

The Science of the Job Search, Part V: Getting Fired (or Laid Off) Costs You ~5 Years of Experience

Layoffs have been dominating the news recently: Daybreak cut ~100 people (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190208103047/http://massivelyop.com/2018/04/26/daybreak-has-now-been-hit-with-layoffs/>), Qualcomm announced layoffs of 1,000+ people (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190208103047/http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/business/technology/sd-fi-qualcomm-jobcuts-20180418-story.html>), GM laid off 1,500 employees at its Lordstown plant (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190208103047/http://money.cnn.com/2018/04/13/news/companies/gm-job-cuts/index.html>), and Subway is closing 500 stores and laying off 4,000+ employees. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190208103047/http://www.businessinsider.com/subway-to-close-another-500-stores-2018-4>)

How bad is it to laid off (or fired)? After analyzing 6,976 recent job applications across 365 cities and 101 cities in the United States, we can say this: **it's pretty bad.**

 fired-laid-off-impact-years-of-experience.png

People who were fired, laid off or quit in the first 15 months of a previous job were 43% less hireable when applying to new jobs — the equivalent of ~5 years of experience.

Controlling for experience, people who **were fired, laid off or quit in the first 15 months of a job were 43% less hireable when applying to new jobs.** Whereas everyone else saw a 13.4% interview callback rate, the callback rate was only 7.6% for these folks. Averaging across industries and cities, getting fired meant roughly **same as wiping out ~5 years of experience for them.**

Let's tease a few other subtler things out:

- Although it increased your absolute **hireability** if you'd been fired, **additional experience also increased the relative hireability gap** compared to your friends who hadn't been fired.
- Normally, ageism means that hiring managers start overlooking you after a certain age. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190208103047/https://talent.works/blog/2018/01/08/the-science-of-the-job-search-part-i-13-data-backed-ways-to-win/#ageism>) If you've been laid off or fired, however, **ageism is a double whammy: hiring managers start overlooking you earlier**, in addition to your experience being discounted as above.
- More than age, race or experience, having **even one employment blemish was the #1 negative factor** affecting the job search.

What's Going On?

Like it or not, hiring managers quickly skim resumes — your resume might get ~6 seconds.

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20190208103047/https://business.time.com/2012/04/13/how-to-make-your-resume-last-longer-than-6-seconds/>) Sadly, that means if there's anything that makes them second-guess it, they're probably just going to trash it instead of actually thinking deeply about it

 fired-laid-off-worst-job-search

More than age, race or experience, having even one employment blemish was the #1 negative factor affecting the job search.

When hiring managers see a short job stint, they don't know if it's because you were fired (because you were bad at your job), laid off (officially not your fault, but sometimes still a flag), or quit early (which *might* mean you're unreliable).

Speaking personally as a (reasonably experienced) hiring manager, rightly or wrongly, I can say that jobs shorter than 12 months made me suspicious. If you listed a job that lasted less than that and you made it to an interview, I'd absolutely ask you about it: "What's up with this 7-month gig at Acme Corporation?" It wasn't necessarily a disqualifier, but it was definitely a flag.

Apparently, I'm nicer than most other hiring managers. Speaking from the data, I can say that on average **American hiring managers are suspicious of job applicants whose shortest employment lasted less than 15 months.**

How Much Does A Layoff Set You Back?

In fact, we can quantify just how much employers' suspicion will cost you. It turns out the cost varies dramatically by the number of years of experience you have:

Years of Experience (#)	Interview Rate (%)	Loss of Years, if Laid Off (#)
1	10.6%	-
2	12.2%	-
3	13.4%	2.9
4	14.6%	3.0
5	16.0%	3.7
6	16.8%	4.4
7	16.7%	5.1
8	15.9%	5.5 [*]
9	15.5%	6.7 [*]
10	14.3%	8.3 [*]

The more experience you have, the more employers punish you for getting fired, laid off or quitting early.

When you think about it, that makes sense; I of course don't know exactly why, but here's why I think so:

- **Higher Expectations.** I don't care *that* much if my new Marketing Assistant was a bit flaky and got fired a few years ago because of it. However, if my new Marketing Director got fired a few years ago because he was flaky? That's a non-starter.
- **Fewer Options.** If you were recently fired as a Marketing Director, there simply aren't many new Marketing Director openings. That means you're unemployed longer and have less negotiating leverage, which means more power for employers.
- **[*] Accelerated Ageism.** As with other forms of subconscious bias, your biggest problem as you get older is that employers find (subconscious) reasons to overlook you. Even if your explanation is totally appropriate, a short employment might give them that reason. Here, the dominating cost is less how far *back* it sets you but rather how many *future* good working years it robs from you.

We'll dig into all of this in a future post on specific issues faced by older job-seekers.

%!@& – That's Unfair

You're right, it *is* unfair. You might've been laid off through no fault of your own, chosen to leave a hostile work environment, had a term-limited work-study student job, or knew you were signing up for a specific, short-term contract gig. Employers don't seem to care – whatever the reason, if you have a short employment on your resume, employers will punish you.

And believe me, I get it – I've been fired too. (Quite

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20190208103047/https://obviouslywrong.org/2013/03/07/farewell-vittana/>) publicly

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20190208103047/https://obviouslywrong.org/2014/01/15/the-best-leadership-advice-ive-ever-gotten/>), in fact. If it makes you feel any better, I'm guessing the press didn't cover your departure.)

But, as I've said before: **it's unfair, but no one cares**. Your girlfriend or husband will still be on your case. Your landlord will still want rent. You'll still need to buy groceries. So, what can you do?


What Can You Do About It?

Although people with employment blemishes did much worse on average, many still did quite well — in fact, **29% of previously-fired people beat the TalentWorks-overall average**.

We dug in and identified the 3 most targeted, important (data-driven) differences between folks who were successful despite an employment blemish and those who weren't.

#3: Tough it out for 18 months [+85% BOOST]

There was a big difference between leaving after 6 vs. 9 vs. 18 months. **People whose shortest job was 9+ months were 85% more hireable** than people whose shortest job was 8 months or less.

 how-long-should-you-stay-before-you-quit.png

Objectively speaking, your hireability is still severely affected if you leave after 12 months. Staying 18 months fully protects you from future employer suspicion.

The conventional wisdom is that it's safe to leave after 1 year, but that's simply wrong. If you're in a tough spot at a job, here's our (data-driven) advice given the above:

- **0 – 8 months:** You're a flake, in hiring managers' eyes. If you have to leave, you should but try to break through to the next stage if you can.
- **9 – 18 months:** You're digging out of the hole! Every extra month you stay during this period increases your hireability by ~9%.
- **18 – 24 months:** "Good enough" is what employers are thinking. You've escaped the trap; unless you're planning to stay for the long haul, this is the perfect time to find another job.
- **24+ months:** "If Competitor Bob thinks she's great, she must be great! I have to steal her." (FOMO is real.) Every month you stay after 2 years increases your hireability by ~2%.

Job Search Tip: Don't list a non-internship, non-contract job if it lasted less than 6 months. (If it was an internship or term-limited contract job, explicitly mention that.) All else being equal, even if you don't like your job, **try to stay for 18 months to show future employers you're reliable** if you can (+85% hireability boost).

#2: Keep working, *somewhere* [+149% BOOST]

Compared to their previously-fired brethren, **people who weren't currently employed took a massive hit – they were 149% less hireable.**

If you're getting laid off or fired, it might be a good idea to creatively negotiate an exit package that lets you run out the clock, e.g. use up old vacation, stay part-time, take a contract role.

If that's not an option, it might be a great time to start freelancing, e.g. join Upwork (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190208103047/https://upwork.com/>) or Thumbtack (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190208103047/https://thumbtack.com/>). And if that's not an option either, start getting creative – your 3rd cousin's brother-in-law needed a personal brand marketer, right? You get the idea.

Job Search Tip: If you're about to start looking for a new job, **find a (creative) way to show that you're currently employed on your resume.** Folks who did this saw a +149% hireability boost compared to their previously-fired or laid-off competition.

#1: Apply to companies with <500 employees [+192% BOOST]

The #1 thing you can do to mitigate a recent layoff or firing? **Focus your job search on small- to medium-sized employers.**

 hireability-employer-size-layoff-fired.png

Applications to companies with <500 employees had a 192% higher interview rate. For every additional 1,000 employees, the hireability for people with work blemishes dropped by 19%.

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I wouldn't have guessed it beforehand, but this makes a lot of sense. Why?

- **Stricter Policies.** Bigger companies have stricter automated filters and more bureaucratic HR policies: even they wanted to hire you, a hiring manager might be forced to DQ you.

- **More Choices.** Bigger companies get more job applicants and a small blemish that'd get overlooked elsewhere might DQ you at a bigger company.

Job Search Tip: Focus your search on small- to medium-sized employers. Folks who did this saw a +192% hireability boost.

Summary

So, to summarize: ~~Get brand name industry experience. Go back to school. Be a woman. Be older. (Or younger.) Sorry, bad joke.~~ Stay 9+ months if you can. Apply on Mondays. (Don't apply on Fridays.) Don't be a team player. Don't use personal pronouns. Apply in the first 4 days. Apply between 6am and 10am. Start your sentences with (distinct) action verbs. List 25+ industry-specific skills. Take charge with leadership keywords. Stay working, somewhere, anywhere. Add concrete work achievements. Apply at companies with 500 employees or less. (Phew! Trying saying that five times fast.)

Easy peasy. You got this, right? Great. Now do that for every job you have to apply to and we'll pretty much guarantee that you get the job you deserve.

Or, you can **sign up for TalentWorks**

(https://web.archive.org/web/20190208103047/https://talent.works/automate-your-job-search?utm_source=blog) – *we'll just take care of it all for you!* (No, seriously. [*]) Let us help you get back to a level-playing field.

[*] For most things, we can just automatically take care of it for you. For instance:

- Our **AI-driven ApplicationAssistant** (https://web.archive.org/web/20190208103047/https://talent.works/automate-your-job-search?utm_source=blog) automatically optimizes the day of week, time of day & delay of your application so you don't have to worry about keeping track of 100+ applications.
- Our **ResumeOptimizer** (https://web.archive.org/web/20190208103047/https://talent.works/?utm_source=blog) will instantly scan your resume for all of the potential issues above in addition to dozens of others.

And our A-List Talent? Sure, some of them might be in especially high-demand fields but, more often than not, they're people **who've put in a few minutes to optimize their resume** for their job search. You should too!

Methodology

First, we took a random sample of 6,976 recent job applications, applicants and outcomes across 365 cities and 101 cities from recent activity on TalentWorks. We extracted employments, educations and augmented with other metadata using our ResumeParser and ResumeOptimizer. Using the duration of applicants' shortest employment, we then categorized individual applicants as someone who'd been fired, laid off or quit early. Finally, we (a) identified maximum-gain hypotheses using a greedy CART algorithm that met a p-value criteria and (b) regressed hireability using a composite Matern kernel with a Gaussian process for each sub-population. We did all of the above with in-house algorithms, sklearn and scipy and visualized the final plots with Bokeh in python.

Why Are We Doing This?

With ApplicationAssistant right now, we can boost the average job-seeker's hireability by ~5.8x.

([https://web.archive.org/web/20190208103047/https://talent.works/automate-your-job-search/?](https://web.archive.org/web/20190208103047/https://talent.works/automate-your-job-search/?utm_source=blog)

[utm_source=blog](https://web.archive.org/web/20190208103047/https://talent.works/automate-your-job-search/?utm_source=blog)) But, what makes ApplicationAssistant work has been an internal company secret until now. We're fundamentally a mission-driven company and we believe we can help **more** people by sharing our learnings. So, that's exactly what we're doing.

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