

Project aims to assist long-term unemployed

MIT professor launching effort to help them overcome barriers

By [Megan Woolhouse](#) Globe Staff, November 17, 2013, 12:00 a.m.



MIT professor Ofer Sharone hopes his research will result in an understanding of how long-term unemployment affects people. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF/GLOBE STAFF

MIT professor Ofer Sharone hopes to solve a dark problem that few even want to discuss: how to help the long-term unemployed.

More than four years after the last recession ended, long-term unemployment remains near record levels, with 4.1 million Americans out of work for more than six months and still struggling to find jobs. What makes the problem so vexing, Sharone said, is these workers, typically older, have qualifications that should provide the path to employment, namely experience, accomplishment, and college degrees.

“You can’t just say go get an education because these people are often educated.” he said. “It’s scary because there’s not an obvious, easy solution.”

Sharone, however, is daring to try to find one. Later this month, he will launch a project called the Institute for Career Transitions, an organization to help the long-term unemployed, focusing on [40- to 65-year-old workers](#) with college degrees. The institute will begin by pairing them with career counselors or job coaches, free of charge, for three months.

Sharone and his researchers will also try to build a better understanding of long-term unemployment and approaches that might help overcome its challenges and barriers. They will study the moods, health, and levels of depression among participants, examining how long-term unemployment — and repeated disappointments — affect them, their motivation, and ability to get back to work.

“We need a nuanced interpretation of what it means to get rejected,” he said. “How does that affect your future, your job search, your sense of self, your life, your relationships?”

Among those working with Sharone is Rand Ghayad, a Northeastern University researcher and visiting scholar at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, who has published [groundbreaking work](#) on long-term unemployment. Ghayad, who mailed 4,800 fictitious resumes and recorded employer response rates, concluded that companies frequently screen out applicants who are unemployed for more than six months.

Ghayad found that employers showed four times more interest in candidates unemployed for six months or less — even if they had less experience and fewer qualifications than those experiencing longer bouts of joblessness. Older unemployed workers, he found, were most frequently passed over, viewed as having outdated skills or as being “damaged goods.”

“I believe workers aged 55 and older are not only suffering from unemployment discrimination, but also age discrimination, which is making it nearly impossible for them to find work in this sluggishly growing economy,” Ghayad said. “Long-term unemployment among older workers should be our priority as a nation.”

Solving long-term unemployment would boost the nation’s economy, which is at risk of losing the potential, productive capacity, and spending power of millions of Americans, Sharone and Ghayad said. Many long-term unemployed ultimately drop out of the workforce, depleting retirement savings, collecting Social Security early, or turning to public assistance.

Many also suffer debilitating depression, and in the worst cases become suicidal, feeling as if they have failed or no longer have value.

Sharone, 45, has studied long-term unemployment for more than a decade, an issue he came to unexpectedly. After graduating from Harvard Law School and working in the corporate world, he said he felt unfulfilled and returned to school at the University of California at Berkeley to study sociology, writing his doctoral dissertation on the experiences of unemployed technology workers after the dot-com bubble burst early in the last decade.

That crash left thousands of people out of work for several months and longer, despite skills, experience, and often advanced degrees.

Sharone said his research found that Americans tend to suffer greater discouragement related to long-term unemployment than do people in places like Israel, where Sharone was born and raised. In Israel, unemployed workers tend to blame the system, directing their anger at a rigid economy that can make it difficult to move between jobs.

Americans, however, often blame themselves. White-collar job searches put a heavy emphasis on networking with one’s peers and on a candidate’s chemistry with an employer, requiring prospective employees to establish rapport.

“This means that when you are rejected for a job, it often feels like it’s not your qualifications that have been rejected, it’s you, personally,” said Sharone, who recently published the book “Flawed System/Flawed Self: Job Searching and Unemployment Experiences” based on interviews with more than 170 white-collar job seekers in the United States and Israel.

Sharone said the new institute, primarily funded through his MIT research budget, will begin randomly matching about 60 unemployed people with career counselors and coaches in the next two weeks. The research component will study three groups of unemployed: one getting one-on-one career counseling, another receiving counseling in a group setting, and finally, a control group that won’t get any coaching.

The program has taken referrals from networking groups to find candidates for the study. But response among career counselors and coaches has been so great (nearly 40 offered their services for free) that Sharone said there is room for about 20 additional long-term job seekers who want help. More openings could be on the horizon.

Sharone said anyone interested should visit the organization’s new website: instituteforcareertransitions.org.

Amy Mazur, a Newton career counselor who usually charges \$85 an hour, said she is donating her services to the project because she thinks the intervention could help many long-term unemployed. She said she also wants to be part of a larger discussion among career professionals on how they might address the problem and change employers’ views of the long-term unemployed.

“What are we doing about a situation where we have people with a lot to offer, people with skills and motivation? You can’t put them out to pasture,” she said. “You don’t want to and it’s not the best thing for the economy and society.”

Sharone said he hopes to hold a conference on long-term unemployment in May to release his initial findings. The research could reveal strategies to benefit job seekers, identifying ways to help them network and overcome obstacles such as an ignored resume.

It could also lead to something bigger, Sharone said, such as a national group that recruits professional counselors to offer this kind of service. Right now, there are few services and institutions dedicated to helping the long-term unemployed, heightening the isolation they likely feel.

“How to cope and remain resilient in the face of rejection is one of the key skills that unemployed job seekers need to develop,” he said. “This is also about how to find a job. But an important part of what I care about is how to deal with rejection in a way that’s not overly self blaming.”

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