

NEWS

Action Centre helps those in need

When James lost his job last year at this time, he figured he'd use the same approach he had used throughout his 10-year management career: professional recruiters, industry networking and a targeted online job search. Nearly 12 months later, he's driving a taxi for cash, living in his elderly father's basement and wondering what went wrong. Educated, highly skilled and well connected, James thought unemployment would be a brief stop between middle-management gigs. But he was caught in a no-man's land: less qualified for the senior roles than other newly-unemployed senior applicants and over qualified for the junior roles he would have been happy to settle for.

James is a real person, and he's experiencing a real problem. Let go from his small company with just a few other employees, he has fallen through the cracks. And with his Employment Insurance now dried up, his access to community resources is minimal and it's complicated and intimidating for him to navigate the system.

As I ate breakfast at Angie's this morning with Jana Papke, I couldn't help but think about how things could have been different for James had his employer been able to taken advantage of our local Community Action Centre.

Funded by Employment Ontario, the Community Action Centre helps people like James find direction after job loss. It's designed for layoffs of 1-50 employees. Groups this small are rarely offered transitional support from their employers. While large businesses can afford and justify a temporary action centre to support their employees in a large downsizing, it's rarely feasible for layoffs of 1-50 people.

Jana, the co-ordinator of the Action Centre, says the centre can provide support for employers and employees during a downsizing or closure, and can assist businesses with staffing solutions when they're hiring.

"People who are part of a smaller layoff or smaller company have been falling through the cracks," Jana explains. "We assess their career and personal needs and help them

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access career support services and community services such as United Way agencies."

The model is unique to our Region, an

innovative pilot idea that treats job support as a "collective." Steve Sachs, a rep from the Labour Program of Waterloo Region, says there's a huge need to help displaced workers. He uses the example of Budd Canada, where employees were laid off in small groups over an extended period of time. "There was no support for those people because of the small size of the layoffs," Steve recalls. "It wasn't a massive downsizing that took place all at once."

The key here is that employers must make the connection for their employees by engaging the Action Centre's services. Clients can't access the Centre by walking in off the street, so the Centre relies on employers to take the first step. I can only imagine how James's situation may have been different had his employer taken this step to help.

While there's no cost to employers -- the program is funded by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities -- the Centre does have limited resources and relies on employer contributions when feasible. "Most employers care about their people and want to do the right thing," says Jana. "They just don't realize a service like this exists in

our community."

As we approach the new year, I can't help but worry about people like James. Canada's January 2009 layoff figures - an overwhelming 129,000 people - marked the country's worst ever one-month job-cut figures. StatsCan tells us that more than 10,700 consumers in Canada declared themselves insolvent last January, a jump of 23.1 per cent compared to the same month in 2008. Along with the job-cuts, labour force statistics imply that disheartened people like James had stopped searching for jobs.

We can all help. By donating to United Way, you'll help our agencies provide support to these 'lost' workers. By spreading the word about the Community Action Centre, or by taking advantage of the service if your business needs it, you'll help people like James to find their way. As I complete this column on Random Act of Kindness Day, I can't think of a better act of kindness than this.

Call the Community Action Centre
519-895-9060 or online at actioncentre.net.
If you'd like to meet me for a discussion,
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