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Unemployed? How to use your time

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People looking for work browse vacancies at a US jobs fair (Getty Images)

If you've lost your job, taken a severance or redundancy package or ventured into the great unknown of time off between jobs, the first few weeks of unemployment can be both frightening and freeing.

The fears — about finances and finding the next job — can often give way to a temporary sigh of relief, especially if you've got several months of pay to tide you over. Suddenly, you have time to catch-up, to start that exercise regimen you've been putting off, erase your sleep deficit, spend more hours with family and friends. But don't kick back for too long.

Once unemployment extends beyond a few weeks, beware of letting one day slide into the next as if it's an extended holiday. In some places, like the United States, it can be much harder to find a job when you're unemployed, so making the best use of your time off the clock is crucial.

Use your time outside the 9-to-5 to take the kind of action to get yourself noticed. Here's how to employ those free hours wisely — and toward your next big [career \(http://www.bbc.com/capital/tags/careers?lc=int_mb_1001\)](http://www.bbc.com/capital/tags/careers?lc=int_mb_1001) move.

Back to school

Taking a [professional \(http://www.bbc.com/capital/tags/careers?lc=int_mb_1001\)](http://www.bbc.com/capital/tags/careers?lc=int_mb_1001) course demonstrates initiative and dedication to self-development, wrote Neil Matthams, recruitment team leader at Sydney-based recruitment firm Talent International, in an email.

Employers and recruiters are also well aware that qualifications can be quite expensive, according to Matthams who works out of the company's Perth office. That can be a good thing.

"A potential employer may get a positive insight into an applicant's character if they are willing to invest in their development even when they have reduced disposable income," he wrote.

Courses should be "in sync" with your field, according to Jorg Stegemann, managing director of Paris-based Kennedy Executive Search & Outplacement. "We are in a specialist market today," he wrote. "If you have worked in marketing for 10 years and now take a course in finance hoping to become a finance manager, it won't work. [It's better to] learn the latest trend in marketing and complete your [profile \(http://www.bbc.com/capital/tags/social-media?lc=int_mb_1001\)](http://www.bbc.com/capital/tags/social-media?lc=int_mb_1001) instead of diluting it."

Start a professional blog

When it comes to being unemployed and standing out from the crowd, a professional blog can help set you apart. If you have a professional website that includes your CV, plan on adding your blog stream to it. Also, make sure to attach a link to it as part of your contact/correspondence details, wrote Matthams. "If it's in this position on a CV, it can't be missed."

"The reason bloggers impress hiring managers is that [blogging] demonstrates a love and enthusiasm for what they do," wrote Matthams. "Therefore, if you're going to include a blog on your CV, it would make sense to write a blog that relates to your profession or line of work."

Software developers, for example, could blog about the latest technologies or projects that they are doing at home while engineers could blog about new projects in their cities and what challenges they might face, he said.

There aren't any set rules on how often you need to blog. "It really doesn't matter as long as the content is interesting and demonstrates to the reader that the blogger has a passion for what they do," wrote Matthams.

But remember any recruiter or potential employer could be reading your posts, so be prepared to discuss them in an [interview \(http://www.bbc.com/capital/columns/career-coach?lc=int_mb_1001\)](http://www.bbc.com/capital/columns/career-coach?lc=int_mb_1001). Make sure to keep your personal online presence separate from your professional one.

Exploit your network

Being unemployed offers an opportunity to grow your professional network, according to Dave Ciliberto, senior vice president of career transition at New York-based organisational and talent consulting firm Partners International. Be clear on what you need from people when you contact them.

"The more specific you are, the more people can assist you," said Ciliberto. Also, don't forget to ask them if there is anyone else that they suggest you contact.

You will need to prepare answers to questions such as "What do you want to do?" and "How can I help you?" said Ciliberto. "Too often job seekers will assume that people in their network will know what kind of position they are looking for or what their skill set and expertise are," he said.

But that is rarely the case – and you don't want to make extra work for them. "Avoid making assumptions and avoid the fear of asking for what you want. Be specific and let your network [of contacts] know exactly what you are looking for and what you can do."

Consider consulting

Contact outsourcing and contract employment firms in the fields that interest you, suggested Ford R. Myers, president of Pennsylvania-based Career Potential, LLC. Often, the work can turn out to be quite interesting and challenging – and potentially lucrative, he wrote.

"In some cases, these consulting or contract assignments turn into full-time job offers after the company gets to know you."

Consulting for any firm or contact is better than doing nothing, whether it's making a business plan for your brother-in-law's tattoo shop or preparing tax returns for a friend, wrote Kennedy's Stegemann.

“Write it on your CV and on LinkedIn to show that you are in the driving seat of your career,” he suggested.

Volunteer

Volunteer for a charity or non-profit organisation – even if it is only for a few hours a week. “How much time is up to you,” said Partners International’s Ciliberto.

For Matthams, a stint volunteering during a period of unemployment always stands out on candidates’ CVs, because it shows that they didn’t just sit around but kept themselves busy and kept their skills sharp while giving back to the community. It might not be as hard as you think to find volunteer work in your field of expertise.

“A web [designer \(http://www.bbc.com/capital/columns/how-to-buy-it?lc=int_mb_1001\)](http://www.bbc.com/capital/columns/how-to-buy-it?lc=int_mb_1001) could offer his services to a local charity whose website needed updating,” suggested Matthams.

Presentation matters

But none of these actions will impress anyone – if you don’t present them well on your CV or resume, warned Matthams. Lumping your most recently completed courses with ones you took years ago “significantly reduces the impact of what you’ve achieved,” he wrote. “More importantly, the person reviewing the CV won’t be able to see how you’ve been [spending \(http://www.bbc.com/capital/tags/personal-finance?lc=int_mb_1001\)](http://www.bbc.com/capital/tags/personal-finance?lc=int_mb_1001) your time.”

Employers and recruiters spend just 5 to 7 seconds scanning each CV or resume, according to Birmingham, UK recruiting firm BeHiring. Their eyes usually dart straight to the description of your last role, according to Matthams.

So, that’s where you want to put what you’ve been working on while unemployed.

Career Coach is a twice-monthly column on BBC Capital in which we consider the career turning points and questions many professionals face. We welcome questions from readers at careercoach@bbc.com (<mailto:workethic@bbc.com>).

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