouse who is employed, check into adding your family onto their plan instead. Comprehensive yet affordable health insurance is also available through the [ACS Insurance Program](#).
- **Life and disability insurance.** How long will coverage continue? Check your policies. For savings, look into other group plans open to you before converting to any individual plans. The American Chemical Society offers members [group insurance](#) and retirement plans.
- **Other employee benefits.** Will these continue for a specified term? Refer to the employee handbook to avoid overlooking anything.
- **Transfer or rehire privileges.** Do any apply to your case? Ask for a detailed explanation.
- **Job placement assistance.** Can you use an office with a phone, word-processing equipment, or secretarial and mailing services to facilitate your job search? What other outplacement services will be provided?

Take notes during the termination interview and request a written record of your termination package from your employer. Tie up any loose ends: company charge cards, company car, outstanding travel reimbursements, personal possessions. Before signing a separation agreement, consider consulting a lawyer who specializes in employment law. Consult your state directory of attorneys. You should not be pressured to sign the same day.

UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

In most termination cases, you have the right to claim unemployment insurance benefits. Remember, this is insurance previously paid for by you and your employer. It is not charity. Look upon it as an employee benefit or a dividend on an investment now come due.

- Report to your state office of unemployment insurance.
- Expect to interview with a state employment service counselor.
- File the necessary forms.

Upon notification of eligibility, you may have to report weekly to the unemployment office. There you will encounter a broad spectrum of the unemployed labor force. It can be a disheartening experience, but don't let it get you down. You have the right to tap every existing financial resource so that you can focus your full attention on your job search.

SURVIVAL TACTICS

It is best to confront the financial imperatives of your particular situation head-on at the earliest possible date. Recognize from the start that the job search process is a lengthy one, and do the most to maximize your financial resources and reserves.

- Review your budget and trim wherever possible: dining out, clothing, home furnishings and renovations, charitable donations, automatic savings deductions.
- Don't take a vacation right away. Besides the financial expenditure, there may be emotional repercussions depending on where you are in the grieving process.
- Contact all your creditors—especially mortgagors and utility companies. Explain your situation and inquire about temporarily reducing your payments.
- Depending on your family's overall financial situation, consider seeking a debt-consolidation loan at a lower interest rate than that incurred on any consumer debts.
- Register with a temporary agency that places scientific personnel, and check with local colleges/universities about adjunct teaching positions. This will provide you with the opportunity to keep up skills, provide some income, and still allow flexibility to interview.
- Review all your resources. If you must tap savings, don't feel guilty. You have saved before, and you will save again. Don't make any rash financial or business decisions. Seek professional advice, as necessary.

AT LOOSE ENDS

You've kept your head at your former workplace. You've found someone with whom you feel comfortable talking things out and venting your feelings. You've broken the news to family and close friends. You've taken care of business and know where you stand financially. What do you do now?

REACH OUT FOR HELP

After the initial shock abates, be it a matter of hours or days, the full impact of losing your job may hit you—hard. This next intermediate stage of grieving, *bargaining* and *depression*, is the most difficult for many. Focus now on coping with your feelings, and reach out for help in doing

so. Family and friends can do much to restore your sense of self-esteem while diminishing the pain.

- *Bargaining*—“If I could only get my job back, I would...” You contemplate anything and everything you could do to get your job back or might have done to keep it. You may be feeling ashamed and regretful. At this stage, any bargaining you might initiate is undermined by your damaged self-esteem.
- *Depression*—“I’m just not any good. No wonder life is terrible.” You may have difficulty making decisions and may also experience appetite and sleep disturbances. Fatigue and a sense of having lost control contribute to your overall anxiety. You may experience a sense of loss most acutely at this time. Depression, the most serious stage, can lead to inactivity, which undermines any notion of a job search.
- For some, job loss triggers unusually strong reactions due to some unresolved past loss—a parent’s death, for instance. *If depression continues beyond a week or two, or if it interferes with your daily functioning, please seek professional help.*

Recognize and guard against a tendency to avoid others by:

- Joining a support group of people coping with job loss. Start by checking with your ACS local section.
- Planning social activities with friends.
- Keeping communication open with family members.
- Maintaining your professional associations and contacts.

STAY ACTIVE

Depression is typically the most difficult stage. It is not a productive time. Don’t expect to mobilize your job campaign while in the throes of depression. Do help yourself by scheduling activities that give you a sense of accomplishment, no matter how small. Concentrate on one task at a time. See it through to completion.

- *Get physical.* Start the day with a fitness regimen that gets you up and going. A regular exercise program provides some discipline and structure to your day. Treat your exercise time as you would an important meeting. The physical activity will help alleviate mild depression as well. Your mental outlook and emotional well-being will improve along with your fitness level. The idea is to feel good physically—don’t set specific self-improvement goals that leave you frustrated and worn out.
- *Learn to use relaxation techniques.* Check out your local library, bookstore, or health store for literature or tapes that teach simple relaxation techniques. Practice daily to help recharge your battery and alleviate stress.
- *Read self-help literature.* While you’re at the library or bookstore, check out the books and articles dealing with job loss, job hunting, and career change. Other subject areas worth investigating are psychology, religion, and counseling. This reading can provide helpful insights and serve as preliminary research for your job search campaign.

ORGANIZE YOUR JOB SEARCH

In the final stage of mourning, your focus shifts from looking back to looking forward. Ask yourself this question to determine whether you are in the grieving process: “What’s my problem?” If you answer, “I lost my job,” you are still mourning the past. If you answer, “I need a job,” you are coming to terms with your situation and are ready to focus on the future. You experience

- *Acceptance*—“It’s not the end of the world, just the end of one job.” You are at peace with what happened and experience a sense of quiet expectation that something good may come out of it. You have mourned the loss of your job and the people and places left behind and are ready to look ahead and start exploring the possibilities.
- *Hope*—“I’ve got a lot of options open to me.” With your acceptance of what is, you are suddenly open to all that may be. The final stage of mourning finds you standing taller, smiling more often, speaking with new-found confidence. Now you can begin to organize for your job search. Realize, however, that this time between jobs will hold its share of disappointment and rejection. You will continue to cope with painful feelings and may even find yourself repeating a phase of mourning you thought was completed. It can also be a time of hope, growth, and self-renewal.

SET UP A WORK SPACE

You are newly self-employed: *Finding a job is a fulltime job.* Get off to a good start by organizing your work space.

- Set up an office—whether it’s a permanent or portable setup.
- Arrange for a professional message on your voice mail or answering machine. Talk to your family about taking messages and make sure the phone is always answered professionally.
- Plan for your word-processing and printing needs: résumés, cover letters, and follow-up correspondence.
- Calculate the expenses of running a job search campaign.

GET TO WORK

Once you have your office organized, set up a schedule for using it. Block off specific times on a daily office calendar for specific tasks:

- making and receiving professional phone calls;
- writing job search materials: résumés, reference statements, and letters;
- conducting career research;
- keeping up with professional literature; and
- continuing physical exercise.

For quick reference, include all outside appointments on your office calendar: interviews, meetings, and professional activities. *Keep a record of job-search expenses for tax purposes: Most of these expenses are tax deductible. If you are unsure, consult an accountant.* On initiating your search, be prepared for an overwhelming lack of response by prospective employers. Letters of inquiry and résumés are infrequently acknowledged because downsizing has reduced the number of human resources personnel as well.

REFINE YOUR JOB SEARCH SKILLS

Post-termination success does not happen overnight. There are many variables in estimating how long it will take you to find a new job. It may well be a period of many months, so invest some time early on in refining your job search skills. Many references in print, including those treating the subject of job loss, provide information on job hunting. Among the topics to explore are résumé formats; marketing strategies—networking, placement agencies, direct mailings, and advertised openings; interview skills; and negotiating a job offer. It is well worth a trip to the local library or bookstore to review the current career literature. There are also many printed resources for advertised job openings. These include regional issues of *The Wall Street Journal* and other business publications, Sunday editions of out-of-town newspapers, *National Business Employment Weekly*, *Chemical & Engineering News*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and other trade or professional publications. College and university placement offices are potential resources for information and services. Inquire if your alma mater assists alumni with job placement.

TARGET YOUR JOB SEARCH

This period of unemployment provides you with an opportunity to assess your career and to plan its future development. Don't narrow your options. Now may be the time to start using some of your other talents. An in-depth evaluation is in order. Consider

- furthering your education in a new or related field,
- pursuing continuing education in your current field,
- taking a new track in your present career,
- starting a new career,
- relocating, or
- seeking a position in a smaller company.

Explore your options if you were to act on any one or combination of the above suggestions. You need a clear concept of the job you are seeking to properly target your search. There are steps you can take to help define the right job for you:

- Inventory your accomplishments, skills, and interests.
- Don't restrict your list to on-the-job activities. Include part-time and volunteer work that may incorporate additional skills such as leadership, fundraising, team orientation.
- Review your inventory for likes and dislikes.
- Imagine your ideal job.

If outplacement counseling is made available to you, these are subject areas open for consultation. You may wish to seek career counseling independently. For a local list of nationally certified counselors with mental health, career, and testing backgrounds, contact the [National Board for Certified Counselors](#), 3 Terrace Way, Suite D, Greensboro, NC 27403; (910) 547-0607. Check

references and fees carefully. Select a counselor with whom you are comfortable and who has experience—years of it.

NETWORK YOUR WAY TO A NEW JOB

Personal contacts account for the overwhelming majority of new positions found by previously terminated employees, but don't put your friends and professional acquaintances in an awkward position by asking if they have a job for you. Get them working for you as advisers: Ask them to review your résumé and keep them informed of your background, abilities, and career goals. When networking, cast a broad net. Begin with a select group of relatives, close friends, and professional acquaintances. Expand this network by asking them to provide you with the names of friends whom you might contact to ask for assistance.

- Maintain contact with former work colleagues and professional associates.
- Maintain membership in your professional organizations, especially at the local level. *You may request waiver of your ACS dues and subscription charges via the dues bill card or by calling the ACS Department of Membership Activities at (800) 227-5558.*
- Enroll in a professional development course to develop new marketable skills or to hone your present abilities.
- Try to arrange informational meetings with personnel in organizations you favor as prospective employers.
- Be prepared to summarize your career accomplishments and aspirations.
- Volunteer your professional services if you feel you have the time. Many school systems are looking for volunteers to help augment their science programs.

Join a job finders club. For example, the Forty Plus Club has branches nationwide. Check on the club's successes before paying dues. Remember also that if you are searching for scientific jobs, you want to get advice and input from people in scientific fields.

SURF THE NET

The World Wide Web is both a great source of information and a great time-waster. You can gain access to other job seekers and share their woes through e-mail, as well as getting the message out that you are available. Recruiters are using the Internet as an effective means of advertising positions available, and most employers now prefer to receive resumes through their online submission systems. For example, the ACS's Job Board ([link](#)) abstracts ads from the current and previous weeks' issues of *Chemical & Engineering News*. Similar sites include "Academe This Week" from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (<http://chronicle.merit.edu>) for academic positions and [indeed](#) as a job posting aggregator site. For job seekers, online services can provide information on immediate opportunities in a confidential environment.

MAKE ACS A POSITIVE CONNECTION

In addition to the networking opportunities available through your ACS local section and division contacts, there are many ways to make ACS a positive connection in your job search. Maintain

your ACS membership, taking advantage of the dues waiver for unemployed members, if needed. The Department of Career Services provides members with one-on-one career assistance, direct contact with employers, and information on employment data, trends, and issues. Among these many services are

- Career Consultant Program
- Workforce Analysis Publications
- Workshops and Presentations at national, regional, and local section meetings
- Recruiters Panels, Mock Interviews, and Résumé Reviews at ACS national meetings.

INTERIM EMPLOYMENT

Finances may dictate that you find some interim employment while looking for the right job. You may be able to find work within your field—either as a consultant or on a temporary or contract basis. There has been a growing trend in American industry to hire professionals on a temporary basis in response to particular needs. Consider other skills that you could put in practice to secure interim employment. Does a hobby have vocational value that you might market?

TRADE-OFFS

Costs are associated with any career change—planned or forced. These costs are not exclusively financial. Keep in mind your head, heart, and home life as well when evaluating career decisions and potential job situations. Consider the trade-offs and assess them in terms of both short- and long-range goals. The immediate expenses of continuing education or relocation, for example, may ultimately yield greater professional fulfillment or better pay and benefits.

MAKE A NEW BEGINNING

There is life after job loss. The period between jobs can be a time of growth and renewal—a time to make a new beginning. This in itself may be anxiety producing and stressful yet extremely rewarding. The message from those surviving termination is a positive one. You emerge with increased self-knowledge, fresh career perspectives, and redefined priorities.

Looking for a new position can be a lengthy process and one that taxes emotions and finances. Find ways to keep the flame of self-renewal burning. Be kind to yourself, both in body and spirit. Acknowledge your frustrations and disappointments. Try to have patience. Remind yourself that things worth being are better than things worth having. Consider any day that contains something of beauty, love, discovery, or growth a day well spent.

FURTHER READING

Byron, William J. *Finding Work Without Losing Heart: Bouncing Back from Mid-Career Job Loss*; Adams Media Corp.: Holbrook, MA, 1995.

The [ACS Committee on Economic and Professional Affairs](#) is directly concerned with issues affecting the professional well-being of scientists and technicians working in chemistry and related fields. However, the American Chemical Society cannot guarantee any outcome based on the use of or reliance on this advice. To obtain information about any of the material covered in this pamphlet, contact the Department of Career Management and Development at (800) 227-5558 or career@acs.org.