



Do You Have a Moment?

Ewan Stewart shares the hard-earned lessons of retrenchment

“DO you have a moment Ewan?” The tone was different; softer, subdued, more serious. As I turned to greet my boss’ unseasonal visit, I knew that my time was up. The year was 2015 and the plummeting crude oil price was sending shockwaves throughout industry; I was about to join the rapidly-increasing bodycount of the oil and gas sector’s unemployed. As I struggled to regain control of my career, the next few months would be the toughest learning experience of my life.

My story is not unique for that period. Boy gets good job, builds confidence, makes strong progress towards his career goals; boy learns he’s not invincible as geopolitics and oversupply turn his industry upside down. Within my week’s notice period, I found myself fighting against the current, in arguably the worst engineering job-market in a generation; the same downturn that forced highly experienced engineers into early retirement, prolonged gardening leave, back to university, or into completely unrelated career paths. For those like me,

fixated on the idea of continuing in my profession, the task was an arduous one: compete against hundreds of equally-qualified and hardworking chemical engineers for seemingly only a handful of job openings. Globally.

As my journey wore on, I noticed a surprising trend. Many of those that I respected most as engineers really struggled, perhaps even more than me, to find their way back in. My premise is therefore that it's not the best engineers that will bounce back in a severe downturn; rather it's the ones who are the best connected and the most able to adapt to the situation. This article will follow my job search, exploring the insecurities, conceits and misconceptions that I had to overcome before I was finally able to regain a foothold. I hope that in writing this I can provide some encouragement to those who find themselves in a similar situation, now and in the future.

LESSON #1: BACK YOURSELF IMPLICITLY

A lot of people have trouble selling themselves to their full potential and I was no different. My first few weeks were spent diligently trawling the job boards, prioritising prospects, and aiming to submit one quality application each day. However, after a few weeks of this, my phone hadn't rung once. Something was wrong and I suspected that it was my CV. Whilst this had been sufficient to secure positions during boom times, under scrutiny it was now inadequate to the point of just being a bullet-list of projects I'd worked on. At the time, I could think of nothing more excruciating than listing my achievements on paper let alone at an interview. I needed help.

I'm not ashamed to admit that I sought professional advice, which led me to create an achievement-based CV – a format I would recommend. The idea is that under each job entry, the CV would have a list of accomplishments detailing your role on a particular project and what the end result of your actions was, preferably with metrics included. For example, the bullet point that had originally read "Water injection project X" was then expanded to read "Produced operating procedures to allow the safe recommencement of water injection leading to 800 bbl/d increase in crude oil production..." Applying this method to multiple years of experience, I found the conventional wisdom of the 2-page CV to be very limiting. My resulting CV was 3–4 pages and packed with examples.

LESSON #2: ADOPT AN OPEN MINDSET

With my shiny new CV to market-standard, I hit the job-boards again with renewed vigour. However, as radio silence continued, frustration began to set in. Whilst I genuinely don't believe there is anything wrong with an involuntary career gap, negative sentiments can be difficult to shake when your professional viability is on the line. Part of me was embarrassed to find myself in this situation, and this had resulted in an almost entirely insular approach to my job search. Perhaps the most anxiety comes from not really knowing whether or

not you are doing the right things. However, if you are able to constantly challenge your assumptions, the resulting insights will allow you to change your methods and set yourself on the right path. Clarity is a great thing; I just needed to experience more pain before I would start to question my own mindset.

My approach very slowly began to change and it started by reaching out to recruitment agencies. However, even though I was seeking advice, I would dismiss it out of hand if I didn't like what I was hearing. For example on learning that companies were using software to screen CVs, I couldn't accept that all of my carefully-scripted cover letters and customised CVs may never reach human eyes. How dare they – all applicants must be assessed on their individual merits! The correct approach, of course, would have been to use this valuable intel to my advantage by ensuring that all keywords from the advert were included in my CV.

**IF YOU ARE ABLE TO CONSTANTLY CHALLENGE
YOUR ASSUMPTIONS, THE RESULTING INSIGHTS
WILL ALLOW YOU TO CHANGE YOUR METHODS
AND SET YOURSELF ON THE RIGHT PATH**

As the weeks went by, I would slowly reconsider my position. The non-reaction to my applications made me think that perhaps I should be listening more. I started to put myself in the mind of a hiring manager. If I had more than 100 CVs in my inbox, would I really have time to read all of them as well as do my day-job? Or would I use other methods to narrow the field? Would I take the risk of hiring someone with no experience in my industry and living in a completely different region? It's not impossible, but it's definitely a tough sell!

There were other things that irked me that I was just going to have to accept, eg candidate profiling, where employers in particular parts of the world can specify the gender, age range, and nationality they want. The false adverts, or CV harvesting exercises. By accepting these for what they were, I was able to qualify the vacancies I was applying for and reduce unnecessary effort. I was starting to learn.

LESSON #3: NETWORK FOR SUCCESS

Perhaps my most significant breakthrough came during a conversation with a fellow job-seeker who had just secured a new contract. Being rather perplexed that I hadn't seen his position advertised, I found out that it hadn't been. A former colleague had simply heard he was looking for work and reached out to him directly. This information was transformational for me. I had just discovered the existence of an underground job market, a notion that I might have scoffed at just a few weeks prior. The competitive advantage of this was immediately clear as I switched my attention to creating opportunities for myself. From then on, my time was spent on LinkedIn identifying decision-makers, on the phone to ex-colleagues, and around

town meeting anyone that would speak to me.

As I understand it, even in the worst job market there will still be positive turnover in isolated pockets. This could be in the form of sub-sectors that benefit from the new market conditions, large projects with committed spend that have passed the point of no return, or the more nimble consultancies with low overheads that are able to out-compete the established design houses in a low-price environment. The smart job-seeker might be well placed trying to identify where these are and making contact with the organisations directly.

WHO'S MORE LIKELY TO GET THE JOB: THE TRUSTED ENGINEER THAT THEY LET GO BUT HAVEN'T HEARD FROM SINCE, OR THE NEWCOMER THAT'S CHECKING IN ONCE EVERY FEW WEEKS?

My advice when reaching out is to keep the tone conversational and to be persistent but not intrusive. Who's more likely to get the job: the trusted engineer that they let go but haven't heard from since, or the newcomer that's checking in once every few weeks? It might be closer than you think!

BOY SUCCEEDS

In the end, I was able to bring everything together. Yes, there were many false starts along the way; interviews I messed up, offers that never came through. My breakthrough came via an industry conference which I had visited in previous years and knew to be well-attended. I carefully did my research on who would be exhibiting and created a plan of who I wanted to speak to, leaving home with a folder full of CVs. Having struck a connection at one particular stand, later that same day I received an email from my new contact putting me in touch with the hiring manager of the subsidiary I was interested in. The only thing then in the way of me regaining my career was the interview, during which I made sure to impress. My plight was over!

LESSON #4: GET INVOLVED

In hindsight, my biggest error was not being connected enough from the get-go. Establishing a network when you need it is all well and good; however it can seem a bit contrived. On the other hand, if you already know who's who in town, then you can feel comfortable reaching out. I believe that the best way to build a network is to do so when you are not looking for work. One way of doing this is to get involved in your local engineering community by attending industry events. An even better idea might be to join a committee, where you could get involved in organising site tours, promoting STEM/diversity, mentoring, guest lecturing or acting as an interviewer for members seeking Chartered status.

My belief is that if you can become an active member of your



CONNECTED: THE BEST WAY TO BUILD A NETWORK IS TO DO SO WHEN YOU ARE NOT LOOKING FOR WORK

community, then your community will present opportunities to you if you ever need it. There are so many other advantages beyond the networking. You will become a more informed engineer, learn new skills which can influence your career, and will amass more CPD hours than you can keep track of!

FINAL THOUGHTS

Retrenchment is just part of the ebb and flow of engineering work; projects end, companies downsize, industries contract. It is not the worst thing that can possibly happen to you, although it would no doubt feature in most people's top ten. In some instances it may even be a welcome time for change, an opportunity to leapfrog into a higher position at a new organisation, or, for the more adventurous, a chance to create your own business.

RETRENCHMENT IS CHALLENGING, BUT IF YOU TAKE THE TIME TO LEARN ITS LESSONS YOU WILL ADAPT AND EMERGE STRONGER

Retrenchment is challenging, but if you take the time to learn its lessons you will adapt and emerge stronger. I found networking to be hands-down my biggest differentiator. Ask yourself honestly, if you were retrenched tomorrow, would you boot up the laptop, or would you be able to pick up the phone? ■

Ewan Stewart CEng MICHemE is a member of the Queensland Joint Chemical Engineering Committee