

Life In The Slow Lane

Crain's Chicago Business - March 16, 2009 - Toting a company-issued BlackBerry meant that Cheryl Aponte always had something to do. Even during her downtime, she would text, check e-mail and otherwise stay connected to her hyper-busy life.

Then, on Feb. 20, Ms. Aponte lost her job as director of major gifts in the Chicago office of the Nature Conservancy, a Virginia-based non-profit.

"One of my first thoughts was, 'What am I going to do without my BlackBerry?' " says Ms. Aponte, 54, of Chicago.

Now, her train rides are less frenetic: It's just her and a book or magazine.

And she's had other lulls to fill as well:

- She does her job-searching tasks
- She gives Royko, the family dog, extra walks
- She's actually available to pick up the phone when her husband calls; before, they would have gone to voice mail while she was busy at the office, setting off a round of phone tag.

A lull in workloads has left a lot of people adjusting to a slower pace. While it may allow them to detox from their last job, or to finally get their spice rack alphabetized, not everyone is well suited to idleness.

Those with big batches of time on their hands marvel that it doesn't pass the way it used to: It speeds up here, slows down there. Relationships bend and twist to fit the newly unemployed's expanse of free time.

"People have a need for structure," says human-resources consultant Jenny Schade, president of Wilmette-based JRS Consulting Inc. "Take away that structure, and it can be very uncomfortable."

Ms. Aponte recalls, her first week at home, "I was tearing around, rearranging cupboards, and my husband said, 'Just take a break.' I said, 'I can't. Who knows, I might get a job tomorrow.' "

Painting and cleaning helped clear her mind of "feelings of anger and bewilderment and all that."

"I'm not a sit-on-the-couch-type person," she says. "I like to be busy."

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SOMEWHERE TO GO

Unemployed people trying to maintain some semblance of a professional schedule are filling up public spaces, including the Evanston Public Library.

Lesley Williams, head of adult public services at the library, says more parents, rather than nannies or au pairs, are accompanying children to the library, while nicely dressed job hunters jostle for posts at computers or in conference rooms. Among the last group, she adds, "It's gotten more intense in the last couple of months or so. You feel more of a sense of urgency."

In the days leading up to his January layoff, Gintaras Lietuvninkas had more downtime than usual at work; no wonder, since he was working as an architect for Gettys, a Chicago-based architecture firm that specializes in hotels, an industry that has been hit hard.

Now that he's home, he's job hunting and keeping a regular schedule that includes showering, shaving and getting to the computer by 8:30 or 9 a.m. But he's also spending more time grocery shopping and tidying up his Riverside home.

"I'm a little more available to help with things at home," says Mr. Lietuvninkas, 48, whose wife is a substitute teacher for two school districts.

Even with all that activity, he still has plenty of time to dwell on being unemployed. While he dodged a round of layoffs in October, being unable to escape the scythe in January has made him feel "not essential."

"Maybe there's more I could have done that could have saved me from the chopping block," he says. "That bothers me."

Chicagoan Katherine Kulcyk thrived on packing as many activities - shopping, laundry, lunch with a friend, studying for the GMAT - as she could into every day while she was a media-relations specialist with Nike Inc.

Losing her job in December was "...like going from 100 miles an hour to slamming on the brakes," says Ms. Kulcyk, 23.

"I'm a person who really enjoys that fast-paced lifestyle. Being forced to conform to a new lifestyle isn't the best feeling."

Now, she spreads activities over an entire week, rather than a day. To keep pace with the corporate world, she maintains a schedule, dashing off to a 6 a.m. spin class two days a week. "I like to get up, get going."

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But she goes hours, rather than minutes, before checking her BlackBerry, because she knows there's no pressing business to attend to.

Her friends, accustomed to instant responses to texts, "are surprised that I don't get back to them immediately," she says.

The whole experience "has been an emotional roller coaster," Ms. Kulcyk says. "The best thing you can do is wake up with a positive attitude."

'HONEY-DO' LISTS

Another problem with spare time is that others try to fill it.

Layoffs change family dynamics, particularly when a formerly clear role is blurred or redefined, says Pam Horan-Bussey, a staff therapist at the Family Institute at Northwestern University in Evanston.

"It's important to come up with a plan for talking to family members about their expectations and what they're going to do with their time," Ms. Horan-Bussey says.

Ann DiCristofano-Twite was laid off in early January as Chicago-area manager at LandAmerica Financial Group Inc., a Virginia-based financial services firm that filed for bankruptcy protection in November.

She longs for the momentum of her activity-packed workdays. "You get up, drop the kid off, go to work, pick the kid up, make dinner," she says. "I'm not used to not doing that."

Now, a typical day includes four hours or so checking career sites and "trying to figure out LinkedIn and Facebook," says Ms. DiCristofano-Twite, 43. "There seems to be a lot more time in the day, and I forget what day it is." She's also become a procrastinator: "I take a lot of time making a list, but not doing it."

She did finally hang photos from her wedding - spreading the task over four leisurely days, getting them all just right.

"When I was working, it would have taken 15 minutes, wherever the nail landed," she says.

While figuring out her next career step, she also finds herself negotiating a different type of relationship with her daughter and her husband.

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When she was laid off, her immediate thought was that she'd be able to spend more time with 16-year-old Krystina. That hope proved unfounded: "She said, 'Mom, I needed you two years ago,' " Ms. DiCristofano-Twite recalls. "That kind of broke my heart."

When she was working, her family was more self-sufficient; now she finds herself tidying up after them. Other family members have asked her to baby-sit during the day, but she's resisted.

Family members "think that because you're home, you're not doing much of anything," she says. "They think they don't have to pick up after themselves or put anything in the dishwasher. I get my 'honey-do' list from my husband: 'Call this place, call that place.' "

More time at home means more tussles over home space for single mother Sheila Quinn.

Ms. Quinn, 44, was laid off from her position at Oak Brook-based search firm Kensington International in late February. While employed, she enjoyed a fairly regular schedule with her sons, ages 11 and 9, with the help of a baby sitter.

Now that she's home all the time, she and her sons are having turf wars in their Arlington Heights home.

Ms. Quinn has commandeered the family home computer for job hunting and networking purposes, while her sons protest, "What do you mean, we can't use the computer?"

The boys also were used to spending after-school time playing guitar and otherwise making noise with friends. Nowadays, if Ms. Quinn has an interview, she'll demand quiet.

"I'm like, 'Guys, you need to work with me on this. It can't only be your space,' " she says.

Though the boys are supportive in other ways - she overheard one of them tell a friend, "My mom will be fine; she always lands on her feet" - she looks forward to the day when she's out of the house a little more often.

"They're very used to having the home as 'their' space," Ms. Quinn says. "My being here complicates things a little bit."