

## **Cobble it: Survival in a WTF Careerland** **by Rose Jonas, Ph.D.**

**Cobble together:** To put together clumsily

**WTF:** Does not mean World Taekwondo Federation

Are any of these you? You are just starting your career. You are one of the 50,000 laid-off Citigroup employees. You are an Anheuser-Busch employee looking over your shoulder for the lay-off posse. As a job seeker, you have watched jobs get unbudgeted even as you have interviewed for them; you've lost out on opportunities because the heavily qualified packed the selection pool. WTF!!!? How do you have a new or continuing career in this mess?

I typically help people go for the dream, the moon, the Big Goal. My advice these days is more about how to cobble together a career and adopt a WTF attitude while we get through this economic downturn. What's here now hasn't been here in just about anyone's working lifetime. New times call for new strategies. Think of this as yours:

1. *Deal first with this reality.* The mess is predicted to be with us for as long as two years. The American economy has lost trillions of dollars. Think of the jobs it has erased in the hydrogen fire of 2008 (see below). Now is not the time for your cheery bifocals. This is big. Take a hard look at your industry and others and be honest about what you see. It may take awhile to get what you want.
2. *Do catastrophe planning.* What if the worst happens? What is "the worst" to you? How much money do you have? How much can you lose? How will you deal with this? You will resist this exercise, but you will be amazed at the peace it will give you. Because you're taking the toughest look at your negative possibilities, it will ease the jitters you've had when your fear-boogeyman jumped out of the closet. Nothing cuts up credit cards faster than doing this.
3. *Get to Plan D.* Celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain, in *Chef's Story*, says French chefs employ a *system D*, which means "we're just making it up." So, have a Plan A (the job or career field you truly want), Plan B (an acceptable, if not as desirable, alternative - selling copiers instead of pharmaceuticals), a Plan C (we're feeling kinda desperate here; it's where "cobble it" comes in and we take what's available), and Plan D (WTF, we're making it up out of thin air). It keeps your eye on the prize, and you want always to keep a dream. It helps you see, in strategizing cobbles, what might be available at C that could help A. (You want to go to medical school. Not available now so finish that science master's.) And never underestimate Plan D; remarkable, phoenix-like possibilities can arise there.
4. *Get creative with a WTF strategy.* You want to be a broadcaster; no jobs. WTF, go to Prague and study film-making. You want to work in health care; no one's responding to your e-mails. WTF, keep building relationships, but rehab a house so you can get out of your parent's basement. You like Boulder and aren't picky about where you live or what you do. WTF, move there and wait tables. You've wanted to try teaching. WTF. Call Teach for America. Social worker? WTF. Apply at a graduate school. Right now is the ideal time for a WTF strategy, when

things are so bad you might as well consider the outrageous. You can be brave now because you have so few choices. WTF. You might step into something wonderful.

6. *Do something that will support A or B, that 2010 will need or appreciate:* An MBA, experience in cold-call selling, working or studying abroad, learning a new industry, speaking Spanish, Internet marketing. When the situation improves, you will be prepared for the next opportunities.

7. *Stay away from lottery tickets and day trading.* My clients can buy a couple of tickets, but they're never allowed to say "win the lottery" when asked what their career strategy is. Don't go to places that take your money with lightning speed unless you have the cash for the harsh lesson that awaits you as certainly as tailgating accompanies football: professional poker, day trading, money in a Nigerian bank. You are most tempted when you are most desperate. Also, think long and hard before you sign up to sell insurance or stocks. These have as high as a 75 percent washout rate once you have painfully dialed through your list of family and friends.

8. *Network like a maniac.* I prefer to call it building relationships. It goes deeper, lasts longer and is more productive than the gimme flavor of networking. When economic times pinch, employers get deluged with resumes, are more conscious than ever about making a good hire decision, and will turn to the people they know before dipping into randomly sent resumes. Go to church or association meetings; sit at a bar; volunteer for a charity golf game. Turn off the Wii and get out of your house. You may find a mentor or an employer while you're waiting in the snack bar line at the high school swim match.

9. *Do something for somebody else.* I say this with caution because clients can fall in love with doing this. Taking on a middle school basketball league feels great, but its demands can ooze into your job-hunt time. The point is to keep your sorry self out of self-pity by helping someone who's got it worse than you. It uplifts the spirit, brings good into the world, and soup ladling at a homeless shelter can be a way to meet a useful other.

10. *Cobble it.* Pragmatic Jane heard Author Wannabe Friend Sally fret about how to turn her writing into a book. Jane's counsel to Sally: "Just staple it. Stop talking about it. Get this job done and move on." You may have to "just cobble it." Put together several jobs to get by. We all have in our youthful past a dose of "cobble it": waiting tables; working as a cook in a university kitchen; being a barista, a bar tender or bank teller; temping at a help desk, tutoring math, being a night clerk at a hotel or Christmas help at K-Mart. When I did my turn at this, I found it shaming, though necessary and, at the end of the day, motivational. I worked hard to get past the need for doing this. Looking back, I'm sure it built character, but I still cringe to remember those bleak days.

11. *Keep dreaming.* In the Great Depression of the 1930s, 25 percent of people were out of work, people lived hand to mouth, lost homes, left family behind. But as Napoleon Hill was penning his feel-uplifted *Think and Grow Rich* (which someone said got people dreaming and recovering, never mind the WPA, the TVA, favorable economic policies and World War II, which stimulated the economy), people were trekking from Oklahoma dustbowls to California valleys; they were setting their money-saving jaws against ever being in this pickle again; they swore

their children wouldn't suffer as they had, and they held onto "possible." It's an American ethic I hope we don't lose as we batten down the hatches, count pennies, delay gratification and worrying about the dark financial clouds whipping towards us. Dreams and practical behaviors will get you through.

Good luck with cobbling it. Let me know how I can help.