



REBOUND

A Proven Plan
for Starting Over
After Job Loss

MARTHA I. FINNEY

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Preface

We're all human. And because we're all human, we share the habit of marking the moments that change our lives forever. The majority of those moments are cause for celebration (or at least track predictably along what we consider to be nature's plan): births, birthdays, graduations, weddings, babies, grandbabies, even the gentle, timely passing of dearly loved ones, are all cause for noticing and remembering.

But we also mark the times when everything we took for granted goes to chaos and yet another illusion is shattered. Those can be private tragedies or national catastrophes that rock our world and in a twinkling send us hurtling into the next phase of our lives. From the Baby Boom generation and moving forward into the Y generation, we have more in common than we might think we do. And that is this: We're constantly being reminded that nothing is certain. And, come to find out, promises are made to be broken. Huh, what do you know?

The biggest promise that has been repeatedly broken in the past 30 years has been that the "system" (whatever *that* is) is airtight, foolproof, and self-perpetuating. A net of stability we can depend on if we simply walk the straight and narrow. Follow all the rules, make a plan and stick to it, go to college, pour heart and soul into your job, go above and beyond the call to make yourself indispensable, and you'll be fine. That path leads to security. No? Oh. There goes another illusion.

Of course, every generation has had its share of troubles, and we'd be major babies to whine that we've gotten the raw end of the historic deal. I would choose these times over any prior era right this very moment. No question. However, for me, "these times" began in 1977—six months before I was due to graduate

from college—when my father came home unexpectedly from an assignment abroad. After more than 25 years with the Central Intelligence Agency as an undercover case officer, he was in the middle of teaching a class in Mexico City when a rap on the glass door delivered a pink slip into his astonished hands. *Adios, muchacho*. Or as his students cooperatively called him, Señor Feingold.

From my perspective—self-absorbed and involved with schoolwork—he had merely come home ahead of schedule. But he left for work the very next morning, so nothing otherwise was out of ordinary. I would learn later that he had a meeting with an outplacement counselor his first day back. Incredibly, the counselor observed, “You seem angry, Mr. Finney.” (As if *that* were going to pry open a “cleansing” outpouring of emotions from a guy who kept secrets for a living.) If my dad were a member of a younger generation, he would have said, “Damn straight, I’m pissed.” But instead, he rose to his feet, walked out the door, turning his back on his life’s passion, mission, and calling. Why not? His life’s passion, mission, and calling had turned its back on him.

That happened right after a period when my father was anxiously and responsibly giving me the advice to choose a “recession-proof” career, and that meant—to his loyal way of thinking—a job with the federal government. But, as I was to read later, he was a member of the first of many waves of federal layoffs, called Reduction in Force. Thousands upon thousands of federal employees were to be tossed out of work during the Carter and Reagan administrations. So much for working for the feds. There goes another promise broken.

He spent the next year or so unsuccessfully trying to land another job. (I mean, how transferrable *are* the skills you learn in more than 25 years as a spy? Especially when you can’t actually say what you were doing all those years? Talk about a resumé gap.) After some ridiculous misfires in industrial

security, one of which was as a security guard for a movie about New York thugs, which caused him to become an actual victim of a garden-variety mugging on the deserted Coney Island subway platform (there's little more pitiful than an aging ex-spy with broken glasses and a bloodied nose), he eventually settled down to become an international political consultant with his former boss—who had also been shown the door.

But the moment I will always remember is the moment just weeks after my college graduation when he finally admitted to me that he had actually been laid off. Wait a minute! What? I had heard of layoffs before, of course, but they happened to *other people*—especially people who couldn't keep up with the times, who couldn't nimbly retool themselves fast enough to stay ahead of the axe, people who hadn't taken care of themselves by getting a lot of education, making a plan and sticking to it, going above and beyond the call to make themselves indispensable so that they would be fine. Now this was happening to a dedicated, college-educated, multilingual *genius* (he was my father, after all) who over decades had more than demonstrated his immediate value to his company's mission-critical objectives.

Being my father's daughter, I took the news evenly, with no overt reaction of shock, or any sign of the seismic shift that extended from my brain and down through my body and deep into my own future. But that very moment, I came to the instant understanding that no matter who I worked for, I would always and only be working for myself (a conclusion that 20 years later would be echoed in the title of a book by Cliff Hakim, *We Are All Self-Employed*—or as my father's Mexican students might one day be destined to read in their own round of dismissals, *Todos Somos Autoempleados*).

That was the moment that changed my life forever.

I laid myself off right then and there. Oh, I tried off and on throughout the ensuing years to go legit and get and actually

keep a full-time job. But I kept returning to a truth that I understood at a most cellular level: The system is whack. Every time I depended on one source for my livelihood, I couldn't shake the feeling that my own personal employment crisis was one decision away.

That was also the moment that handed me my own life's assignment—to write about the world of employment. My father's pain became my calling. I have since spent my career, the past 20 years especially, focusing on how people can marry their talents, passion, and sense of personal mission with truly sensible career management. Which puts me in an exquisitely perfect position to be the one to write this book.

At this point, for most of us, the actual concept of layoffs isn't quite the sucker punch it was to my father's generation. My generation and all of you who are younger have been exposed to layoffs, downsizing, rightsizing, and so on, in some way or another. Either your parents faced it, your friends' parents, or your parents' friends. Or your friends. Or you.

Unless you have been completely in denial, you know that there is no such thing as the job-for-life contract. Hasn't been for decades. We come to this new world with the ironic advantage of knowing full well that the axe could fall, completely out of the blue, for no reason whatsoever.

Still, that doesn't make it any easier when it happens to you or the ones you love, does it?

And this time, the lack of control and chaos seem to have ratcheted up several notches. As I write this Preface, the economy is in freefall, and the headline crawl at the bottom of my TV screen has just announced another loss of 240,000 jobs. Layoffs are everywhere, saturating communities or picking off individual households here and there while skipping over entire blocks.

And it's impossible to track the craziness behind rounds of dismissals. Highly educated, high performers, even high producers are being shown the door. You know who you are. You're the one who is educated; you tooled your skillset according to your passions and according to what all the magazines predicted would be the hot careers of the new century. You've been smart, you've been strategic, in every single step and decision you made in the construction of your career, your profession.

You knew your job, you loved your job. And you did it well. The system wasn't supposed to play out like this, was it? But it did. And now here you are, holding this book in your hands. *This book!* Damn!

So what can you hope to get from these pages? A plan of action and understanding into how to build your entire life from here on out.

Getting laid off is more than just a career crisis. It touches every aspect of your life—your finances, certainly, your health, your emotional health, your relationships, your legal considerations, your future, your identity and self-esteem, even the future of your children and their ability to aspire to a happy life.

No one person can cover all this territory. Fortunately, over the past 20 years or so of writing about this stuff, I've made some very smart friends whose collective wisdom will give you the insights you need to take the next steps wisely. This book represents a gathering of some of the best minds in their respective fields. I have reached out to my network, and all my wonderful friends and expert contacts have in turn reached out to their networks. And together, we offer the best wisdom in each of the categories that are changing in your life right now as you try to sort out what's what.

You will also read firsthand experiences of what it was personally like to go through the shock of being laid off. (Their names

have been changed, but their words and stories are real.) Some readers will criticize this collection because each person's story ends on an up note. I chose these people on purpose. This book is not intended to be a "balanced exposé" on how horrible the economy is. You already know that. But what you might not know is that your own laid-off saga can also end on an up note. And my mission is to bring you proof that it's possible for you because it happened to them.

We are here for you within these pages. Here you will find the help, perspective, insights, and wisdom you need to take the next best steps in your life to keep moving forward toward your ultimate dreams.

And hope...here you will find the hope as well.

Are You on the Layoff List?

So many people report that being laid off came as a total surprise. One morning they show up for work as usual. An hour later they're sitting behind their steering wheel stunned, with a box of pictures and books in the backseat.

It's bad enough to lose your job. But to have it take you by surprise is just unfathomable. How can you read the tea leaves on something like this so that it doesn't happen to you? Or so that it doesn't happen to you again?

Here are some signs that you might be on a list of people to be laid off:

- Your company has hit hard times and has publicly announced that it will institute “cost-cutting measures.”
- Your industry sector has taken a dive on Wall Street.
- Your company has been acquired, and there's someone just like you already ensconced in the acquiring company.
- Your company just bought your competitor, and there's someone just like you in the newly acquired company.
- You work for a closely held family business—and you're not family.
- You work for a publicly traded business that prides itself on being “one big happy family.”
- You've been asked to research ways the business can reduce expenses.
- Your otherwise congenial boss starts avoiding you.
- Your otherwise congenial boss starts snapping at you.
- Your boss starts looking at you strangely.
- Your boss starts looking right through you.

- You inexplicably feel compelled to ask your boss if there's about to be a layoff.
- You are one of the highest paid people in the organization.
- You are one of the lowest paid people in the organization.
- You're somewhere in the middle.
- You wonder how your long-time coworker could be taking such a lengthy leave of absence without saying good-bye.
- There is an unusually bulky FedEx package from headquarters that's addressed to your local HR department.
- There is absolutely nothing out of the ordinary going on in the company whatsoever.
- You picked this book up just out of curiosity.
- You have a job.

The best thing you can do:

Recognize that everyone is subject to being laid off.

The worst thing you can do:

Think it won't happen to you.

The first thing you should do:

Keep in mind that getting laid off has nothing to do with your performance.

Voice of Experience: Rob

As a company, we had already gone through a challenging time in 2000, and my company was one of the few in Silicon Valley that didn't lay off anyone. In fact, we became famous for the way we all pitched in to save everyone's jobs. I took a 6% hit to my salary that year and took a lot of vacation time. Everyone was doing it, and morale was really high.

Even after that crisis was over, though, the sales force—where I worked—still went through many changes and restructurings, which I think were detrimental to the business. The focus shifted to what particular people were doing rather than the greater good of the company. So, when I was relocated from headquarters in San Jose to Colorado, the thought did cross my mind that being so far away from headquarters might put me at a greater risk for being laid off.

I was in Colorado two and a half years when my boss called me over a weekend and said that the sales force had been restructured again. And he had good news and bad news. The good news was that I still had a job. The bad news was that he was no longer my boss. My new manager was a guy in Los Angeles now, a coworker and someone I'd worked with for over ten years.

I figured that if you were going to cut people, you'd do that during the restructure. So I thought, "Well, I didn't get cut, so I guess I'm safe."

Two months later my boss said, "I need you to come to a 7:30 a.m. meeting. Can you be there?" I knew this was the big day they were going to let people go. And I thought he was asking me to come in early to stand in for him at some other meetings while he was laying people off. When I walked in, he met me in the lobby and said, "I'm not allowed to say more than a couple of words to you. I have to let you go."

Within an hour I had gotten my personal files off my laptop and my things out of my cube. I was walked out like a criminal. And that was the end of my 15 plus years with my company. I couldn't even say good-bye to friends and colleagues I had known for 15 years.

I was in shock, but I was relieved at the same time. I could stop all this speculating with every reorg, and I didn't have to look over my shoulder anymore. Then panic set in. We immediately put our house on the market. And I spent the next month fixing it up, landscaping, tiling a bathroom, and painting the whole house. The smell of anxiety is the smell of latex paint.

My wife and I bickered a lot during that first month. And the kids knew that “Daddy lost his job.” But we also worked very hard to reassure them that even though we didn’t know what was going to happen and that we might have to move, everything would be okay. The house didn’t sell.

The day I got laid off I did my resumé, having to build it from the ground up. I also sent emails to customers and friends I’d worked with, letting them know I appreciated working with them all those years, and that felt good.

I immediately started letting people know I was looking for a new job. Networking is huge. My wife even talked to parents at my children’s school. And it’s amazing how quickly people mobilize. I started interviewing within a month and a half, and within three months I found work, which is pretty amazing when you think about the fact that at that time the big high-tech companies in Colorado were laying off people.

At first I was worried that being laid off would be a problem for me, that people would assume that I had been a poor performer. But this is so commonplace now, people aren’t jumping to that conclusion.

The good that came out of this whole experience is the reminder of how important your network is. Contacts are so important, and I had taken them for granted. Every interview I had was because someone recommended me. And I wasn’t the ideal candidate for the job that I’m in now, but someone personally vouched for me.

On the flip side, I must have sent out 100 resumé and wasted about two weeks going on websites and filling out those stupid online forms. I did not get one callback. Not one.

The best thing you can do:

Keep your network active, no matter how comfortable you feel at your present job.

The worst thing you can do:

Waste your time with online applications. If you see that a company has an opening that interests you, use your network to connect with someone inside the company you can meet directly.

The first thing you should do:

Immediately get the word out that you're in the market for a job. Don't let the shame or negative self-talk stop you.

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