

# CAREERS



## How to Recover From a Firing

BY ANNE FAIRCLOTH

*In a time of widespread downsizing and ceaseless job changing, getting fired isn't the disaster or disgrace it used to be. In fact, it can even have its bright side.*

Remember the days when getting fired was almost as rare as getting divorced? When you chose a spouse, you signed a lifelong contract; perhaps more to the point, your spouse did the same when he or she picked you. But with almost half of all couples today splitting up before death does them part, divorce has lost its taint. And with lifetime employment at one company even rarer than lifelong monogamy, dismissal for cause is not the disgrace it once was. Getting fired is "less of a scarlet letter today," according to executive recruiter Bill Heyman of Heyman Associates in New York City. "When I started 18 years ago," he says, "it was unheard of for a recruiter to consider candidates who lost a job. But that changed when people started switching jobs more frequently." Over the same period, the surge in downsizings and layoffs—one out of eight executives has been fired at least once, according to the American Management Association—has made termination seem less personal, and thus less terminal.

Nevertheless, it still hurts, especially when you're not part of a mass layoff. Undertaking any job search is difficult—a gut-wrenching combination of rush party and blind date—and when it's preceded by the psychological blow of being fired, the result can be paralysis.

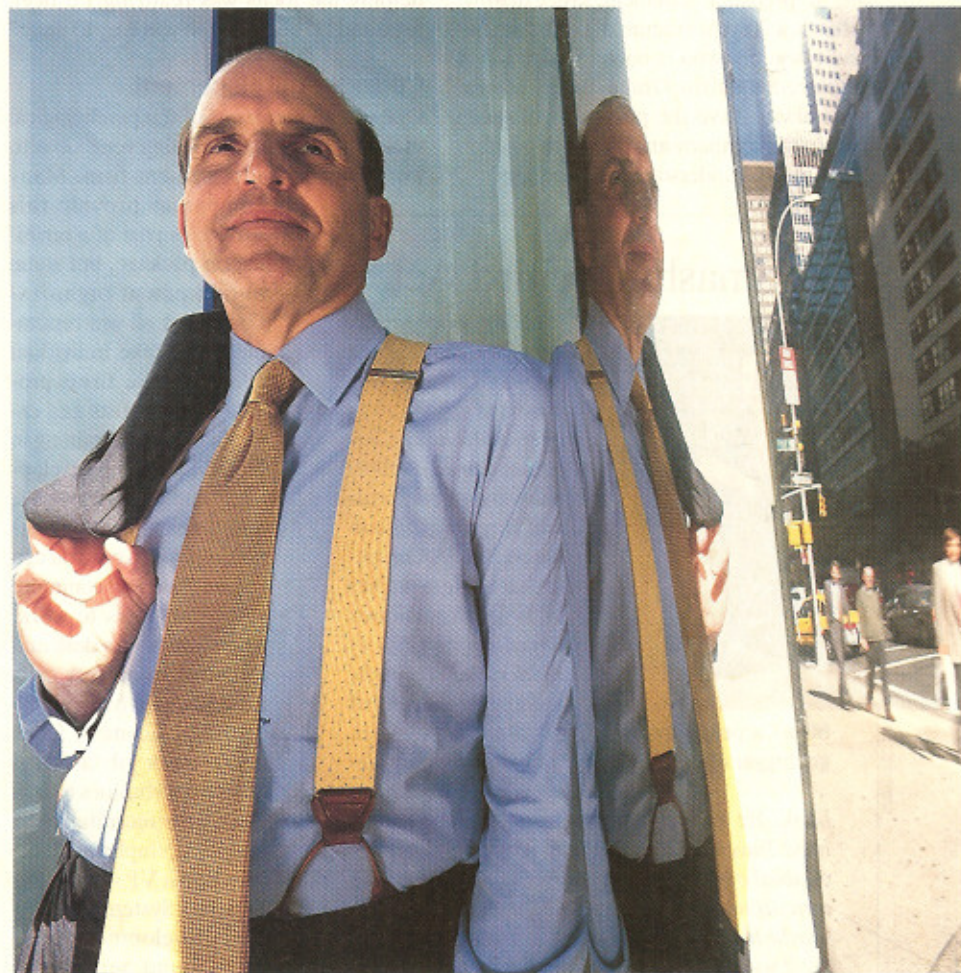
Getting fired, however, can actually be a blessing. Often it means you can quit pretending, to others and yourself, that your personality and skills were at all suited to your most recent situation. Being told in unmistakable fashion that they were not lib-

erates you to find a more satisfactory job—for both you and your employer—provided you have taken the following steps.

### Figure out what went wrong

"If you do not understand what might have been your contribution to the firing, you'll repeat the mistake," says Michael Wakefield, a senior program associate at the

Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, N.C. Ideally, says Wakefield, you received regular evaluations and so have a pretty good idea why you were canned. In reality, few managers have the time or the skills to give you ample feedback. Moreover, to discourage lawsuits, human resources professionals prefer to say as little as possible at the time of dismissal.



A nice severance package and some consulting gigs kept PR man John Margaritis from dealing with job loss.

If you can't get your former employer to tell you what happened, a good career counselor can help you piece it together. "I usually discover the dismissal is a culmination of events where my clients failed to act," says Marilyn Moats Kennedy, a management consultant in Wilmette, Ill. Such employees let friction build, assuming they wouldn't be fired.

### Develop an exit statement

Try to resist the temptation to storm out of the office and slam the door. Keep your head for the delicate negotiations needed to put your dismissal in the best light. According to Terry Ebert, managing director of the Ayers Group, a New York-based outplacement firm, you and your employer should develop an exit statement that begins with a paragraph stating what you accomplished in your job. The second paragraph should say that due to a change in management style, or some other reason that condemns neither the company nor yourself, you decided to pursue a career elsewhere. That way, potential employers hear the same story from you and anyone who may provide a reference. "It's never too late" to prepare a statement, says Christine Pallatto, a 20-year veteran of corporate human resources who is now a senior VP at outplacement firm Drake Beam Morin. "You always have the possibility of going back to the company and asking to position it as a mutual understanding," she says.

### Work through it psychologically

This may be a fast or slow process, depending on your ability to bounce back. Says John Challenger, of outplacement firm Challenger Gray & Christmas: "Even the most self-assured CEO can be thrown off balance by being out of work." Emotionally you may feel like hiding or taking a sabbatical, but Challenger believes you should begin your job search as quickly and "as publicly as possible." That first call or two may be hard, he says, but "the more people you tell, the sooner you'll find a job, and the better that job will be."

John Margaritis, who was dismissed as CEO of PR firm Ogilvy Adams & Rinehart in May 1997, had a delayed emotional reaction to his termination. Because of a good severance package and some lucrative consulting assignments, he did not come to terms right away with what had happened. "For a while I just drifted. I was surfing the Net, goofing off. I didn't want to do anything." Then his severance checks stopped coming, and "it hit me," he says. Margaritis ultimately became a partner at the Hawthorn Group, a PR firm. "The first step in helping me focus was realizing I'd been fired and I'd been hurt. It was easy to deny."

### Consider outplacement

One way to break out of the psychological funk that accompanies losing your job is to work with an outplacement firm. Many companies provide this service as part of a termination package, but some outplacement organizations—not all are reputable—also take individual clients. These firms provide psychologists and career counselors, training in areas like résumé development and interview skills, and perhaps most important, a place to go. You can put on a suit and commute with your peers to work, where you have a desk and someone to answer calls from prospective employers. Outplacement firms also sponsor job fairs and other opportunities to network with recruiters and potential employers. Kathy Gray, a VP at InterPro Expense Systems, a software-development company, found her current

job through a recruiter she met at a Drake Beam Morin job fair. But remember, companies retain these firms to find you a new job quickly. If you'd prefer a more introspective, unhurried approach, they may not be your best bet.

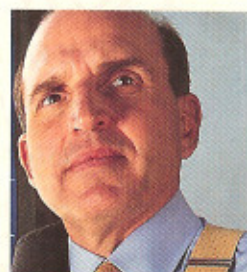
### Nail the interview

"Nobody wants to hire a victim," says Caela Farren, CEO of MasteryWorks, an Annandale, Va., consultancy. Key phrases to avoid: My boss was a jerk; they didn't appreciate me. Echoes Pallatto: "Don't take an emotional or defensive tack. I prefer it when candidates are willing to say they were in some way responsible and don't blame the former employer." Of course, this sort of composure requires you to have resolved the emotional issues surrounding your termination. Work with a counselor or friend at portraying your dismissal evenly and coming across as confident and capable, or simply videotape yourself.

Above all, be honest. Although you should not put the reason you left a job on your résumé, the question will almost certainly come up in an interview, especially if you are not working now. Use your agreed-upon exit statement if you have one, or take the opportunity to focus on your strengths with an explanation like, "I felt they underutilized my marketing background." Remember to keep it short: One of the biggest mistakes people make is spending too much time trying to justify what happened.

### Look for the silver lining

Sometimes dismissal provides the push you need to break out of a rut. Don't be afraid to look for work in a new industry or consider a new type of job. Some firees have given rein to their entrepreneurial instincts. Take two managers at Handy Dan, a California retailer, who were fired in 1978 as the result of personality clashes with the chain's new owner. A friend suggested that they had "just been hit in the ass by a golden horseshoe." The two are none other than Arthur Blank and Bernard Marcus, who started a company called Home Depot. And it never would have happened if Handy Dan had wanted to keep them. **F**



"THE FIRST STEP IN HELPING ME FOCUS WAS REALIZING I'D BEEN FIRED AND I'D BEEN HURT."

## A Smashing Third Act



Mike Carpenter's career got bigger after Kidder.

*As the once-mighty crash at Citigroup, one former fall guy has bounced higher than ever—Michael Carpenter, named co-chief executive of corporate and investment banking on Nov. 1. Carpenter last made headlines in 1994 when he was forced out as CEO of Kidder Peabody in the wake of the Joseph Jett bond-trading scandal, which ultimately destroyed the investment bank. Yet he was snapped up by Sandy Weill to head Travelers Life & Annuity, where he more than doubled operating earnings. His mandate now is to turn around the most troubled area at Citigroup. Maybe his demonstrated coping skills are just what Weill was seeking this time too.*