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How to Update Your Job Skills While Unemployed

By **DAWN FALLIK**

Out of work for months? Prevent your professional skills from atrophying by taking steps to brush up.

In July, five million people in the U.S. were considered long-term unemployed—meaning they had been jobless for 27 weeks or more. Career counselors say that as weeks turn into months, job-hunters need to polish and update their skills to stay current. They should look for ways to network while they do so, and avoid spending lots of money. "You want to get the biggest bang for your buck," says J.T. O'Donnell, a career coach in North Hampton, N.H.

Here are some strategies:

- **Stay connected to industry associations.** Check out your membership rights with trade groups or unions. Many times, you can continue your membership for free or at a reduced rate if you're out of work. "That means you get booklets, magazines, all the information that will help keep you up to date with what's going on," says Gerry Crispin, co-founder CareerXroads, a Kendall Park, N.J., consulting firm that helps companies recruit.
- **Hit conferences.** Attend industry or professional conferences by checking out association Web sites and groups on social media sites like Facebook. Often, associations will waive or reduce conference fees for members, or for those who are unemployed.
- **Join local interest groups.** Local organizations like the chamber of commerce provide good networking opportunities and sometimes offer skills classes. Offer to help run the program committee, which sets the agenda for speakers and events. You'll get a say in who is invited and network with guests.
- **Take classes—in person.** Taking an online class is easy, but it eliminates that face-to-face networking that often lands jobs and opens doors, says Ms. O'Donnell. "You need something where you physically show up," she says.
- **Consider entry-level coursework.** One of Ms. O'Donnell's clients was laid off from a project management job in banking. He wanted to become a project manager at a software company, but didn't know the lingo. He took a basic Web design class; his younger classmates taught him industry terminology. "He came back so excited about learning a new industry and was much better prepared for interviews," she says.
- **Add advanced skills.** Getting a certification can boost your resume. Auditing a high-level class at a local college can improve skills and help you keep up with new developments. Check colleges to see if they offer free or discounted rates for unemployed people.
- **See what training programs your state offers to the unemployed.** New Jersey offers grants for non-degree business classes at Rutgers University as well as free community college classes if there are open seats.
- In Michigan, the state's "No Worker Left Behind" program offers up to two years' worth of free tuition in the state university system for unemployed and underemployed workers.
- **Write about your industry and connect more online.** Start a blog about your industry. Or find five people you always wanted to interview and write an article for a local publication or industry blog. That way you keep your name out there, make new connections and continue to learn, Ms. O'Donnell says.