

Jobless stigma lingers in working world

 theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/career-advice/life-at-work/jobless-stigma-lingers-in-working-world/article13816119

16 August 2013



Leah Eichler >

Special to The Globe and Mail

Published August 16, 2013

Losing a job can be a traumatic experience. When my first contract role ended while working in Jerusalem in my early twenties, I quickly created new business cards, called myself a freelancer and started knocking on the doors of editors I met in the area. One asked where I currently worked and when I explained I was freelance, he retorted, "So, you're unemployed." The description stung.

But that was more than 15 years ago and with the changing landscape in the work force, the stigma of unemployment should be a thing of the past. Canada lost nearly 40,000 jobs in July, only two months after a record number of job gains, indicating that volatility is the new normal.

In the United States, employers added 162,000 jobs last month, a number most experts feel wasn't good enough. So why aren't we declaring a "no-commitment" era in the working world, in which employees and employer acknowledge that we aren't in it for the long haul? That would go a long way toward dispelling the stigma of unemployment.

"In the old days, unemployment was equated with failure and blame fell squarely on the individual who 'couldn't hold a job,'" said Helen Giffen, president of HG Communications in Toronto, a consulting firm that specializes in human resources strategy and communication.

"Today, with organizations in constant transition, most people have had either a direct or indirect experience of seeing someone leave their job without another to go to," she said.

Yet when questions about employment history arise, Ms. Giffen acknowledged that it can feel like there is a stigma attached to being out of work.

Most of the professionals who told me about their unemployment experiences agreed to do so only on condition of anonymity, indicating that we haven't overcome that stigma. Yet.

"In the few interviews that I have had, the tone of the interviewer's voice changes in a negative way when they ask me if I am currently unemployed," said Jaime, a public policy researcher in Washington, D.C.

Laura, who just started a two-year contract as a director of finance and infrastructure for a not-for-profit organization in Toronto, likened her recent bout of unemployment to a close family member dying.

"I remember being overwhelmed with emotion when I entered the office building after being packaged ...Some people would greet you while others would scurry by not wanting to make eye contact," she recalled.

As an HR professional, Michel in Quebec said he understands why hiring managers skim over the résumés of the unemployed – with more applications than jobs it's an easy way weed through applicants quickly. He felt the struggles of unemployment first hand after losing his job last December. One role he applied for required applicants to have had no more than two jobs in 10 years, ruling out candidates who were a casualty of downsizing or bankruptcies. He counted himself lucky to find a new role in five months.

And, unfortunately, the sting of unemployment grows more pronounced as we age.

"Having a graduation date on your professional profile that places you in your fifties does carry a much greater stigma than someone in their early thirties, and job seekers need to recognize that this stigma exists," said Lisa Taylor, president of Toronto-based Challenge Factory, which offers career programs for the over-50 work force.

She suggests that older job seekers focus on employers who will value their experience. "Your job-search approach, and the people supporting you, need to recognize that there are specific sectors, employers and positions that value age and experience, and there are other companies that unfortunately don't. Work where you are valued," she said.

Suzen Fromstein agreed that finding herself unemployed at 55 hurt her career opportunities. By 59, the Torontonians gave up applying for full-time employment. To cope, she kept herself busy researching what successful professionals felt was required to maintain their role. The result is her newly published e-book, *Suits and Ladders*. Ms. Fromstein now focuses full-time on writing and speaking engagements.

Reframing your unemployment as something positive may be the key to managing the way others view your status. "Your perception will influence what you say and how you say it. Describe the circumstances simply and factually. Then move on quickly to the juicy part – how you're using this opportunity to enhance your life," Ms. Giffen said.

You can discuss how you're using your time to rethink your interests, enjoy a holiday, explore new opportunities or reconnect with family.

"The moment someone hears that you may actually be enjoying this situation – or at least benefiting from it – stigma turns to envy and even admiration," she said.

Leah Eichler is founder of [Femme-o-Nomics](#), a networking and content portal for professional women and [r/ally](#), a mobile collaboration app.

E-mail: leah.eichler@femme-o-nomics.com Twitter: [@femmeconomics](#)