



Managing Your Job Transition

Making Smart Financial Choices
after a Job Loss

Dealing with a Job Loss

Dealing with a job loss can make you feel overwhelmed. It's okay to take a few days to adjust to your situation. But don't wait too long to figure out how to handle your finances during a period of unemployment.

Keep yourself on track—follow these basic steps:

- ▶ **Take Control of Your Finances:** Knowing what financial resources you can count on will help you plan.
- ▶ **Use All Available Employment Services:** Take advantage of every job search channel to find your next job sooner rather than later.
- ▶ **Protect Yourself From Financial Fraud:** Check out anyone offering you financial services or advice.

About this Publication

This publication is being distributed in New York with the cooperation of The Better Business Bureau® Serving Metropolitan New York, www.newyork.bbb.org and www.bbb.org, (212) 533-7500.

For additional details about how to handle credit, debt, savings, and investment issues, as well as tips about how to choose financial advisers and credit counselors, please see *Get More Money Now*, a public education project from the Education and Research Foundation of the Better Business Bureau of Metropolitan New York, generously supported by the FINRA Investor Education Foundation. Go to www.bbbmoneynow.org to view and print out the information in either English or Spanish.

Managing Your Job Transition

MAKING SMART FINANCIAL CHOICES AFTER A JOB LOSS

You may not be able to control if or when your company merges, lays off workers, or ceases operations—but you *can* take steps to manage the financial impact of those events.

This brochure contains tips on how to:

- ▶ manage your finances in the event of unemployment;
- ▶ ask the right questions about your company's benefit plans; and
- ▶ check on financial advisers and avoid fraud.



What Now?

STEPS TO TAKE AFTER THE LAYOFF, MERGER OR SHUTDOWN

Whatever the reason for the loss of your job, you now face a period when handling your finances wisely will be critical to you and your family. These tips can help you take charge of your financial situation:

- ▶ **Act Quickly to Reduce Spending:** With less money coming in, you should take immediate action to reduce spending wherever possible. Resist the temptation to buy on credit.
- ▶ **Assess Your Short-Term Situation:** Figure out how much cash you have readily available or can get on short notice, how much you owe—mortgage, rent, credit cards, car loans—and the monthly payments associated with those and other debts. Establish how long you can make ends meet on the financial resources that you already have in hand.
- ▶ **Ask About Employment Services:** Your employer may work with state and local officials, or consultants known as outplacement firms, to provide services such as job placement, retraining or resume writing. Maximize your opportunity to get a new position as quickly as possible by taking advantage of these services. If you belong to a labor union, also ask your union what it can do to assist you. Make finding a new position your full-time job.
- ▶ **Inquire About Unemployment Insurance:** A representative of the state's unemployment insurance office may be at your workplace to offer guidance and assistance in filling out the necessary applications. If not, you can usually find the nearest government office by looking up the local Department of Labor. Ask if you qualify and find out how the insurance may be affected if you get other payments from the company. Knowing how much you can claim and how long you can expect to receive unemployment benefits will help you handle your finances.



In New York State, you can find information online about how to file a claim at www.labor.state.ny.us/ui/how_to_file_claim.shtm. Or call the NYS Telephone Claims Center at (888) 209-8124 for New York State residents, or (877) 358-5306 for out of state residents, between 8:00 am and 5:00 pm, Monday through Friday. This is a toll-free call. Services are available in English, Spanish, and many other languages.

- ▶ **Avoid Taking Out Loans or Withdrawals Against Retirement Savings Plans:** This kind of move might cost you a lot of money in terms of penalty taxes. Loans put a drag on your retirement savings by reducing the amounts invested on your behalf. In the event of a layoff, 401(k) rules generally require that employees pay back loans within 90 days of leaving or face both income taxes and a hefty 10 percent penalty tax on the withdrawal.
- ▶ **Get Financial Advice:** Your company or union may offer guidance regarding the financial decisions you face. Your state or local employment agencies may also provide information. Ask questions as early as possible to help determine what is right for you. Consider working with a credit counselor or investment professional. They can help you develop a plan to see you through your unemployment period and beyond.



Understand Your Company's Benefits

Your employer may offer a variety of employee benefits, and it is up to you to take the initiative to understand them. This is particularly important when you face a period of unemployment. One benefit that you probably use frequently is your health insurance. Other company benefits, such as a 401(k) or pension plan, help you build retirement security over time. Do not be shy: ask questions about how employer benefits may affect you, now or later.

ASK THESE QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR EMPLOYER'S BENEFIT PLANS:

- 1. What are the terms of the plans that cover me?** Ask for the summary plan description (SPD), the document that contains a complete description of the benefits owed to you and how they are calculated. Your company's human resources department or chief financial officer, the plan trustee or administrator, or your labor union should have a copy of this document.

2.

When do I vest and how much is my benefit?

The plan administrator or the company's human resources department should tell you exactly how long you must work before you become entitled to, or vest in, your benefits, exactly when vested benefits are credited to employees each year, and how much those benefits will be. Ask how the benefit is calculated so you can double check that the amount reported to you is correct. Also check previous benefit statements that you have received along the way to ensure that the calculation is correct. Keep in mind that you are always vested in the amounts that you have contributed to a plan. Your employer, however, may require employees to work for a designated period to vest in the amounts contributed by the company.

3.

When can I start getting payments?

You need to know when you can start receiving your benefits so you can plan accordingly. It is possible that you may not have a right to receive payments as quickly as you would expect even if you retire or depart the company under normal circumstances. Some plans may provide for an early retirement option under certain circumstances if you have met the length of service requirement even if you do not meet the age requirement. This option usually results in a reduced benefit to the employee. Before you opt for payments, make sure that you understand what level of benefit—full or reduced—you are getting, the reason causing a benefit reduction, and how long you have to wait to get the full benefit provided by the plan.

TIP:

Health Insurance

COBRA MAY HELP YOU STAY HEALTHY

One of the most significant risks of unemployment is the loss of your health insurance. A federal law, known as COBRA, provides for continuation of health coverage up to 18 months after a job loss, under certain circumstances. To be eligible for COBRA insurance:

- ▶ You must have been enrolled in your company's health plan while employed. The plan must also continue to operate after you are no longer employed.
- ▶ You have a limited time to decide to take COBRA coverage once you have been notified that you are eligible. You must select coverage by the 60th day after the written notice is sent to you or the day your health coverage ceases—whichever is later. If you fail to respond, you and your family will lose your right to COBRA benefits.
- ▶ You must pay the premium that you were already paying plus the amount that was paid by the company. There may be additional administrative fees—possibly up to 2 percent of your premium. Even if this seems high, you are still paying group premiums instead of individual premiums, which are usually higher.
- ▶ You must pay the full premium on time. Failure to make your full payment on time will result in termination of health insurance. Generally, you will not be able to recover coverage by making the payment after your coverage was terminated.

For more information, visit the Web site for the Department of Labor's Employee Benefits Security Administration (EBSA) at www.dol.gov/ebsa. The EBSA is charged with protecting the integrity of pensions, health plans and other employee benefits.

Commonly Offered Benefit Plans

PENSION PLANS:

These plans usually provide a series of payments, also called a defined benefit, after you retire. The amount you receive is normally calculated based on a combination of salary, age and years of service. Pension plans that replace a good chunk of your before-retirement salary are becoming rare. Employees who leave a job before a certain age or specified years of service with the company may not receive anything. This may happen when they have not met the eligibility requirements to become entitled, or vested, in the plan benefits.

401(K) PLANS:

These plans are referred to as defined contribution plans because they allow you to contribute a portion of your salary to retirement savings, and receive certain tax benefits. When you participate, the taxable salary that your employer reports to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) is reduced by the amount of that contribution. Income taxes on that money and any earnings are deferred, or postponed, until you withdraw from your account. Generally, if you withdraw before age 59½, you will pay a tax penalty. Some companies also offer a Roth feature to the 401(k) plan that allows you to contribute after-tax dollars—known as designated Roth contributions. You pay taxes on designated Roth contributions up front, but their earnings grow tax-free. Earnings on the Roth contributions may be withdrawn after age 59½ so long as the withdrawal is made five years after the initial Roth contribution.

The maximum amount you can contribute to a 401(k) is set annually by the IRS. For 2011, the maximum contribution is \$16,500. If you are 50 or older, you can add another \$5,500 in “catch up” contributions for a pre-tax total of \$22,000. If your company allows you to make both pre-tax and designated Roth contributions, you may determine how much you want to contribute to each. You must, however, count both contributions towards the annual limit.

A 401(k) plan may give you several investment choices. The company may also match some or all of your contributions on a pre-tax basis. You will owe tax on any pre-tax contributions and their earnings when you withdraw funds from the plan. The money that you have contributed to the 401(k) plan will not be affected by events impacting your employer because you are always entitled to or vested in your own contributions. Your employer will decide how long you must work before you vest in the matching contributions. You may move (rollover) your 401(k) savings when you leave an employer allowing continued deferral of the taxable portion of your account. If you work for a nonprofit organization, your employer may offer a 403(b) plan, which is a similar kind of retirement savings vehicle. Check plan rules with your employer.

CASH BALANCE PLANS:

These plans provide for a benefit that is stated in terms of an account balance. Each employee has an account to which the employer contributes a specified dollar amount every year. The funds in the account earn interest at a guaranteed rate that is independent of the actual investment performance of the plan. Generally, you can take an annuity or a lump sum.



EMPLOYEE PROFIT-SHARING PLANS:

The company contributes a certain amount of its annual profits to participating employees. Each worker's account is credited with its share of the contributed profits. The amount contributed often ebbs and flows with a company's financial performance.

EMPLOYEE STOCK BONUS PLANS:

The company contributes a certain number of shares of its own stock to its employees. As with profit sharing plans, the amount of shares received tends to fluctuate according to the company's financial performance.

Long-Term Unemployment

GET THE DETAILS YOU NEED TO MAKE DECISIONS

Being out of work for an extended period may require making some difficult decisions that could affect your long-term financial health. High on the list: you may need to decide how to manage severance pay, choose the form of payment from benefit plans, and consider how to preserve your retirement funds if you are still years away from retirement age. Keep in mind the following tips when deciding what to do:

- ▶ **Conserve Funds Meant for Your Retirement if You Can:** Tap into your retirement funds to make ends meet only if you have no other options. If you have a choice, keep those funds invested and working for you until you actually retire. If your situation becomes so difficult that you must seek bankruptcy protection, ask whether pension and retirement funds in qualified plans might be designated protected assets in bankruptcy proceedings. Consult a professional adviser to determine whether this would be possible in your bankruptcy situation.
- ▶ **Beware of Tax Consequences:** Income taxes apply when you tap into retirement funds prior to age 59½. The plan administrator is required to withhold 20 percent of the amount you cash out to ensure that you will pay the taxes that apply. An additional 10 percent penalty tax may apply if you are under 59½ years of age. To avoid income tax and a tax penalty, you must roll over your funds to an Individual Retirement Account (IRA) or other qualified retirement plan within 60 days of receiving the retirement funds.



- ▶ **Choose Direct Rollovers to Avoid Potential Taxes:** If you elect to roll over retirement funds, you may avoid tax complications and the risk that you will not complete a rollover within the required 60 days of receiving those funds. Choose a direct rollover by having the plan administrator transfer the rollover amount directly to an IRA or other qualified retirement plan.
- ▶ **Use Lump Sums Wisely:** Receiving a lump sum may tempt you to spend it on that one thing you have been wanting all your life. Do yourself a favor and wait. If you face a long unemployment period, these may be the only funds you will have to make ends meet. Even if that is not the case, consider short- and long-term needs before you decide what to do. If you decide to invest the lump sum, take your time to consider what you are going to invest in, when you are going to make the investment and how much of the lump sum you want to invest in different types of investments such as stocks, bonds, or non-financial assets.

TIP:

401(k) Hardship Withdrawals

UNDERSTAND THE TAX BITE AND LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES

Under certain circumstances, it may be possible to access your 401(k) funds before retirement. Check with your employer for the specifics of your plan. A hardship withdrawal should be a choice of last resort. You will never get the full amount that you withdraw because you will have to pay taxes.

Generally, hardship withdrawals are:

- ▶ available if your employer's plan permits them, but are not required by law;
- ▶ not loans—they cannot be repaid;
- ▶ subject to regular taxes—your employer will likely deduct 20 percent up front;
- ▶ subject to a 10 percent penalty tax if you are not 59½ or older;
- ▶ available only after you have withdrawn all other available 401(k) funds;
- ▶ not available after you have been terminated.

You may use hardship withdrawals to:

- ▶ purchase or repair a primary home;
- ▶ pay education tuition, room and board, and fees for the next 12 months for you, your spouse, children and other dependents;
- ▶ prevent eviction or foreclosure on your primary residence;
- ▶ address severe financial hardship;
- ▶ pay for unreimbursed medical expenses for you, your spouse, children and other dependents;
- ▶ pay for funeral expenses for immediate family members—parents, spouse, children, and other dependents.

TIP:

401(k) Hardship Withdrawals continued

The 10 percent penalty tax is waived if your hardship withdrawal results from:

- ▶ your total and permanent disability;
- ▶ medical bills that exceed 7.5 percent of your adjusted gross income;
- ▶ a court order to pay funds to a spouse, child or dependent;
- ▶ permanent lay off, termination, quitting or early retirement in the same year you turn 55;
- ▶ permanent lay off, termination, quitting or retirement accompanied by payments for the rest of your (or your designated beneficiaries') life or life expectancy that continue for at least five years or until you reach age 59½, whichever is longer.

Hardship withdrawals are costly in the short-term when you pay taxes. Over the long-term, they also cost you when the withdrawn funds are not there to grow with the help of compounding.

Protect Yourself—Avoid Investment Fraud

BEWARE OF INVESTMENTS THAT PROMISE TOO MUCH:

The announcement of your employer's merger, closing or mass layoff may have received national or local press coverage. If all of a sudden you find that you are receiving unsolicited offers for an incredible business start-up opportunity, or the investment of a lifetime, beware. If it sounds too good to be true, you know it probably is.

ALWAYS DO A BACKGROUND CHECK BEFORE HIRING AN INVESTMENT PROFESSIONAL:

The right investment professional can work with you to make good choices during periods of unemployment. Legitimate investment professionals must be properly licensed. You can check the credentials of any person offering you investment opportunities.

HOW YOU CHECK TO PROTECT YOURSELF:

- ▶ For a broker or brokerage firm, use **FINRA BrokerCheck** www.finra.org/brokercheck or call toll-free (800) 289-9999.
- ▶ For an investment adviser, use the SEC's **Investment Adviser Public Disclosure** Web site at www.adviserinfo.sec.gov or call toll-free (800) SEC-0330.
- ▶ For an insurance agent in New York, check with the **New York Insurance Department**. Visit www.ins.state.ny.us or call the Consumer Services Bureau of the department at (800) 342-3736, Monday through Friday, 9:00 to 5:00 pm.



- ▶ For brokers and advisers in New York, be sure to contact the Office of the Attorney General, **Bureau of Investor Protection** at (800) 771-7755, www.oag.state.ny.us.
- ▶ You may also check with the **Better Business Bureau** at www.bbb.org to find out if they have information about a company's reliability.



Your “To Do” List

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER TO KEEP YOUR FINANCES ON TRACK

There are many things you need to do and think about as you face a period of unemployment. It is easy to feel overwhelmed. Remember, keep it simple by:

- ▶ **Taking Control of Your Finances:** Determine what financial resources you can count on so you can stay in control.
- ▶ **Using All Available Employment Services:** Increase the opportunities of finding your next job sooner by looking through every job search channel.
- ▶ **Protecting Yourself From Financial Fraud:** Use financial services and accept financial advice *only* after checking out the person offering them to you.

Who We Are

FINRA and Investor Education

FINRA, the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority, is an independent, not-for-profit organization with a public mission: to protect America's investors by making sure the securities industry operates fairly and honestly. We do that by writing and enforcing rules governing the activities of nearly 4,700 brokerage firms with approximately 633,000 brokers; examining firms for compliance with those rules; fostering market transparency; and educating investors.

Our independent regulation plays a critical role in America's financial system—by enforcing high ethical standards, bringing the necessary resources and expertise to regulation and enhancing investor safeguards and market integrity—all at no cost to taxpayers.

FINRA's commitment to protect investors extends beyond strong enforcement. We believe that investor education is often the best form of investor protection. To that end, we provide free, unbiased education resources and tools to help investors evaluate investment products and professionals, and better understand the markets and the principles of investing.



Investor protection. Market integrity.

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