

Jump starting careers

New institute aims at getting older workers a job

- By Ethan Forman Staff writer
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Ken Yuskus/Staff photo From left, Institute for Career Transitions clients, Bruce Cohen, Terry Primack, and Brian Dooley talk over ideas. The Institute for Career Transitions helps older workers transition into new careers.

DANVERS — In September, the state's unemployment rate dipped to 3.9 percent, but for Methuen's Deborah Burkholder, the executive director of the Institute for Career Transitions, saying there is full employment are "fighting words" when it comes to older, mid-career professions looking for a job.

That's because she has developed a new work-between-work program called the ICT Collaboratory, a program which launched this summer in the Workbar at Staples in Danvers, at the Liberty Tree Mall.

Her aim is to help Baby Boomers and older workers who, despite being highly-skilled or having advanced degrees, are finding it hard to get back into a career job.

Many have exhausted their unemployment benefits, patience and confidence. Many have taken "gap" jobs to make ends meet.

The problem of long-term unemployment for older workers was outlined in an October 2015 study from the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis that found the Great Recession was harsh for

both younger and older long-term unemployed, and "that older workers have become a more prominent group among the (long-term unemployment) population." These are people who are out of work for 26 weeks or longer.

"The average worker in (long-term unemployment) went up from 38.3 years old in 2006-2007 to 40.1 years old in 2012-2013," the study found.

Another sign is a Massachusetts Department of Unemployment Assistance report for those claiming unemployment insurance on the North Shore for the week ending Sept. 16. This report showed that 57 percent were age 45 and up.



*Ken Yuskus/Staff
photoThe Institute
for Career
Transitions
Executive Director
Deborah
Burkholder talks
about helping older
workers transition
into new careers.*

Burkholder said the program focuses on participants' well being, how the rules of work have changed, and different ways people can earn income with their skills if they can't find a job.

The 12-week program takes place Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, 8:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., and participants are obligated to be there, barring an interview or other conflicts related to a job search.

"We treat it just like a job," said Scott Schultz of Haverhill, one of the program's facilitators and designers.

The group aspect of it is key.

"That's what we have been interested in exploring together in the context of the collaboratory," Burkholder said. "It's bringing talented people back together in a community of support to explore possibilities for creating a livelihood."

Katherine Prum, 56, of Gloucester was part of the first cohort of nine people in July.

"We all came here because we had exhausted every personal resource," Prum said, "emotional and whatnot. I call it my Hail Mary."

In July 2016, Prum was laid off from Brandeis University after nearly 11 years. She had worked as a relationship manager and corporate relations manager, and part of her job involved helping students graduating from business school find jobs.

She knew what employers were looking for and how they were hiring.

But, in recent years, she saw how social media and job sites had "democratized" access to jobs. However, this has made it hard for those who hire to figure out who to hire. Getting a job from an online job posting is like winning a lottery, Prum said.

Prum had been laid off in the past, but each time she took the opportunity to reinvent herself in a new career.

This time, that was not so easy to do. The task driven job techniques she had coached did not work. But she found ICT's program "transformational."

"This is about developing adaptability, resilience, certainly, but more agility," Prum said.

Prum still works in retail, a job which she enjoys. She has been developing a side business to generate revenue, and she just started as a consultant for a strategic plan for her community's library. Her goal is to do "impactful" work, not simply find a job.

Transitional theories

The four-year-old Institute for Career Transitions is in process of obtaining its nonprofit status, said Schultz. It is now in the midst of its second session.

People have to be interviewed to get into the program, and it is not free. It costs \$1,200. Schultz said the money goes to covering the program's expenses, and they are seeking state funding.

Schultz and Burkholder said the program is based on the research of Ofer Sharone, an assistant professor of sociology at UMass Amherst and the author of "Flawed System/Flawed Self: Job Searching and Unemployment Experiences" (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

Schultz said Sharone was looking at the problem of long-term unemployment amid highly-educated individuals, and compared the difference between Israeli and U.S. workers.

"Israelis kind of want to blame the systems ... and Americans want to blame themselves," Schultz said.

Turns out, having an advanced degree can work against someone trying to re-enter the workforce; employers may think an older highly-educated worker may demand more money.

"One of the things they found out was that your education makes no difference," Schultz said of the research.

"It used to be having a degree was a protection from some of these ups and downs in the labor market," said Burkholder said, "but we have been finding that that's not so much the case anymore."

"The other thing he found," Schultz said, "was the coaching, the career coaching, that was really focused on the long-term unemployment issue, was the one thing that really made a lot of difference," Schultz said.

Mary Sarris, the executive director of the North Shore Workforce Investment Board, said there is a need to address the reality of older workers who cannot get back into their careers, and she understands what ICT is trying to do.

"The North Shore is an older area," she said, and that means it is dealing with a large proportion of older workers in the labor force. The North Shore WIB oversees the North Shore Career Center, which Sarris said offers workshops for older workers.

Some of what the ICT Collaboratory offers are the nuts and bolts of writing cover letters and resumes, and updating LinkedIn online profiles.

But the real value is its ability to build confidence, Schultz said.

"They are in an emotionally rough spot," Schultz said. "They are stuck. There are things that are holding themselves back ... They are not presenting themselves the best they can be to potential employers."

Join in the future of work conversation

On Thursday, Nov. 16, the Institute for Career Transitions, Workbar and Blue Cord Management are hosting "Transition, Reinvention and Work in the New Economy," a conversation about trends in employment practices and their future implications.

The talk takes place at Workbar at Staples, Liberty Tree Mall, 230 Independence Way, Danvers

Preregistration is required at www.ictransitions.org/events/

RSVP by Monday, Nov. 13, and the cost is \$17. After Nov. 13, the cost is \$25.

The talk includes light refreshments

CONTACT INFORMATION

salemnews.com

300 Rosewood Drive, Suite 107

Danvers, MA 01923

Phone: (978) 922-1234

Email: sn@salemnews.com

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