

America's Displaced Worker: Resources for Successful Workforce Re-entry

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Abstract

The United States has suffered record unemployment and underemployment for the past decade. According to surveys conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Statistics, the most consistent responses for worker displacement have been insufficient work and plant or company closure and relocation. To recover, the U.S government has encouraged unemployed and displaced workers to enroll in community and technical colleges to develop the skills needed to compete in our global economy. The future of the nation's global competitiveness and international relevance depends heavily on the quantity and quality of skilled workers produced. This purpose of this article is to showcase some of the statistical data available concerning unemployed Americans, the factors contributing to the displacement of workers, the financial cost of the displaced worker, and the federal programs designed to assist displaced workers with acquiring postsecondary credentials and skills for successful workforce re-entry. Emphasized in this article is the importance of goal setting and potential career options for the displaced worker and adult learner.

Keywords: Displaced, Unemployment, Literacy, GED, collaboration, Technical, Recovery, WIA

1. Introduction

Todd is from a manufacturing community in the state of Ohio where most high school graduates go on to work for one of the local manufacturing companies. Shortly after graduating from high school, Todd went on to work for Airborne Express in Wilmington, Ohio. He later went to work on the body shop assembly line at the General Motors' Moraine plant for 11 years. In 2008, the economic downturn in America forced the closure of the General Motors' Moraine plant. The plant closure left Todd and thousands of other plant employees jobless. At the age of 34, Todd is now a "displaced worker" (Dorsett, 2011).

1.1 Definition of Displaced Worker

The displacement of the American worker has become a relevant and historical phenomenon. According to the National Bureau of Economic Research, America's "Great Recession" began in December 2007 (Isidore, 2008) and officially ended in June 2009 (Isidore, 2010). Nonetheless, America's sluggish economy has produced 15.4 million displaced workers, in which 6.9 million had held jobs for at least three years from January 2007 through December 2009 (BLS, 2010). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics defines the "displaced worker" as a person 20 years of age and older who lost or left his/her place of employment due to permanent plant or company closure or relocation, insufficient work, or his/her position or shift being abolished (2010). The results of workers losing long-tenured jobs often leads to permanent income loss and the need to acquire a new skill set (Greenstone & Looney, 2011).

1.2 Definition of Workforce Re-entry

Unemployment for a short or long period can discourage workers from seeking gainful employment. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, those individuals who are not in the workforce and currently not looking for employment because they believe there are no jobs available or they don't possess the proper qualifications, but do desire and are available for employment are identified as discouraged workers (2012). An extensive layoff can be difficult for those individuals returning to the workforce. The Bureau of Labor Statistics identifies those individuals who are unemployed, but previously employed before leaving the labor force prior to initiating a search for employment as reentrants (2012). Those individuals who are successful in finding employment, in this era of high unemployment, must be prepared, in order to experience successful workforce re-entry. Preparation for successful workforce re-entry may include workers strengthening their skills and general knowledge, establishing or re-establishing a routine to balance employment and family, rehearsing how to address questions about their layoff, rebuilding or enhancing their network of professional contacts, and learning from mistakes made in previous employment (Middleton, 2009).

1.3 Purpose

This article will showcase some of the statistical data available on unemployed Americans, the factors contributing to the displacement of workers, the financial cost of the displaced worker, and the federal programs designed to assist displaced workers with acquiring postsecondary credentials and skills for successful workforce re-entry. This article will conclude with the process of goal setting and potential career options for the displaced worker and adult learner.

2. Unemployment Statistics and Contributing Factors

The unemployment of the American worker has hindered the economic growth of cities throughout the nation. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2008), there were 3.6 million long-tenured workers displaced during the January through December 2007 period, in which 45% lost or left their jobs due to plant or company closings or moves; 31% reported that their position or shift was eliminated; and 24% alluded to insufficient work as the reason for their displacement. In September 2009, the state of Michigan reported the nation's highest employment rate at 9.6%, and the state of Wyoming reported the lowest unemployment rate at 3.2% (CNNMoney, 2011).

Approximately 31% of workers in the United States experienced unemployment or underemployment during the 2009 period (Mishel, 2011). U.S. Census officials reported that in 2010, about 48 million people ages 18 to 64 did not work even one week out of the 2010 calendar year, up from 45 million in 2009 (Tavernise, 2011). In July of 2011, the national unemployment rate was 9.1%, in which the state of Nevada (12.9%) and California (12.0%) reported the highest jobless rate among the states (BLS, 2011). The jobless rate in the state of Georgia was 10.2% for the month August 2011. August 2011 marked the 49th consecutive month that Georgia's jobless rate surpassed the national jobless rate (Batten, 2011). In September 2011, the U.S. employment rate has been at or above 8.8% for 30 consecutive months (Mishel, 2011).

The U.S. Labor Department announced on September 2, 2011, that there were no jobs gained in the U.S. during the month of August, resulting in the unemployment rate remaining at 9.1%. The U.S. government has not reported a zero monthly addition of jobs since February, 1945 (Censky, 2011). The White House's Office of Management and Budget announced on September 1, 2011, that the projected unemployment rate for the remainder of 2011 would remain at 9.1% (Sahadi, 2011). However, recently the U.S. economy has shown signs of recovery. For example, in October 2011, the U.S. economy gained 80,000 jobs which lowered the unemployment rate to 9% (Rampell, 2011). In addition, the U.S. economy gained a net of 157,000 new jobs in November 2011 and 203,000 new jobs in December 2011, resulting in the U.S. unemployment rate being lowered to 8.5% at the end of year 2011 (Rich, 2012). On February 3, 2012, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that in January 2012 the U.S. economy gained a net of 243,000 new jobs which lead to the unemployment rate being lowered to 8.3% (BLS, 2012).

Consequently, the unemployment factor has had a dramatic impact on the nation's poverty rate and bankruptcy filings of American consumers (Censky, 2011). The U.S. government defines poverty as a family of four with a yearly income of \$22,314 and an individual yearly income of \$11,139 (2011). Censky (2011) reported that the nation's poverty rate elevated to 15.1% in 2010, which equated to 46.2 million people. The 2010 U.S. poverty rate was the highest level of poverty in the U.S. since 1993 (Tavernise, 2011). According to economists from the Brookings Institution, an additional 10 million people will fit the status of being poor by the middle of the decade. The joblessness in America is viewed as the main source for inducing more Americans into poverty (2011).

In addition, researchers at the Institute of Financial Literacy conducted a study and reported that more college graduates had filed for bankruptcy from 2006 to 2010, than previous years

(Smith, 2011). The study revealed that unemployed Americans filing for bankruptcy had increased by 21% since 2006. The causes of financial distress voiced by a high percentage of the respondents were overextended credit, reduction in income, or loss of employment (2011).

2.1 Economic Crisis

The long-tenured displaced workers of 1995-96, who were 20 years of age, reported finding employment within an average of 7.6 weeks of their displacement. However, displaced workers aged 45-54 years of age reported finding employment within an average 11.6 weeks of displacement (BLS, 1999). Currently, 14 million Americans are unemployed, in which 42.9% of them have consistently experienced unemployment for more than six months (Censky, 2011). The White House Budget Office has forecasted that the unemployment rate will not drop below 6% until 2017 (Sahadi, 2011). The announcement of this forecast, the recent debate over the nation's debt ceiling, the downgrade of the nation's long-term credit standing, the closing of manufacturing plants, and the announcement of companies filing bankruptcy has created an apprehensive spirit for many Americans about their future employment (Linn, 2011). In a 2011 MSNBC Gallup poll, the findings revealed that 30% of workers expressed their anxiety of becoming unemployed due to company layoffs (2011).

2.2 Company Closure or Moves

During the 1996 and 1999 period, 1.2 million American workers lost employment in mass layoffs annually (Ghilani, 2008). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the largest percent of mass layoff occurred in 2001 (2008). For example, the fourth largest employer in the city of Albany, GA, Bob's Candies, announced in December of 2001 that they would move the Albany plant's production line to Mexico. The reduction in workforce reduced employment at the Albany plant from 500 to 375 employees (AllBusiness, 2001). Three years later, after the announcement of a reduction in workforce, the Albany plant closed; and all production lines transferred to Mexico (Fletcher, 2011). The Bureau of Labor Statistics conducted a 2010 Displaced Worker Survey, which reported that the primary response for worker displacement was insufficient work (31%); whereas, in 2002 it was reported that the closing or moving of a plant or company was the primary reason for worker displacement (Dunne & Fee, 2010).

2.3 Position or Shift Abolishment

The global financial crisis of 2008 drastically affected the American worker. According to the International Monetary Fund, one of every four occupational positions lost worldwide was lost in the United States during this time (Peck, 2011). For example, in late February 2009, the Rheem Manufacturing Company, a manufacturer of heating, cooling, and water heating systems, announced to its 1,200 employees in the Milledgeville, Georgia, plant that they would lose their jobs due to plant closure (Paul, 2009).

3. Financial Cost of Displaced Workers

The city of Albany and Dougherty County, Georgia, has suffered the loss of three major employers within the last six years, resulting in the unemployment rate reaching 11.5% at the onset of 2010 and remaining at that level for most of that year (Fletcher, 2011). Bob's Candies closed its Albany plant in 2005, Merck Chemical closed its Albany plant in 2006, and Cooper Tire announced the closure of its Albany plant in 2008. These three plant closures accounted for over 1,800 jobs being loss in the region (2011). The yearly economic impact of the Bob's

and Merck's closure resulted in almost \$80 million in losses, which equated to 1.5% of the city's economy (USA Today, 2005); and the Cooper Tire closure, alone, resulted in approximately \$160 million in economic losses (Fletcher, 2011).

4. Resources for Workforce Re-Entry

4.1 Postsecondary Education

One of the factors that has attributed to America's economic woes, is the lack of skilled workers needed for specialized positions. Jaschik (2008) reported that in 35 states, more than 60% of the population did not possess an associate degree or higher; and more than 32 million adults in the U.S. had never attended college. Manufacturing companies are reporting that they are receiving plenty of applicants for vacant positions, but few, if any, have the relevant experience or skills needed to perform the work (Isidore, 2011). According to Kincheloe (1999), workers with marginal skills have trouble finding employment with limited possibility of promotion opportunities. In an effort to rectify this skilled worker shortage, at the onset of his term, President Obama challenged the government to assist everyone in attending at least one year of college (Moltz, 2009). In 2004, 670 workers from Techneglas, a manufacturing company in Columbus, Ohio, lost their jobs due to foreign competition. Over one hundred former Techneglas workers took advantage of the outplacement services offered at Luzerne County Community College (LCCC) in Nanticoke, Pennsylvania (Ghilani, 2008). A study conducted by Ghilani (2008) revealed that majority (84%) of the former Techneglas workers, who responded to the survey, were successful in finding employment after graduation, and 57% of the respondents reported that their education assisted them in finding employment.

In 2009, 11.5 million students had enrolled in one of the nation's two-year institutions. Today, 40% or almost six million of American college students are 25 years of age or older (USDOE, 2011). According to Census Bureau, the 2010 Population Survey revealed that only 16.8% of American's 25 and older averaged having some college credits, but no degree; and only 9.1% had attained an associate degree (Census Bureau, 2011). President Obama set a goal for the nation to produce an additional five million community college graduates by the year 2020 (Moltz, 2009).

4.1.1 Adult Literacy

Displaced workers who return or enter college for the first time, often suffer from the lack of self-motivation and the need for remediation. Older students, who have been out of the classroom for a number of years, more than likely will need some remediation (Powers, 2006). Those displaced workers, who lack a high school diploma or GED (General Education Development), can attend any of the 25 technical colleges in the state of Georgia and take courses that will prepare them for the GED exam (TCSG, 2011). The Technical College System of Georgia not only offers GED courses, but also offers occupational programs at the certificate, diploma, and degree level (2011). The curricula for the occupational programs focus on meeting the demands and needs of industry. Therefore, allowing program graduates the opportunity to enter the workforce shortly, if not immediately, after program completion.

4.1.2 Industry Collaboration

Community and Technical Colleges are key components to America's economic recovery. The Bureau of Labor Statistics has projected that during the next decade, 45% of job openings will

be “middle-skill” positions (Moltz, 2009). Therefore, education beyond high school will be required for most positions. Some scholars have suggested community or technical colleges should be more employer-oriented in their course design and course offerings to accommodate these displaced workers entering or returning to school. More involvement and collaboration with industry will assist displaced workers in developing the skills needed to qualify for specific job openings, upon completion of their studies (2009). In order for colleges to have an effective collaboration with industry, colleges will have to develop a marketing system that is industry-controlled, instead of college-product controlled (Hamm & Tolle-Burger, 1988). Colleges should organize and direct their efforts to satisfying the needs of industry (1988). For example, Monroe Community College in Rochester, New York, routinely hosts program advisory committees, where local small businesses gather and discuss their training needs and actively participates in the area chamber of commerce and the Rochester Business Alliance (Moltz, 2010). In 2010, the Chrysler plant in Wisconsin closed and Gateway Technical College immediately collaborated with area businesses to retrain and find new employment for the displaced workers from the Chrysler plant.

An authentic and meaningful partnership between private and public organizations and community and technical colleges is vital to the success of graduates finding gainful employment within the field or related field(s) of their occupational studies. A workforce initiative started by the Obama administration in 2010, called Enter Skills for America’s Future, encouraged community colleges to collaborate and develop close relationships with potential employers, to design and create curriculum that relates to the needs of industry (Rampell, 2010). An example of such a partnership is a retraining program called Training Futures. The goal of this program is to educate and groom approximately 100 low-income people annually in the state of Virginia for administrative and medical offices jobs. The program’s collaboration with Northern Virginia Community College System and local employers within the region may be the key factor in the college’s report of an 89% job placement rate of graduates within six months after their graduation (2010).

5. Financial Aid

5.1 Federal Grants

One of the many barriers for displaced workers seeking postsecondary education credentials is the cost of education and the lack of financial resources for everyday living. The U.S. government has taken necessary steps to assist displaced workers with the financial burden of acquiring additional formal education and other social necessities. The most common method to lower the cost of tuition and to make college more affordable for students is the use of federal grants. The most common federal grant available for non-traditional students is the Pell Grant (USDOE, 2011). This federal grant provides financial assistance to students with annual family incomes up to \$60,000, in which the maximum award amount for FY 2011-2012 is valued at \$5,550 (Lederman, 2011 & USDOE, 2011).

The Pell Grant award amount is based on a formula that includes the student’s household income, the cost of tuition, the student’s part-time or full-time status, and his or her plans to attend school for a full academic year (USDOE, 2011). According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2011), the total Pell Grant recipients for FY 2009-10 were 8,094,024, in which 35.2% (2,851,665) of the recipients were from two-year institutions. Two-year public

institutions experienced a 36.8% increase in the number of Pell Grant recipients from FY 2008-09 to FY 2009-10.

The federal government has developed other programs to assist unemployed and displaced workers with their educational cost. Programs such as the Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA), provides financial help and job training to unemployed workers when employers move jobs overseas. This decades-old program commits a significant amount of resources to occupational retraining. The program received a funding boost with the enactment of the 2009 economic Recovery Act (US Fed News Services, 2011 & Liberto, 2011). With resources available through the Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) program, grants such as the National Emergency Grant (NEG) and On-the-Job-Training Grants provides funding to assist with the retraining of displaced workers.

Support services for displaced workers include training related expenses, childcare, and travel payments. Those workers who have skills that are in demand, receive assistance in job search activities, such as workshops on resume writing, proper interviewing techniques, and analysis of transferable skills (US Fed News Services, 2011). The U.S. Secretary of Labor, Hilda L. Solis, announced in June 2010 that \$75 million will directly go to 41 states, the District of Columbia, and three federally recognized Native American tribes. These funds will provide those displaced workers with on-the-job-training opportunities (USDOL, 2010). For example, the state of Wisconsin's Department of Workforce Development announced in August 2011 that they would allocate \$918,010 of NEG funds to provide employment and training services to 325 displaced workers, who were displaced by the layoffs of Polaris Industries and Robin Manufacturing Company. In addition, the state provided nearly \$4 million in assistance for over 2,580 dislocated workers in April 2011. The displaced workers were primarily from the manufacturing sector (US FedNews Services, 2011).

Another program designed to assist displaced workers is the Community College and Career Training Grant program. This program allocates resources to community colleges to develop, offer, and improve educational or career training for workers eligible for training under the Trade Adjustment Assistance Act (Moltz, 2010). Community colleges are encouraged to develop effective programs that educational outcomes lead to successful employment. The focus is to have students credentialed in a short period, in order to expedite their re-entry into the workforce (2010).

Researchers suggest that shorter courses and flexible schedules are more appropriate for older students due to students pursuing a career and managing a family, simultaneously (Powers, 2009). Pusser et al. (2007) suggested that non-traditional or adult students benefit greatly when the design of academic courses accommodates their routines. Accelerated courses, weekend, evening, and hybrid courses that consist of face-to-face and on-line segments should be available for course selection.

5.2 Workforce Investment Act

In addition, former President Clinton signed the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) into law on August 7, 1998. This workforce investment system helps to increase the employment, retention, and income of America's unemployed population. The objective of WIA is to increase the occupational skill set of individuals, improve the quality of workers in the workforce, reduce

welfare dependency, and enhance America's productivity and global competitiveness (DOL, 2011). States that receive WIA funding are required to develop local workforce boards that consist of various human services agency representatives, parents, workforce-related customers, and with the majority of the members being from the private (business) sector of the community (GADOL, 2011). Generally, the workforce services provided to unemployed participants include identifying training or education offerings in a specific geographic or discipline area; financial aid assistance; information about job vacancies, high growth occupations, and salary ranges; and career counseling that includes career options, instructions on how to conduct a job search, resume writing, and interviewing techniques (2011).

6. Goal Setting and Career Options

Most displaced workers have a desire to re-enter the workforce as soon as possible. In order to accomplish this objective, Ginsberg & Wlodkowski (2009) stated that goals are most effective when they are defined clearly and goals with expressive outcomes are established during the learning process of non-traditional or adult students. The process of goal setting is a systemic approach directed toward a desired objective that a person sets for himself or herself and regularly monitors the progress of his or her direction (LitSource Tutor Workshop, 2008). Wlodkowski & Ginsberg (1995) stated that success for the non-traditional student or adult learner is achieved when the learning experience(s) of the student has personal relevance, and the student has a voice in the learning process.

In order to find the correct career path, the displaced worker or adult learner will need to develop goals that are achievable, measurable, desirable, and have available resources. The adult learner must have the commitment and self-determination to accomplish the goal (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009). When students make the decision to select a different career path or decide to enhance their skill set, students are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the most profitable career(s) available. Many high-paying jobs only require a two-year degree. For example, in September 2011, MSNBC released a report identifying eight high-paying jobs that require a two-year degree (Fowler, 2011):

- **Registered Nurse-** This profession has proven to be quite stable during the recession and offers plenty of opportunities for career growth. The expected annual salary for an individual in this career is roughly \$55,000 per year (2011).
- **Engineering Technician-** The engineering field has a range of specialized areas. For example, an Industrial Engineering Technician can earn in the range of \$47,000 annually; an Environmental Engineering Technician can earn about \$41,000 annually; an Electrical Engineering Technician can expect to earn an annual salary of roughly \$47,000 per year; and an Aerospace Engineering Technician can expect to earn approximately \$52,000 per year (2011).
- **Dental Hygienist-** Although this career option only requires a two-year degree, it generally requires workers to obtain a license or certification. The demand for this position is expected to increase in the years to come. An individual can expect to earn over \$57,000 per year in income (2011).

- Computer-Support Specialist- This career may include IT, network security, and help desk positions. Generally, these positions offer an annual income ranging from \$46,000 to \$60,000 (2011).
- Paralegal- Individuals who choose this career track can expect to earn an annual salary of roughly \$46,000 (2011).
- Diagnostic Medical Imaging and X-ray Technician- An employment increase is projected for this career option. An individual can expect to earn in the range of \$52,000 per year (2011).
- Web Designer- According to Payscale.com, web designers earn an annual salary of roughly \$49,000 per year. However, those individuals who choose to start their own business or work freelance has unlimited projected annual salary (2011).
- Physical-therapy Assistant- As the world's population continues to age and increase, this career option will be in demand for years to come. Individuals can expect to earn an average annual salary over \$46,000 per year (2011).

6. Conclusion

The "Great Recession" and America's turbulent economy has produced 15.4 million displaced workers (BLS, 2010). America's sluggish economy has been the impetus for the nation's unemployment rate being at or above 8.8% for 30 consecutive months (Mishel, 2011). According to surveys conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Statistics, the most consistent responses for worker displacement have been insufficient work and plant or company closure and relocation (Dunne & Fee, 2010).

In an effort to remedy the unemployment of the displaced worker, the U.S government has encouraged the unemployed and displaced workers to enroll in community and technical colleges and develop the skills needed to compete in our global economy. Federal grant programs such as Pell, Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA), National Emergency Grant (NEG), On-the-Job-Training, Community College Career Training, and the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) are available for students to assist with the financial cost of college and the daily necessities of life (US Fed Services, 2011 & Liberto, 2010). In addition, certain components of these federal programs assist students with establishing future career goals and identifying profitable career options. The future of the nation's global competitiveness and international relevance depends heavily on the quantity and quality of skilled workers produced, who will make positive contributions to the economic and social status of America.

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