

The Long-Term Unemployed: How to Make Sure You Are Not Overlooking Skilled Talent



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IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE ECONOMIC DOWNTURN, there are over 4 million Americans who have been out of work for six months or longer. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, nearly 40 percent of the total unemployed population is now long-term unemployed, a historic high. Though individuals of all ages have been affected in the current recession, younger workers have been about as likely as prime-age workers to find employment, whereas older workers have been the least likely to find jobs.

HR professionals have long recognized the benefits of seeking out the talents, experience and skills from all segments of the population to build their workforce. Yet studies have shown that long-term unemployed job applicants are often overlooked and sometimes excluded from job opportunities. Recruiters, HR and hiring managers, eager to avoid the costs of making a bad hiring decision, typically identify potential red flags in résumés, including long gaps in employment.

Nearly a quarter of Americans say they were laid off at some point during the recession, and 80 percent know someone in their circle of family and friends who has lost a job during this time period. As these statistics suggest, in the current challenging economic times, many of the long-term unemployed are out of work for reasons beyond their control. Consequently, an employment gap has less bearing on an applicant's qualifications or probability for success. In addition, the new generation of workers and current workplace trends are resulting in shorter tenure for employees. In fact, the median tenure for workers age 55 and over is more than three times the median tenure for workers ages 25 to 34. Younger workers are also more likely to leave a job before finding a new one. Increasingly, the best hiring strategy is to consider a broad variety of qualified candidates.

This guide offers basic steps HR professionals can take to ensure that recruiting and hiring practices do not intentionally or inadvertently disadvantage individuals from being considered for a job based solely on unemployment status.

Step 1: Refocus Your Recruitment Mindset

THE EMPLOYMENT LANDSCAPE IS DIFFERENT TODAY due to both economic changes and demographic shifts resulting in a need to reconsider the skills and contributions of the long-term unemployed. Recruitment suggestions include the following:

- When reviewing résumés and job applications, focus on the knowledge, skills and abilities you seek for the position. In particular, older workers tend to be unemployed longer and yet possess years of experience, job knowledge and polished skills. Rather than setting aside those résumés with employment gaps, analyze the skills and experience obtained through a previous job or through other experience described on the résumé, and include all qualified applicants in the next round of interviews.
- Do not assume that candidates are overqualified. It is important to realize that many of those who have been out of work for a long time have reevaluated what they want to do and are more than willing to take a lower salary or position to work in a new environment or new type of job.
- Recognize other nontangible skills that the long-term unemployed may possess, such as drive, loyalty, a desire to succeed and a sense of purpose.

Step 2: Review Hiring Procedures

IN ADDITION TO LOOKING CRITICALLY at how you review résumés, examining hiring procedures will help ensure your organization is applying appropriate recruitment strategies. Research reveals three main ways that organizations are sharpening their recruitment strategies to reduce the risk of disadvantaging the long-term unemployed:

- Focus job advertisements on the desired knowledge, skills and abilities for the particular job. Advertisements should encourage all applicants to apply and should not include any statement prohibiting or discouraging the long-term unemployed from applying.
- Periodically review your human resource information system or electronic application software to make sure you are searching for relevant information and not inadvertently screening out résumés based on gaps in employment.
- Ensure that qualified job candidates are provided an opportunity to explain gaps in employment. Understanding the reason for a gap in employment is more critical now than ever.

Step 3: Train Your Hiring Teams

AFTER REVIEWING HIRING PROCEDURES, recruiters, HR and hiring managers should understand how to review résumés and not overlook applications based solely on gaps in employment. With the current skills gap and competition for the best talent, HR professionals cannot afford to overlook potential candidates based on assumptions about applicants' employment history.

Step 4: Create or Expand Training Programs

OFFERING A TRAINING PROGRAM OR TEMPORARY POSITIONS can be a good way to recruit and train candidates. Employers can establish or grow current training or short-term employment programs by including a specified number of slots for unemployed adults.

By including people experiencing long-term unemployment in your programs, you will have an opportunity to assess their skills, work ethic, cultural fit and other factors that employers look for in a candidate before you move toward a permanent hire. Today many more unemployed adults are eager to prove themselves in the workplace or explore a new field of work. This approach allows both the employer and the candidate to determine whether the job is a good fit.

Step 5: Network with Resources in Your Community

EMPLOYERS MAY DISCOVER AN UNDERUSED POOL OF TALENT by actively seeking out the long-term unemployed and linking with community resources. Some ideas include:

- Host an open house or informational event at your worksite inviting long-term unemployed job seekers to learn more about your organization and giving you an opportunity to talk with them in a more relaxed setting. These programs have the added benefit of raising your organization's profile in the community.
- Create partnerships with local academic institutions and other training programs such as schools of continuing studies and certificate programs. Partnering with a local education institution is a great way to meet potential applicants. These partnerships have the benefit of providing an employer with an applicant pool that is gaining the skills employers need. If you want even stronger applicants from these institutions, provide the program with materials, examples or case studies from your organization. This will result in candidates who are more knowledgeable about

and a better fit for your company. The more information you provide, the better suited the programs will be to address your needs, and the better the candidates will be for your organization.

- Reach out to your local **CareerOneStop centers**. These government-based employment programs serve all types of businesses and job seekers, including unemployed youth and veterans. They may be sources of good candidates with recent training acquired through their programs.
- Learn about local nonprofit organizations serving the long-term unemployed. New organizations are developing in many communities to help match job seekers with employers. The programs are as varied as the communities they serve and can be researched online. A sampling of these organizations includes:
 - » **Platform to Employment (P2E)**, a five-week boot camp that focuses on both skills development and emotional support. Based in Bridgeport, Conn., it has expanded to many other locations, including Chicago, Cincinnati and San Diego.
 - » **Neighbors-helping-Neighbors**, a volunteer-led organization where workers help each other network and reinvigorate their careers with meeting locations across New Jersey and expanding to other states.
 - » **LA Fellows Program**, which places qualified middle managers in struggling local nonprofits in the Los Angeles area.



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