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Carrie Johnson

Job Seekers Look for Help in Numbers, Comfort in Pep Talks

Adine Hoffman, a technology trainer, approached with an eager look. Alas, no luck. It was only a reporter, not someone in a position to hire her.

Before Sept. 11, Hoffman said, she had two interviews—but the well has since dried. That's why she hits networking events like the information technology employment night in Alexandria, hoping for job leads.

Candidates waited in line Tuesday to talk with recruiters from firms such as Electronic Data Systems Corp. and SiteSafe Inc. But even those opportunities aren't sure things.

Janet Schuchmann, a recruiter for First Virginia Bank and one of the most wanted at the event, rolled up a thin stack of résumés and stuck them in her purse. But Schuchmann said the company has "not had a lot of open positions" among its technical staff of 250 because turnover has slowed in the sluggish economy.

That's become a common refrain in a job market that has become even more tentative in the past month.

"Overall, the market seems very guarded and hypersensitive," according to research notes issued last week by Drake Beam Morin, a New York-based firm that offers job counseling and other help to laid-off employees. "New clients since 9/11 are more keenly aware that their job search is going to take some time."

As the wait drags on, job seekers increasingly turn to peers and career groups for advice. Folks in the hunt for a new position said they planned to supplement their Web efforts—such as posting employment paperwork online—with old-fashioned approaches.

In a basement office near Dupont Circle last Monday, more than 50 people gathered to hear a talk called "Finding Work Without Losing Heart." Many came from the ranks of the D.C. area's once-bustling technology sector: here, a Web developer; there, a



John Tergstrom was among the participants at a technology employment night last week on the Alexandria campus of Northern Virginia Community College. Jobs were scarce.

BY MICHAEL LUTZKY—THE WASHINGTON POST

technical writer and editor. Mixed into the gathering, hosted by Forty Plus, (www.fp.org) a nonprofit job search and support group for executives 40 and older, are a few salespeople and public relations staffers who used to count as potential customers a long list of now dead dot-com and telecommunications firms.

"Our biggest goal here is moving you out of Forty Plus," Cal Gilbert, president of the Washington chapter, told the group. "We're one of the few organizations that likes to see our members go away."

The day's speaker, William Byron, advised the attendees to develop a strategic plan to focus their efforts. His prescription? Think about what sets you apart from others, whether it's foreign-language skills or the ability to write and speak clearly.

Enlist friends and mentors to serve as an unofficial "board of directors" that can listen to and critique your pitch. Videotape yourself to rid your vocabulary of junkyard language.

Along the way, Byron, pastor of Holy Trinity Church in Georgetown and the author of books on job loss and corporate culture shifts (www.holytrinitydc.org/Pastor/Book/default.htm), manages to wrestle a few laughs out of a group that he said might justifiably feel "lower than a whale's belly," about the prospect of unemployment.

"Identify your values," Byron said. "What are your convictions? What do you think is really important? Line these things up and view them as kind of a range finder."

That's what folks like James Benjamin, out of work about 3½ months, are doing. Benjamin, who has started getting job interviews again in the past two weeks, said he has been hearing from smaller companies rather than larger ones. After seven years in technology—telecommunications installations and networking—Benjamin said he's now looking for a job with solid benefits.

"That's important because I have a family," Benjamin said.

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