

ANNUAL MEETING HANDOUT

When Your Museum Job is Terminated: some practical tips for what to do next

This session handout was originally presented during the 2013 Annual Meeting in Baltimore, MD and was updated in 2020 following the coronavirus pandemic.

Established museum professionals, Mary Jane Taylor, Anne Verplanck, Jeannine Disviscour, and Lee Vedder, provide strategies for coping with job loss, networking, finding interim contract and consulting work, and securing new positions.

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DEALING WITH NEWS OF A LAYOFF

Negotiating your exit

- ◆ **Review your employee handbook/personnel policies** to be sure your severance offer is within the museum's guidelines.
- ◆ **If you are offered severance**, consult a lawyer before you sign an agreement. This is particularly important if you think you're being short-changed.
- ◆ **Consider negotiating for additional time before your departure date**, for extra weeks of severance and/or health care coverage, or for registration costs for an upcoming conference.
- ◆ **If offered outplacement assistance**, decide whether you will use this or whether you should ask for the money to underwrite your own job search. If you work with an outplacement firm, investigate all its offered services.
- ◆ **Begin to think critically about your most marketable skills**, and what work products showcase those skills. If you haven't done so already, create a portfolio with physical and digital copies of materials that will assist in your job search. Include label text and photographs of curated exhibitions, program outlines, staff training resources, tour outlines, catalog essays and object entries, exhibition designs and installation plans, grant applications, visitor evaluations, brochures, newsletter articles, blog posts, website content and press releases.
- ◆ **If you are furloughed**, try to get clarity on the institution's intentions about how and when you might be brought back, and whether benefits and email access will continue during the furlough. You likely qualify for unemployment during this period.

Handling your practical affairs

- ◆ **COBRA** provides for continuation of health benefits for 18 months, but is expensive, especially for a family.

Mary Jane Taylor, Anne Verplanck, Jeannine Disviscour, and Lee Vedder. "Plan B': What to do when your museum job is terminated." Session presented at the American Alliance of Museum's Annual Meeting, May 22, 2013, Baltimore, MD. Session handout revised by participants, July 2020.

Handling your practical affairs - continued

- ◆ **Investigate options for health insurance:** check your eligibility for a spouse's or parent's plan; explore your options under the Affordable Care Act.
- ◆ **Research your state's unemployment compensation immediately** and begin the claims process. Investigate community groups and social service agencies for guidance on how to navigate the process.
- ◆ Consider whether you **a.)** can, **b.)** want to, and **c.)** should look for jobs outside the area in which you live.
- ◆ **Assess your financial situation** and reduce expenses as needed.

Take care of your physical and emotional health

- ◆ **Exercise and good nutrition matter;** take time to eat a balanced diet and get regular physical activity. If possible, go outdoors. Sunshine and fresh air can boost morale.
- ◆ **Find a confidante or two** with whom you can share your frustrations about your former employer or job hunt; to the rest of the world, present an upbeat attitude.
- ◆ **Spend time with positive people.** If someone in your social circle is consistently negative about your situation, avoid them as much as possible.
- ◆ **Consider volunteering** for a social service agency or other organization. Helping others provides perspective.
- ◆ **Work on small but visible home or garden projects.** Clean out a closet, repaint a wall, plant flowers. Doing something start-to-finish can offer a much-needed sense of accomplishment.

FINDING YOUR NEXT OPPORTUNITY

The job search

- ◆ **Pursue your job search online *and* off.** Balance scouring online job listings and using social media with attending networking events, having informational interviews, and meeting contacts for coffee.
- ◆ **Networking matters.** If meeting in person isn't practical, a short session on Zoom, Google Meet or Skype is a good substitute and can help you build contacts in other regions of the country.
- ◆ **Set a consistent weekday work schedule for job-hunting, and create a new daily routine.** A regular early morning walk or run with a friend can start your day on a good note.

The job search - continued

- ◆ **Practice good work time management** by taking on the hardest task first and, when possible, working during your most productive times of the day or evening.
- ◆ **Attend seminars and webinars to learn new skills and to network.** These online and in-person forums can introduce you to new and adjacent career fields as well as help you make new contacts.
- ◆ **Do not be shy about your situation.** Posting, “revising my resume for the first time in 5 years,” on Facebook and other social media platforms can signal to a broad group of friends that you are job-hunting.
- ◆ **Responsible use of social media** is a good way to build your personal brand and expand your professional network. Identify relevant Twitter feeds and Facebook groups to follow and contribute to; use YouTube and other social media platforms in ways that fit the image, information, and ideas you wish to project.
- ◆ **Focus your job search by compiling a list of target organizations** for which you’d like to work. Read all you can about these institutions, and find people who can connect you to stakeholders.
- ◆ **Make a prioritized list of whom to contact**, and create a system to track your interactions with potential employers and networking contacts.
- ◆ **Maintain a thorough resume on LinkedIn**; make regular posts; create an email signature that includes the URL for your LinkedIn profile.
- ◆ Remember that many jobs (including freelance and consulting work) are obtained through word of mouth.
- ◆ **Seek professional volunteer opportunities.** Join the planning committee for an upcoming conference, judge a local art show, science fair or National History Day; review grant applications. Consider becoming a tour guide for a local art, history or architecture organization.
- ◆ **Maintain your professional and academic memberships** (i.e. American Alliance of Museums, local and regional museum associations). These organizations put you in regular contact with colleagues in the field. Join a committee or volunteer your services.
- ◆ **Participate in a job support group** offered by your local unemployment office, community center, or place of worship.

Catalog your transferable skills

- ◆ **Think critically about how your passions and your past experience might qualify you for jobs beyond museums.** Networking can provide ideas and contacts in such fields as:
 - **Fundraising**, including grant writing and major gifts positions;
 - **Auction houses**;
 - **Research**, with projects that can be supported by fellowships;
 - **Teaching**: tutoring, primary and secondary education, college (including community college), and curriculum writing;
 - **The corporate world**, including hospitals. Many companies and organizations need staff versed in marketing, writing and editing, physical and digital publishing, teaching and training, and archival and database management. Registrars might find supply chain management a good fit; exhibition coordinators might consider positions in project management.
 - **Consulting** (see “Building a Successful Consulting Practice,” AASLH technical leaflet 228). Be aware that for many, consulting is a challenging way to earn a full-time living. The unpredictable nature of the work and lack of benefits means that many consultants require a second source of steady income. But for those who enter a new field full-time, consulting on the side may be a good way to remain involved with museums.

Assessing new job opportunities

- ◆ **Be selective about jobs to apply for**; look for positions that are a good fit, rather than submitting an application for everything that comes along.
- ◆ **Do your homework on institutions you’re applying to**, paying close attention to a museum’s:
 - **Financial health**: Read the organization’s annual reports and strategic plan, and find their IRS 990 forms on candid.org (formerly guidestar.org). Determine the board’s level of financial engagement.
 - **Personnel**: Research the recent rate of staff turnover. Learn about the board of trustees, the CEO and the senior level staff, past and present.
 - **Reputation in the community**: Talk with staff members at peer institutions. Consult pertinent news and industry reports via a range of media.
 - **Institutional culture**: Find (or get introduced to) colleagues who know what it’s like to work there. Be particularly attuned to issues of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, ageism, and class.

MOVING ON WITH YOUR CAREER

Curating your career: Being prepared

- ◆ **Maintain a separate, non-work email account** for your professional memberships, newsletters, list-serves and activities, and for personal messages.
- ◆ **Document exhibitions and other projects for your portfolio** in images and video. Use cloud or other non-institutional storage to maintain copies of labels you have written, programs you have developed, and contacts. Periodically transfer copies of all of your work, including digital projects, to personal storage.
- ◆ **Keep institutional and personal research projects and attendant physical or electronic files separate.** If there is overlap, maintain copies off site and/or use personal cloud storage.
- ◆ **Always keep your resume up to date;** maintain an “everything but the kitchen sink” resume should you need to recall precise dates or complete duties for a job application.
- ◆ **If you are moving to a new area for a position, carefully consider renting versus buying a home.** Renting for a year or two before purchasing a home might be wise.
- ◆ **Volunteerism and community involvement are often rewarding,** and can also develop one’s network and increase skills such as fundraising, strategic planning, and marketing.

In your new role

- ◆ **Thank those who helped you.**
- ◆ **Stay connected** with those you met while networking. Pass along journal articles or blog posts that might be applicable; introduce contacts with similar interests. Become known for being a resource for others.
- ◆ **Help those who have lost their jobs,** whether they are in your field or not. “Let me take you to lunch” means a lot to someone who has lost their job.
- ◆ **Maintain contact** with former supervisors, advisors, and mentors who can provide guidance, contacts, and references. Keeping in touch with former students, interns, and junior colleagues also helps build a strong network.
- ◆ **Be prepared for changing leadership** and be alert to signs of administrative volatility. Develop allies at all levels in the organization who can advocate for your work.
- ◆ **Maintain a file of all your performance reviews** and document examples of accolades.
- ◆ **If you are having difficulties** with your supervisor or colleagues, keep a log to document issues as they occur.

In your new role - continued

- ◆ **Continue to expand your networks** and visibility through conference presentations, volunteer roles in professional organizations, and forward-thinking posts on social media.
- ◆ **Attend conferences and webinars** to expand your knowledge and skills as well as develop a sense of new directions in your field.

PANDEMIC AND OTHER CRISIS-RELATED TIPS

- ◆ Check with your local or regional museum association and professional organizations for financial assistance and job guidance.
- ◆ Coffee over Zoom, Google Meet or Skype can provide broad networking opportunities in your region and beyond.
- ◆ Consider trading off short periods of childcare with another trusted household, or finding a responsible neighborhood high school or college student who can watch your child(ren) outdoors for an hour or two.
- ◆ Determine whether living with family members or friends and/or relocating could reduce expenses and stress.