

May 3, 2009

Job-Search Networks, in All Shapes and Sizes

By MATT VILLANO

ON a recent Monday evening in the basement of the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Brooklyn Heights, a group of seven local residents gathered to discuss their faith — in the job market.

One woman, who had been laid off from a high-powered job at a local hedge fund, sought advice about the benefits of accepting part-time work. Another participant, a man who had worked more than a decade in the technology industry, wondered aloud whether switching fields would be wise.

At the front of the room, Conrad Cardinale beamed like a proud father. That's because the group was his idea. Mr. Cardinale was a managing director at [Bear Stearns](#) until its collapse in 2008 and, after he was laid off, he set out to expand his professional networks.

One strategy included asking his pastor for permission to lead networking sessions at the church. The pastor agreed, and a self-help group was born.

"I didn't know what to expect at first," Mr. Cardinale said. Noting that "it helps to talk with other people who find themselves in the same situation," he says the meetings help since "you never know when you're going to meet someone who knows someone that might be able to help you land your next job."

Mr. Cardinale, who is still looking for work, is not the only jobless or underemployed professional who is starting a networking group. While people have flocked to social networking Web sites like LinkedIn and [Facebook](#), growing numbers of job seekers are building grass-roots offline communities, too, and sometimes use the Internet to arrange to meet people face-to-face.

In many cases, these meetings are regular gatherings that attract no more than a dozen people at a time. In other cases, the get-togethers are much larger, and travel to different cities.

Whatever the approach, participants say the goals are simple: to talk, trade stories, voice concerns and share contacts that could lead to new work.

"The benefit of getting together in person is that you feel like you really get to know what someone's all about," said Rodney Jordan, who has a job with a local printing company but started the Community Matters Networking Group in Hockessin, Del., to help neighbors in need. "Those face-to-face connections can go a long way."

Mr. Jordan found group members through advertising online and offline. His group, like Mr. Cardinale's, meets in a local church. Other grass-roots networking organizations convene in places like neighborhood coffee shops.

Consider the five-member "D.C. Burner Opportunity Seekers" group in Washington. Every Monday at 10

a.m., it gathers at the Busboys & Poets restaurant in the Mount Vernon Square neighborhood to share information about professional contacts, strategies and plans.

Caryn Sykes, a self-employed accountant and business planner, said she assembled the free-form group from friends she met at the annual [Burning Man](#) cultural festival in Nevada to help get over the shock of losing two of her biggest clients.

“Dealing with the loss of work as a self-employed person, I was feeling pretty isolated there at home,” Ms. Sykes said. “Talking with other people about their experiences and committing to being proactive about getting through the situation made me feel like I was taking matters into my own hands.” Group members share contacts to help one another find job leads.

In Seattle, a different coffee klatch, “Pink Slips Unite,” is more structured.

This 12-person group meets on Thursdays at C & P Coffee Company in West Seattle. The group was founded by Keri Robinson, a recently laid-off [Microsoft](#) marketing specialist, who first advertised the gathering on a neighborhood blog. She starts each meeting by asking participants to share professional highs and lows of the week. Members also detail efforts to obtain job interviews.

“If I want to work someplace and someone else in the group has a contact there, I should know about it but I might not know to ask,” explained Ms. Robinson, who has not yet found a new job. “We’re trying to focus on making those connections because that’s what will help our people find their next jobs.”

When the group draws a crowd of 15, it’s a big day. At some other grass-roots networking gatherings, attendance in the thousands can be the norm.

Such is the case with [LaidOffCamp](#), a networking program developed by the entrepreneur Christopher Hutchins, after his layoff from a technology company, to help others tap into their entrepreneurial energy.

The first daylong series of seminars was on March 3 in San Francisco, attended by job seekers, freelancers and other self-employed workers. Since then, this traveling endeavor has morphed into more of a [Lollapalooza](#)-style networking event that advertises online and through word-of-mouth. In June, for example, stops will include Miami, Chicago and San Luis Obispo, Calif.

Rajiv Doshi, recently laid off as a software developer, attended the inaugural event and said networking face-to-face was a worthwhile complement to networking communities online. “In-person networking events allow you to build upon the types of relationships you’ve formed online,” he wrote by e-mail. “It’s important to have face time to build a stronger connection.”

DESPITE the benefits of face-to-face networking, career specialists warn that not all grass-roots groups are created equal.

Some can focus on the wrong things. Duncan Mathison, a management consultant in San Diego, said it was easy for gatherings to devolve into negativism and amount to nothing more than “a group gripe session” about heartless employers and persistent creditors.

Rachelle J. Center, president of RJC Associates, a management consulting firm in San Francisco, said job seekers should also beware of organizations where fellow participants are more interested in receiving help

than giving it.

“It has to be a quid pro quo,” she said. “You help them, they help you. Successful networking is as much about what you can do for others as it is about what you can get from them.”

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