

## Escape the Cycle of Underemployment

By Leslie Stevens-Huffman

At the height of the recession, the **U.S. Labor Department** estimated that 9 million people were working part-time or reduced hours. While there's no official tally, some estimate that millions more were forced to accept lesser positions at lower salaries just to pay their bills. If this sounds eerily familiar, it will take a strategic plan and a concerted effort to recapture your previous stature and salary.

"Employers are always looking for reasons *not* to call a candidate," notes **Steven Provenzano**, CPRW, president of **Executive Career Services**, a coaching and resume firm based in Chicago. "Candidates who've been working part-time or in lower-level positions need go on the offensive to prove that their technical skills are still current and that they're worth the salary they're seeking."

So, how do you break the cycle?

### Look Outward

"Technical professionals need to adopt a market mindset and stop looking inward to end a pattern of underemployment," says Missouri-based IT career coach **Kingsley Tagbo**. "Don't try to push the skills you have, focus on filling the skills the market is demanding."

If you're facing a diminishing demand for your tech skills, you'll have to contend with increased competition and lower wages just to reclaim your former position. So re-assess the market, acquire new skills or certifications, and develop a long-term career strategy. For example, Tagbo suggests learning iPhone apps or PHP as a way to reboot your career.

"If you have hot technical skills, list them in your profile and skills summary at the top of your resume, because you want to quash any perceptions that you've lost your edge," adds Provenzano.

De-emphasize your current position by utilizing a blended resume format, which places your relevant technical skills and experience at the top and provides a chronology of your work history near the bottom. Classify your current job as an interim position and exclude the name of the company to focus reviewers on your related work history.

### Prove It

Once you've anticipated the market and grabbed the attention of prospective employers, you're ready for the supreme test: Proving your worth during an interview. Employers are often skeptical of candidates whose careers have gone backwards or plateaued. Those who fail at this juncture can usually point to a lack of interview preparation, technical knowledge or an overdose of ego as the culprits.

"Volunteer to work for free if you have to and penetrate the barriers of disbelief by providing a portfolio of your work," suggests Tagbo.

Peruse the job description to anticipate the technical questions you'll be asked, then bone up for the interview. Although some tech professionals contend there are often several correct answers to technical interview questions, experts vehemently disagree. Technical managers source questions from study guides and certification exams and compare a candidate's answers to those supplied by the experts. You'll receive higher offers if you purchase the guides and provide text book responses during interviews.

"Take the certification exam or the practice tests to prep for the technical interview, so your answers are sharp and you appear confident in your knowledge," advises Tagbo. "Support your case by referencing specific examples from your portfolio."

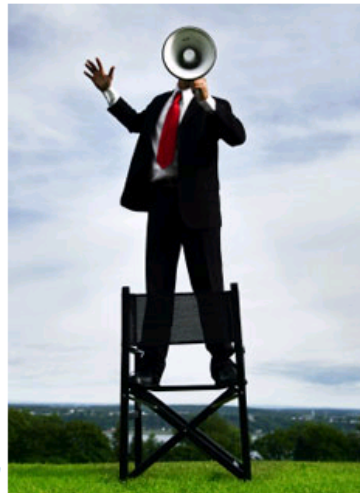
Although accepting an interim job shouldn't be a deterrent given the recent economy, be prepared to discuss the ways you've sustained, and even increased, your technical knowledge.

### Adjust Your Attitude

Despite making changes, you may have to settle for a lower salary simply because the supply of candidates exceeds the demand. Having realistic expectations is important, so you don't convey a sense of entitlement during interviews. If you do, you'll jeopardize the opportunity.

"I always advise candidates not to take a huge salary cut unless they absolutely have to," says **Alicia Pezo**, a technical recruiter for Los Angeles-based recruiting firm **Technical Connections Inc.** "If you have to settle for a lower-level position, look for a company with growth opportunities, so you can work your way back up." She believes you can regain up to \$10,000 if you turn in a solid performance during your first year.

"It can be discouraging at times, because employers base their offers on your current salary," notes Pezo. "Just keep the long-term picture in mind because you'll be earning money over your entire lifetime."



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