

'Sorry, you're overqualified'

Sunday, February 22, 2009 3:33 AM

BY STEVE WARTENBERG

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH



COURTNEY HERGESHEIMERDISPATCH

Gail Patrick, 54, worked at the Legal Aid Society of Columbus for 30 years -- until she was laid off Dec. 31. Now she's hunting for a new job.

It can't happen to me.

While jobs disappear right and left, some people steadfastly believe that *their* job won't. This is especially true of educated, experienced, successful professionals in the midst of lengthy tenures at their company.

Gail Patrick was one of them.

"I had a false sense of job security," said Patrick, 54, a Columbus resident and lawyer with a wide range of marketable skills.

Dec. 31 was her last day at the Legal Aid Society of Columbus, where she worked for 30 years in several capacities, most recently as director of administrative services.

"You think your job is secure, and then you find out it's not," Patrick said.

She unexpectedly found herself on the growing list of successful professionals now looking for a job.

Nobody is immune to a layoff in the midst of a devastating recession. When it happens, many must re-evaluate their career and consider positions with less responsibility and smaller paychecks.

These "overqualified" people are now competing for a shrinking number of high-paying jobs.

"I was living the dream. My childhood dream came true," Patrick said. "Now, I'm living the new American reality."

About 40 people living this new reality, including Patrick, gather weekly in the Columbus office of Jewish Family Services. They are

part of the nonprofit organization's Strategic Utilization of Career Centered Support Services (SUCCESS) program.

It provides free assistance for professionals who have been laid off. They get help with cover-letter and resume writing, networking, job searching and polishing interview skills. The participants also serve as a support group for one another.

"These are educated, successful people who made \$35,000 or more and were laid off through no fault of their own," said Karen Hughes, coordinator of the program.

The group includes software developers, accountants, bankers, marketing experts, distribution managers and human-resources specialists. Despite their shared bond of unemployment, the members seem upbeat and optimistic -- and determined.

At the start of each meeting, each person describes a recent job-related success, anything from updating a resume to securing an interview.

"It helps a lot," said Graham Pelle, a Dublin resident. "It helps with networking and also realizing you're not the only one out there dealing with it."

He was director of merchandise planning and control for Value City Department Stores, which declared bankruptcy in October and closed its stores two months later.

"The retail climate is challenging. Companies are cutting back and laying off and not filling positions," he said.

Patrick agreed, saying a job paying less than she used to make is a possibility.

"But I worked in nonprofits for 30 years, so I'm not used to a big paycheck and that makes it easier."

The SUCCESS program, in its third year, has grown each year. About 150 people are enrolled.

During the first year, Hughes said, participants took an average of three to six months to find a job.

It's now up to six to nine months, a long time to go without a paycheck.

Heather Allen of the Columbus office of Manpower, an employment and human-resources company, said, "We're seeing a significant increase in the number of people applying for positions, and we're seeing people who are totally overqualified applying for jobs."

Some employers are reluctant to hire overqualified candidates, thinking they will continue to look for a better-paying job. "As soon as the economy turns around, you stand a chance of losing them," Allen said.

Pelle is aware of this concern from potential employers.

"If they ask if I'll keep looking for a job, I'll say no -- and it's the truth," he said. "Throughout my career, I've been a very loyal guy."

Dealing with day-to-day financial needs is another problem for members of SUCCESS.

Patrick no longer eats out, goes to the movies, or buys new clothes since her layoff and has put off going to the dentist and buying new glasses.

Expensive imported tea was her biggest indulgence, but now she drinks Lipton and saves \$40 a month.

Pelle, who said his nest egg could last a year if he is careful, is eligible for COBRA health insurance, a federal program that provides 18 months of coverage for those who lose their jobs.

The catch is the price: about \$1,100 a month for his family, which is more than he can afford. "I'm more worried about the kids," he said. "If it's just normal doctor visits, we can afford it. But if it's something major ... "

His wife went back to work, at a health club, but is not eligible for health insurance.

Despite the obstacles, Pelle is optimistic. He has had two job interviews.

"I'm a pretty 'up' type," he said. "I don't get depressed, and I look at the positive side of things."

Patrick also has a positive attitude.

"My passion is to find a job where I can use all the different skills I have to help make Columbus better," she said and then ticked off her experience, which includes client representation, management, teaching and training, community relations and finances.

Patrick thinks networking is the key to finding a job.

"I've talked to everyone I know, 100 people -- everyone I've worked with, everyone at every place where I ever gave a speech, even my barber," she said. "I started handing out my resume to them and have six different people who send me e-mail blasts of openings I might want to pursue."

Being in her 50s could be an issue for potential employers, Patrick said.

"Age is always a factor," she said, though she has developed a strategy to turn this into a positive.

"I explain the value of all the experiences and knowledge I have that I didn't have when I was 30. You have to show the evolution of your skills and how much you can bring to the company."

swartenberg@dispatch.com