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From layoff to payoff: Bouncing back after being fired

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It was June 2001 and Ann Middleman could see the writing on the wall.

The dot-com bubble had burst and the Manhattan PR firm for which she worked was losing clients and hemorrhaging money. At a companywide meeting, Middleman turned to her friend and told her, "Well, I'm gone. I'm making more money than anyone in the department."

Within three weeks, Middleman was laid off from her job as vice president of research. She was 54 years old.

At first she looked for a job with another company. When she met with an executive search firm, she was told, "The client is not interested in meeting with you." It was then that it hit. "I'm too old," she thought. "They want a 30-year-old MBA in a miniskirt."

Middleman began attending meetings of the International Association of Business Communicators. She met an advertising executive who asked her to accompany him on a sales call. When he got the account based on Middleman's ability to conduct customer surveys, Middleman was in business. In 2002, she formed ADM Marketing and Research Consulting, based in Westbury.

Middleman said her business has been a big success. Today, she said, she's making more money than she did when she had her corporate job, and she couldn't be happier.

"On a scale of 1 to 10, my job satisfaction is an 11," she said. "I make more, I work my own hours, and I enjoy life more."

But the difficulty Middleman faced in finding another job after being laid off in her mid-50s is not unusual. Losing a job after age 50 is one of many workers' greatest fears. Even as employment among workers 55 and older is hitting new highs - 25.6 million employed in June - workers 55 and older make up an increasingly large percentage of large-scale layoffs, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Moreover, it typically takes workers older than 50 about 15 percent longer to land a new job - an average of 3.8 months versus 3.3 months for all job seekers, according to data provided by Chicago outplacement firm Challenger Gray & Christmas.

"Regardless of the laws against age discrimination or what anyone says, ageism is rampant," said Michael Kirby, a career consultant and entrepreneur in Boynton Beach, Fla. Kirby, 66, has been laid off twice in the past 12 years.

Kirby cautions his middle-age clients who have been laid off not to expect to find a similar-paying job. He often ends up counseling clients to consider "something entrepreneurial," such as starting their own business, buying a business or going into consulting.

In fact, people who are 55 or older are riding a virtual tsunami of entrepreneurship. Between 2000 and 2006, the number of self-employed individuals 55 to 64 soared 33 percent, from 1.4 million to 1.9 million people, according to BLS data provided by Challenger Gray & Christmas. That's a far higher rate of growth than any other age group. The second-fastest growth rate among self-employed people was individuals older than 65.

"A lot of people at this age are choosing self-employment because they want a balance between work and lifestyle," said John Challenger, chief executive of the firm. "You're less encumbered, as often the heavy family-raising costs are out of the way, and you have more flexibility," he said.

Landing on your feet

Moreover, people who are laid off late in their careers have an advantage - a track record and connections. "People know you, you have a reputation, and unless your industry disappears, you have a network that you can use to bounce back," said Laurence Shatkin, co-author of "225 Best Jobs for Baby Boomers."

Relying on those connections to kick-start a business is an effective path for landing on your feet. For two years, after being laid off at age 55 as a senior vice president for a New York City public relations firm, Barry Zusman, a public relations counselor in Huntington, worked for his former employer. At the same time, he looked for another corporate job. Finally, in 2003, Zusman gave up on the job hunt. "I realized it would be difficult for me to be hired because I was perceived as too senior," he said. "I decided to hang up my own shingle as The Zusman Co."

Almost four years into his new business, Zusman is making about half as much money as he made in his former job. "I'm OK with that," he said. His daughter is out of college and the mortgage is almost paid off.

Moreover, he is proud of what he has built. "It's a successful business. I've made money every year," he said. Zusman noted that if he wants to work on his boat,

which he keeps in Huntington Harbor, he can do that. "As long as the material I submit is on time and well written, it doesn't matter," he said.

Another common path for people laid off late in their careers is to take skills learned in the corporate world and transfer them to clients on a consulting basis. For 20 years, Nancy Rasmussen worked at NEC USA in Melville. By the time she lost her job in 2002, she was 60 years old and director of corporate sponsorship and events.

Rasmussen went through a handful of interviews before deciding to form her own business. "I had so much experience and knowledge from the corporate world, I felt I could better use my talents by sharing them with small to mid-sized businesses," she said.

Today, Rasmussen is an event-planning consultant and the owner of Expert Events of Smithtown. Among her events this year will be the 12th Annual Port Jefferson Village Charles Dickens Festival in late November-early December.

Like Zusman, Rasmussen admits she's not making as much money as she did in the corporate world. "I make probably 40 percent less," she said. But she says that's acceptable. "Where my true passion lies is in helping smaller companies and nonprofits get recognition and new clients," she said.

Landing on your feet after being laid off in middle age often takes creativity. Lisa Renee Pomerantz, 51, is an attorney based in Sayville. In April 2003, after 15 years, she, too, was laid off from NEC USA. Pomerantz was 46 and a senior corporate counsel.

Pomerantz approached a number of Long Island-based corporations to see if she could get another corporate job, but had no luck. "I had more seniority and experience than the people I was interviewing with," she noted.

After landing a consulting job writing online legal training courses for a year, Pomerantz set out in 2005 to redefine the relationship between attorneys and their clients. "Most people use attorneys to accomplish a goal, but I saw myself in an ongoing advisory role," she said. Her concept took off when she stepped up her public speaking on topics such as intellectual property.

Job satisfaction

Pomerantz has almost two dozen clients, many of them involved in innovative or high-tech businesses. Among her tasks is to make sure her clients own the intellectual property behind their ideas and help them set up business partnerships. "I have tremendous job satisfaction," she said. As far as the money

is concerned, while she has not achieved a six-figure income again, she expects that will happen in the next 12 months.

A path that is a bit more risky is to try to meld one's passion with one's experience. That's what Karen Ferraro, a wellness adviser, has done. Ferraro trains people to build home-based marketing businesses through Arbonne International, which sells herbal and botanical skin- and body-care products. She also gives workshops on feng shui, reiki and other methods of improving mental, physical and spiritual wellness.

Ferraro had been devastated when she was laid off in 2003 as vice president of marketing for a North Carolina-based software company. She was 51, and she and her husband had moved to North Carolina from Long Island for the job.

Ferraro immediately launched into an intense period of "personal healing." Her bookshelves became crammed with books on holistic health and well-being and personal growth and development. While she went on interviews and the temptation was great to go for the steady paycheck, she realized she wanted to go in a new direction.

In 2004, Ferraro and her husband moved back to Long Island, where she did marketing consulting for universities, technology companies and businesses involved in health and wellness, including Arbonne International. Later that year, she went into business as Wellness Expressions, based in Bellport.

Ferraro said her multifaceted business generates about \$200,000 a year in revenues. "Sometimes I pinch myself because this is not work for me. I feel fulfilled," she said.

Those who are happy with their second careers cite several factors as key to success. One is flexibility. Zusman noted that he had always considered himself a senior executive, but when he went into business for himself, he realized he'd have to roll up his sleeves and be a "worker bee" again. "You can't cling to what you had in the past," he said. "I'm a skilled PR practitioner, not a senior level PR executive."

Another key lesson successful entrepreneurs have learned is the importance of marketing their businesses. "Long Island is great for speaking and networking," noted Deborah Brown-Volkman, an East Moriches-based career coach and author of "Four Steps to Building a Profitable Business." There are many networking groups, professional organizations and chambers of commerce that can provide a forum to get your business in front of people, she said.

"It's job No. 1 in order to bring in business," said Zusman, who credits Business

Network International for bringing in key clients.

Event organizer Rasmussen got the Dickens festival job by attending a meeting of the Suffolk County Women's Business Enterprise Coalition. "I met one of the village trustees who owns a business in town. I had an interview that afternoon and within a week I got the contract," she said.

Reinforcing your usefulness

Another good way to grow your business is by public speaking. Attorney Pomerantz's business took off when she stepped up her speaking engagements. She presented workshops to the Long Island Association, the business and civic organization; and the Small Business Development centers at Farmingdale and Stony Brook. She still schedules at least one speaking engagement a month.

Pomerantz and Middleman also are big proponents of writing. Pomerantz produces an electronic monthly newsletter on topics that reinforce her usefulness to existing clients and helps them refer her to new clients. The newsletter also helps publicize her speaking engagements.

Middleman said writing about topics that touch on one's business can help raise your profile.

Another key factor in success is being current on technology. That may mean taking night classes to learn Microsoft PowerPoint for presentations. Middleman routinely hands out flash drives with her logo and a brief PowerPoint presentation on her business.

Of course, not everyone is happy being a consultant or entrepreneur. The fact is that on your own, it's tough to make what you made in the corporate world. "There often are just too many holes between assignments," Challenger noted.

David Wollos became a consultant 13 years ago, after he was laid off from his job as senior vice president for distribution and sales for a New York production company. The David Wollos Co., based in Merrick, takes children's entertainment properties and develops new media outlets.

Wollos said he would like the financial security of a corporate job, but added that companies he does business with do not employ people his age. "If you go to Nickelodeon or MTV, there are not too many people there over the age of 35," he said. "In this business, people want to work with me in a consulting relationship."

Being laid off in your 50s is never easy, and unfortunately, it's not uncommon.

"It's not necessarily you. This happens to a lot of people these days," said Kirby. The key is to keep a positive and open mind. "It can be devastating," said Rasmussen, "but it can create wonderful new opportunities as well."

What it takes to run your own business

Here are some of the characteristics experts say you should have to be an entrepreneur:

A willingness to sell or market yourself. Someone who goes into business for himself or herself needs to be comfortable going to potential clients. You have to bring in new projects and assignments. "And, while a lot of people are afraid of marketing and selling," said Deborah Brown-Volkman, a career coach and the author of "Coach Yourself to a New Career," "it's a skill you can learn online, through books or in a course."

A financial cushion. If you need income right away, now is not the time to launch your own business - it's time to get another job, said Brown-Volkman. And, if you have savings, be prepared to dip into those savings to get your business off the ground.

A solid track record. One common mistake people make is to venture into new fields in which they have no experience. Stick with what you know and take advantage of your connections, said John Challenger, chief executive of Challenger

Gray & Christmas Inc., a Chicago-based outplacement firm.

Commitment and energy. You need to be prepared for both, said Challenger. Luckily, "energywise, 55 is the new 40," he said.

One final piece of advice: When they get laid off late in their career, many people spend time toying with the idea of retirement. "Don't waste time," said Challenger. "The key is to move quickly." Otherwise, you feed the perception you're not really committed to working. If you are interested in starting your own business, your connections and networks will still be fresh.