

ECONOMY: LAYOFFS

## Losing your job, losing your identity

Many people define themselves by their work - and when they lose that, they risk losing their whole sense of themselves, pros say

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APRIL 22, 2009

Michelle Gillies lost a lot more than a steady paycheque when she was laid off from her job last year. She also lost her identity.

"My job was me. I spent 10 years so closely linked to what I did there that there were no lines to separate the two," says Ms. Gillies, formerly the promotion manager and a producer for Burlington, Ont.-based Christian cable broadcaster Crossroads Television System (CTS TV).

It took four months after she was let go in a cutback last April for her to be able to wake up at her home in Oakville, Ont., without thinking about the job, she says.

"I really couldn't imagine what I was without my job. Losing it was like having a death in the family -my own."

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Ms. Gillies is not the only person to find her identity so caught up in her job. Many people allow too much of their identity to be defined by their occupation, title, status and achievements on the job - and when they lose that, they risk losing their whole sense of themselves, career and psychology experts say.

With mounting layoffs, it's a predicament that more and more people are going to find themselves in. Job loss - or even just worrying about losing a job that you wrap your whole identity around - can lead to physical and psychological illness, and make it difficult to reimagine yourself should you need to launch a new career, the experts say.

Such overidentification is more common than you might imagine. Nearly a third - 31 per cent - of 12,113 respondents to a recent online Globe and Mail poll said their personal identity is defined by their career.

While it might seem admirable to be that committed to what you do, "a title shouldn't define who you are; it should always be who you are that counts," career expert Barbara Moses advises.

"If prestige at work, titles and salary are what people measure themselves by, losing their jobs will leave them feeling adrift, with no moorings," says Dr. Moses, a Globe and Mail columnist and the author of *What Next? Find the Work That's Right for You*.

That can lead to anxiety and depression, hostility and rage, as well as heart disease, insomnia, headaches and psychosomatic disorders, she warns.

While both sexes can over-identify with work, men are at higher risk, she says. That's because they are more likely to define themselves by their achievements and status they derive from their work.

"Men can have so much riding on their role at work that losing a job is a blow to their identity on a very primitive level," Dr. Moses says.

"Men often see job loss as a source of shame and embarrassment, and they may not be willing to tell others that they are unemployed. To them, admitting a job loss can be an admission that they are incompetent."

Women, on the other hand, tend to take a broader view and see personal interests and good relationships with family and friends as just as important in their lives as what they do for a living. "Because of that, women see job loss not as a mark of failure but as something that has to be coped with," she says.

As a result, men are less likely to wait to digest the emotional loss before moving right back into networking and job hunting, she says.

But Dr. Moses says it's vital to go through a grieving process before plunging into a new job search.

"How long varies, but it generally takes at least a couple of months for people who closely identify with a job to accept that the position and the former company are no longer a part of their lives," she says.

Rushing to find a new role can actually hurt someone's chances of finding a satisfying new career, says executive coach Linda Cattelan, principal of Toronto-based ResultsCatalyst Inc.

"By not taking time to review options, anxious job seekers can come across as angry and desperate to potential employers," she says.

"As well, the overidentification can make them try to jump back into a position that may no longer be right for them, and blind them to the fact that, no matter how much they loved their former role, there may be better alternatives," she says.

Ms. Cattelan recommends her clients go through at least a few weeks of reflection and reassessment of their career goals, skills and interests before they start to look for a new career. She asks executives who suddenly find themselves in transition to rate how important career, money, health, home and material possessions and relationships with others are in their life, and how satisfied they are with what they have in each.

"This can be an eye opener, because some career-obsessed people suddenly realize they have been so focused on their career that they have given short shrift to family or health," Ms. Cattelan says.

The review can make over-identifiers see that they may have compensated for dissatisfaction with another aspect of their life by putting an unhealthy attachment on work.

And it's important to find a sense of self-worth outside of work, she notes. "If you only look to your job as a source of positive affirmation and self-esteem, you put yourself at risk of becoming out of balance...I suggest looking at other areas of your life where you have some success or could have success if you put more focus on them. For instance, having a successful relationship, raising your kids, solid friendships, achievement in a hobby or sport, helping through philanthropy or community service."

The challenges are not only psychological. Many people who have been so wrapped up in their job may not be able to reimagine themselves doing something else, pros say.

So after Ms. Cattelan has clients do the assessment, she asks them to list five things they would consider most important in a new career, such as challenging work, a supportive employer or managing others.

"When you are clear about what your priorities are, then [the more] you can start out searching out opportunities that will provide them," and the less you think about specific roles or titles, she says. "The more you can bet beyond the blinkered mentality about having only one possible role, the wider the opportunities you can discover."

But it's not enough for someone who was really wrapped up in a job identity to decide to make a change. You have to break habits that have become ingrained in your personality so that you can demonstrate to others that you are capable of breaking out of your mould, says organizational psychologist Jack Muskat, managing director of talent development at human resources consultancy Verity International Ltd. in Toronto.

Your enthusiasm and commitment to a previous role is admirable but you have to give examples of how you are actively working to get beyond that role and trying to learn new tricks, Mr. Muskat says.

Spending much of your interview waxing nostalgic about your previous role is going to be off-putting to a potential employer, he says. You have to show that you are putting the past behind you. "You get discounted because it indicates you are not going to be adaptable to a new environment."

Another thing that can unconsciously hold back people who have become deeply identified with their work is they don't realize they have internalized a way of talking and doing business, says Michael Stern, a former recruiter and founder of management consultancy Michael Stern Associates in Toronto.

People who have been tied to a certain industry should ask friends and colleagues outside it to point out when they hear them lapse into language that no one in any other industry would know, he says. He advises clients to practice their pitch in front of a mirror or a friend to get feedback on how much insider lingo they are using.

Making a break from a job you got too close to can require time and effort, but in retrospect, it will bring career benefits, Mr. Muskat says.

"I've spoken to people over the years who will say that they are glad they got terminated because it made them realize they had gotten unhealthily close to their work. It put them in a position where they are in an industry with a brighter future, but they never would have done it on their own," he says.

That's certainly true of Ms. Gillies, who says taking the time to reassess herself and her situation, and get job search advice from an outplacement company, helped her to gain a fresh perspective.

Now, realizing broadcasting has limited potential, she is focusing on options in marketing, media relations and public relations. While she has nothing firm yet, she is optimistic that she is closing in on a new job. And she'll go into it with a new attitude.

"I have realized there is a whole lot more to me than my job," she says. "My work will continue to be a part of my life - with the key being part. My life will be properly balanced, as it should be."

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### *Test yourself*

Is your identity too defined by your job? Take this quiz, compiled with the help of career experts Linda Cattelan and Barbara Moses:

Most of your time is spent working or thinking about your job.

You have few interests outside what you do at work.

You feel restless when you are not working.

You can't carry on a conversation without referring to what you are doing at work.

You get depressed, agitated or bored when you are not working on high-profile, challenging assignments.

You wouldn't know what to do with yourself or how to fill your day if your job was eliminated.

When something positive happens to a colleague, such as a promotion or raise, you are privately envious or resentful.

You make yourself available to the office 24/7, through phone, e-mail or a BlackBerry.

You feel better about yourself when your boss or other senior people praise you, worse about yourself when they are indifferent or critical of your work.

The majority of your social life involves workplace colleagues or workplace functions.

People who work with you would describe you as very ambitious and competitive.

You regularly sacrifice personal obligations and leisure opportunities in favour of work responsibilities.

When you are at home with your family, your mind is often back in the office.

### *The more statements you*

*agree with, the more*

*likely you overly define yourself by your work.*

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### *Switching identities*

Feel your identity is too defined by your career? Here are some ideas from career expert Barbara Moses to help you understand and overcome it:

Re-examine your scripts

Do you think you are more interesting because of your job title? Or that your spouse will love you more if you get a promotion? Or that your kids don't mind when you miss a recital because of your job? Or that you will garner more respect because of what you do for a living? Re-examine such beliefs.

Think about consequences

Look for clues about how your preoccupation with work affects your health, family and other personal relationships. How much time does work take away from family? Are family members upset by the amount of time you spend at work? In social situations, do you find your

conversations always wander back to work? How do people react? Try to catch yourself and pay attention to the consequences.

#### Look to the past

Think about where you learned to develop a sense of self so closely tied to work. Were you primarily rewarded as a child for getting great marks? Were you praised more for what you did than who you were? Might you be modelling a parent: Was one so similarly career-identified that you learned this was the way to be? Or, was a parent so much the other way that you felt you had to be different?

#### Look at your values

While you may value such things as meeting challenges or seeking advancement, do you find that time with family, volunteering or pursuing hobbies are also important? Think about whether a focus on work is preventing you from satisfying other things that are important to you.

#### Force attention elsewhere

Think about other things you enjoy doing, from yoga to gardening. Develop a plan to incorporate them into your schedule - and force yourself to follow it. Widen your interests: Read books outside your subject area. Learn something new, whether a language or photography. Commit to new projects outside of work.

#### Redefine accomplishment

Think about your achievements in arenas outside of work. Keep the ways you are succeeding, and the feelings of well-being they generate, in your mind's eye. Over time, you will develop a broader sense of self.

#### Consider therapy

People whose sense of self is intimately tied to work are often resistant to making changes. Seek professional help.

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#### *Separation anxiety: moving on*

So caught up in your last job you can't imagine yourself in a new one? Here are tips from the pros on how to get ready to move on:

#### Stay cool

Avoid anger and the urge to take revenge. Don't lay blame on yourself or the organization

#### Don't panic

You need weeks, if not months, to grieve and clear your head. Don't leap into a desperate job hunt before you're ready.

#### Take comfort

If you are a victim of a downsizing, reassure yourself it was not a personal failure, just part of a widespread economic trend over which you had no control.

#### Don't hide it

Be open and honest about your job loss, but not brutally honest so that you drown people in detail they don't need to know.

#### Analyze your vulnerability

Review why you were expendable. Even if it was a numbers game, you were on the wrong side of the equation with a manager or a work role. It should provide insight about what to look for and what to avoid in future.

#### Take off the blinkers

The kind of role you performed before may no longer be your best option and, in fact, jobs like it may no longer be available. Research other roles that require your skills and aptitudes.

#### Review accomplishments

Restore confidence by writing down achievements and strengths, and go over the list regularly.

#### Lose the lingo

If you've so absorbed your former job culture that your language is full of insider jargon or slang, make a conscious effort to be more colloquial.

Be flexible

Accept the fact that you may not be able to hold out for a job with the same title, comparable salary or even in the same city as your former position.

*Wallace Immen*

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