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NEXTMOVES

Working for free can be the quickest path to a paycheck



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If you are currently unemployed and frustrated by a lack of progress in your job search, it's time to examine your strategy. Too many job seekers take a passive role in their hunt for new employment. If your activities are limited to searching online and sending out your résumé, it's time to take more aggressive action. Find ways to jump-start your search and get results. The best way I can demonstrate this idea is to share a story about a client who took ownership of her job search and achieved amazing results.

After 12 good years working as an administrative assistant at a financial services firm, Gloria was laid off. Having marketable skills, she launched a job search and landed a similar role at another company. She soon realized that her new job was not a great fit and she missed the camaraderie with her former colleagues. As fate would have it, within the year she was laid off again, at a time when the job market was deteriorating rapidly. She, like so many others, received notice in December 2008.

At our first meeting, I asked Gloria about her background, skills and interests. She explained that she loved helping people. When she was younger, she wanted to be a nurse or a teacher, but as her life unfolded, she took a different path. From time to time, she considered pursuing a new career but it never seemed to be the right time. Gloria realized this was her golden opportunity to

make a career change. To get started I suggested that she try volunteering as it would:

- **Help her learn new skills and brush up on old skills while gaining experience for her résumé**
- **Allow her to test the waters in a new industry or job before committing to it or investing in training**
- **Provide opportunities to meet people who had similar values and interests**
- **Offer a fresh perspective on life, by helping those with challenges greater than her own**
- **Give her a purpose, keeping her engaged while building momentum, a critical component in a job search.**

That was all Gloria needed to hear. I suggested that she do research to identify appropriate opportunities. An important consideration was how much time she could devote to volunteering. Some nonprofits ask volunteers to pitch in whenever they can, while others have fixed schedules. She could check www.volunteermatch.org and www.idealists.org plus visit local charities to get a sense of where and how to get involved.

She sprang into action. By our next meeting, she had done her research, made decisions and got the wheels in motion. Since she had contemplated being a nurse or teacher years ago, she decided to take on assignments and test the waters by volunteering at a local hospital and becoming a tutor for a literacy organization.

Gloria volunteered at the hospital three hours a week. They sent her wherever they needed help. Because she had strong administrative skills, she was a

valuable resource. It didn't take long for her to determine that she liked working in a health care setting. She found two evening courses at a local college that would round out her volunteering with knowledge of medical terminology and practices.

She completed a literacy training program and began tutoring a few hours a week. She was busy, but her schedule allowed her to continue an active job search. Plus she found that people she met while volunteering were eager to help her and kept their eyes open for job opportunities.

One evening, in her medical office practices class, she told the instructor she had applied for an administrative assistant position at a hospital holding company. It turned out the instructor not only knew the company, she worked there full time. Since she knew firsthand how motivated Gloria was, she contacted the hiring manager and recommended her for the job. Gloria started in October 2009 and loves her new job. Talk about a small world.

I often share her story with other clients, particularly when they feel stuck and bogged down by the job search. I always hope it will motivate them to follow Gloria's lead. However, they struggle to comprehend how applying so much time and effort to volunteering could possibly be a more productive use of their time. So they stay home every day, apply for more jobs and send out more résumés, while Gloria approaches her one-year anniversary.

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