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Dallas-area coaches help jobless baby boomers work out frustrations, new careers

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After he was laid off from his banking job in December, John Halliburton asked himself what he wanted to do with the rest of his working life. Before he could apply for another job or even write a résumé, the 57-year-old Allen resident knew he had to answer that basic question.

That's when he met Jill Pfaff Waterbury, a career counselor in Coppell who helped him repair his damaged self-esteem and size up his professional strengths and personal interests. With her coaching, he concluded he has a future as a consultant to investors who buy troubled bank assets.

The recession has turned into a boom for career counselors like Waterbury. Many clients are older than 50 and have spent their entire working lives within a single industry. Unemployed for the first time in years, they wonder what they can do next and who will hire them.



MICHAEL MULVEY/DMN
'You have to know yourself before you can identify the right career,' says job counselor Helen Harkness, who is working with David Leonnig on career objectives.



MATT NAGER/Special Contributor
John Halliburton of Allen says career counselor Jill Pfaff Waterbury helped him get over bitterness and move on after he lost his job in banking.

Halliburton is now devoting 35 to 50 hours a week to his quest for work.

"Thanks to Jill, I've gotten over my bitterness and moved on," he said. "I have a plan for the next stage of my life, and I'm finally able to get a good night's sleep."

"This recession is different from others. It's much broader than the tech bust, and it's reached deep into the ranks of longtime employees," said Waterbury, who counsels at an outplacement company, advises individual clients and teaches a job-search course at Richland College.

Laid-off workers in their 50s or early 60s who might have retired in previous downturns don't have that option this time because the severance packages are smaller and the market has sliced their nest eggs in half, she said. But they also doubt they'll find another job like the one they had.

Many of the newly unemployed come from shrinking industries, Waterbury said, so they can't just jump to a competitor and do the same work. Instead, they must figure out how to apply their skills in a new industry or completely reinvent themselves.

How it works

Downsized employees hire a career counselor on their own or get the help through an outplacement benefit paid by their former employer. The coaching typically takes place in one-on-one sessions or group workshops over several months.

Counselors say their first task is often to help clients work through their emotions. Some are in denial and think they'll soon be rehired by their old company. Others are paralyzed with fear that they won't land a decent-paying job. Still others are angry at the way they were let go.

Dallas career coach Pam Venne recommends keeping a journal to vent.

"Put your thoughts in writing for 20 minutes a day for 20 straight days," she said. "You've got to clear your mind before you can represent yourself well to potential employers."

Venne, principal of the Venne Group, also helps clients in their 50s and early 60s overcome their anxiety about age.

"If you believe you're too old to try something, you've already defeated yourself," she said. "How you think of yourself will help determine how others see you."

Job counselor Helen Harkness tackles her clients' fears of age discrimination head-on. She asks them what they'd like to do if they were 20 years younger. Then she challenges them to pursue it.

"Boomers are living as though they've shaved 20 years off their age," she said. "Chronological ages don't matter anymore."

Harkness lives what she preaches. She started her business, Career Design Associates in Garland, at midlife and continues to run it long past the traditional retirement age. She's counseled more than 6,000 clients in the past 30 years.

Career coaches usually put clients through a battery of self-assessment tests to discover their interests, skills and strengths.

"You have to know yourself before you can identify the right career," Harkness said. "I ask my clients to look inward before they look outward."

Counselors recommend that their clients get feedback from friends and relatives, too.

"Sometimes, friends can help you sort through all of your interests and find your passions," Venne said. "Brainstorm with eight to 10 friends. They may tell you something you haven't realized about yourself."

Chasing dreams

Ron DeFate, 57, of Richardson left a 23-year career in retailing last year for what he hopes will be a more satisfying livelihood as an instructor or corporate trainer. He decided on his next career after volunteering as an instructor for a nonprofit organization.

"Others told me that I have a knack for speaking in front of groups, so that's the kind of job I'm trying to find," he said. DeFate says his visits with a career counselor confirmed his decision to chase his dream

and reinvent himself.

Waterbury says an important part of a counselor's job is to help clients research whether there's a demand for their personal interests and skills.

"It's not enough to settle on what you want to do. You've got to know who might pay you for it," she said.

Gary Foreman, 52, of Dallas called on Harkness after he was laid off as a sales executive for a musical instrument company. After evaluating his strengths, Harkness advised him to stick with sales but to switch to an industry that's growing.

"Helen found that my talent is in building strong business relationships," he said. "I just needed to use it somewhere that had a brighter future."

Foreman recently joined a company that designs Web sites.

Anyone wanting to hire a career counselor should check for professional credentials, since the booming field has attracted some practitioners with little or no training, said Deneen Pennington, executive director of the National Career Development Association.

"Be careful of anyone who promises quick results. Ask for references. And don't forget to inquire about fees," she said.

The association's Web site, www.ncda.org, gives advice on how and where to find a coach.

Some career counselors charge by the hour. In the Dallas area, fees average \$75 to \$150 an hour. Other counselors bundle their services and charge a flat rate of several hundred dollars or, for high-level executives, several thousand dollars.

Clients say they value their career coaches not just for the practical advice but also for the pep talks they hear on those days when the world seems to have turned against them.

"It's like working with a personal trainer," said Mimi Crabtree, 54, of Dallas, who routinely calls and exchanges e-mail with Waterbury for help with her career search. "She keeps pushing me a step beyond where I think I'm capable of going."

Meanwhile, Waterbury says she and her counseling colleagues have found a way to pump themselves up. Whenever one of their clients lands a job, they send each other an e-mail to celebrate.

"We like to remind ourselves that despite all the gloomy news, people are still getting hired. There are indeed happy endings to our clients' stories."