

## Life After Layoffs Essentials --Gayle's Greatest Hits

SPJ-Fort Worth organized a number of sessions during the last eight years or so to help our colleagues in North Texas learn how to better survive the continuing rounds of layoffs at news organizations. During the years, a long line of great professionals from various walks of life have offered their advice and insights. Some circumstances have changed, but a lot of what we've heard in the past is still relevant.

Here's what I consider the "greatest hits" from those sessions.

### Health Insurance

Keep some health insurance, if at all possible. At just about every session, the financial folks such as Paul Foutch have emphasized that medical expenses are the No. 1 cause of deep financial trouble. *I think this is the single most valuable piece of advice I have heard through the years.*

*COBRA* is the first line of defense after a layoff, but it's expensive. As an option, try to get added to your spouse's group plan or obtain health insurance through a professional association such as SPJ. SPJ offers discounts to its members but not group plans. Another possibility is "gap" insurance, a temporary solution that covers catastrophic events but not pre-existing conditions. Those who figure they will be self-employed for a while might consider individual policies, which will have high deductibles. The last resort, for the very ill and those who have used up *COBRA* coverage, is the Texas high-risk pool. If you live in Tarrant County, you can look into signing up with the JPS Connects program, which is income-based. Lots of musicians and freelancers that I know are part of it.

*Experts warn that you should carefully read insurance contracts to make sure that pre-existing conditions are covered and that loopholes don't lurk in the fine print.*

### FINANCIAL

Don't panic, but don't be Pollyanna's. You may think you've got a nice cushion in the bank, but remember that you may be out of work longer than you think. A few years ago, the rule of thumb was that for every \$10,000 you were earning, it takes about a month to find a new job. So—take the time to sit down and make a realistic plan with options. Financially, the name of the game is to conserve cash and maintain cash flow.

So, don't use a lump sum severance to pay off a car note or a credit card balance. Instead, just pay what you need to each month in order to keep those accounts current. Apply for unemployment. Think about boosting

your insurance deductible. Immediately sit down and plan what you can do to trim spending, especially credit card spending. If you're trying to survive by putting basic expenses on a card, it's a losing proposition.

Consider part-time or far-from-perfect jobs in the interim. That can be invaluable in keeping things together until you find the new job that you can live with long term.

If you've got kids in college, right now is the time to have a come-to-Jesus talk. Help your students look for more financial aid or for a part-time job. Introduce them to the joys of public transportation.

Making a staged financial plan is invaluable at this stage—what will you need to do if you have not found a new job in two months? Three months? Six months? One of our experts suggested making a list of what you own that can be sold, list your fixed (as opposed to discretionary) spending, then list what moves you can make to cut or postpone expenditures, what can be done to bring income in—and then prioritizing the crisis. For instance, he said: *Selling a second vehicle might be an option in the second or third month of unemployment. Think creatively about what can be done to extend the time when you to do something drastic such as sell the house. Borrowing against assets—against a 401K or via a home equity loan—is a more severe option that should be considered probably in the third, fourth or fifth month of unemployment. Borrowing on a credit card is a very dangerous move to consider at all. And bankruptcy should be a very last consideration. “Don't think of it as an option---it's not a short or long term answer,” according to our financial experts.*

Checking your credit rating is crucial during this period since potential employers may be doing the same thing, and it may sway their hiring decisions. Individuals may check their credit reports for free, once a year. The three major credit reporting companies each show different things—check all three. You can dispute inaccuracies online.

## **JOB SEARCH**

This is not the time to crawl in a hole and lick your wounds, as much as you might want to. **Energetic networking is the key to getting hired again. Go immediately and start renewing old acquaintances.** Put together a resume. You have to be aggressive, like a good journalist.

Many of our panelists have advised that investing time, energy and, where possible, money in adding skills can be important. “Be fearless—try anything—learn anything,” one panelist said. To learn how to do something, she suggested, first do it for someone as a volunteer.

**And—this is key—understand that the skills you have as a journalist are very much in demand in other industries—perhaps at even higher pay and with better working conditions.**

**Gayle Reaves-King:** *“I’ve been active in SPJ for about a decade, and the reason I’ve stayed with it, bottom line, is the help that we provide to journalists—whether it’s training, networking opportunities, or programs such as this—down-to-earth whether-the-rubber-hits-the-road help. You don’t get much more basic than these layoff sessions, which SPJ has now done four for five times in the last several years—free to attendees.”*

The other part of the equation if that, as we all know, even before the layoffs started, most news organizations stopped years ago in doing any investing in their workers—no training, no professional membership dues. *I think the lesson here is that, whatever is going to be done to help journalists survive and thrive, we are going to have to do ourselves. Not the bosses. Not some generous, philanthropic company. Us. And what journalists do is vitally important to this country. So, that’s why I think organizations such as SPJ continue to be so important. They provide mentoring, networking, skills training and moral support.*

*A lot of us don’t think of ourselves as joiners. That’s great. But think of farmers in this country, who are mostly cussed independents, never wanting to join together in a common cause. And think who holds the power in the food industry these days, and who is fat and happy—it’s not the farmers. If you stay in any part of this business, groups such as SPJ are invaluable!*

For those determined to stay in the business one way or another:

Barbara Ehrenreich told a college graduating class recently about how she pitched a story to a well-known newspaper. The newspaper bit but for only a fourth of the amount it would have paid just a few years ago. She was bothered, but then she had an epiphany: *She’s on a mission, and she will do whatever it takes.*

The recession, Ehrenreich said, is showing journalists that they are not part of the elite but of the working class—underpaid, jerked around and liable to be laid off just like an auto worker or mechanic. But a laid-off auto worker, she said, doesn’t go to the garage and keep assembling cars by hand—journalists do. As long as there is a story to be told or an injustice to be exposed, she said, journalists will find a way to do it, recession or not. Because we are all on a mission. Our journalism degree isn’t a certificate of entitlement—it’s a license to fight.