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# Local job seekers of all stripes finding challenges

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Negotiating today's job market poses a challenge for any employment seeker.

Take Jay Dixon, a 2003 graduate of San Clemente High School. He wishes he could have stayed in school an additional four years to avoid what he considers the nearly impossible task of finding a job in the current economy, in which unemployment rates are 8.6 percent in Orange County and 11.5 percent statewide.

After graduating from the University of Nevada, where he played defensive line for the football team, Dixon headed back to his hometown of San Clemente.

"I was excited to come back and have a job," he said, "but there were no jobs available." The few full-time jobs that were open were snatched up by people who had been laid off or were more qualified, Dixon said.

Dixon took part-time work as an assistant coach for the SCHS football team and as a substitute teacher. He also works in real estate.

"The college degree really doesn't do much unless you get lucky, unless you know someone," he said.

## THE EXECUTIVE SIDE

Susan Howington, chief executive of Power Connections Inc. in San Clemente, would agree. Her job is helping executive-level workers find positions that often aren't even listed. In that case, networking is the key to finding work, said Howington, who likens her role to an agent marketing celebrity clients. Her services cost up to \$20,000.

Power Connections works with 16 to 20 clients at a time, coaching them on everything from writing cover letters and resumés to interviewing to keeping up their profiles at LinkedIn.com.

"We package the people that we work with, meaning 'brand' them," Howington said. Then, using the company's connections and by coaching job seekers through their own connections, Howington is able to secure interviews for her clients, she said.

"You can line opportunities up for people, but you can't get them the job," she said. "At the executive level, that's where your jobs come from. It's who you know, or who somebody you know knows."

Ten people using her company's services have found positions in the past two months that pay \$120,000 to several hundred thousand dollars a year, Howington said.

"These are not the people that just get a job off the Internet," she said. They're seeking executive positions, and "there aren't a million of those out there; there's a handful."

### **'IT'S LOOKING BRIGHTER'**

Despite challenges in today's job market, the doom and gloom often portrayed in the media is false, Howington said.

"Aren't people tired of hearing about how bad the job market is?" she said. "I'd love to see some success stories here."

When the economy crashed last fall, companies almost stopped hiring executives at all and only recently started to look to fill those positions again, Howington said. Since then, prospects have been better for job-seeking executives.

"The market is changing here in Orange County; it's percolating," she said. "It's looking brighter and brighter, and my clients are getting calls."

"The clients that are successful in this market are the ones that are putting the time in," she added. "There are certain ones that it's happening for sooner." People looking for executive jobs often need a lot of patience. It can be months between the first interview and a job offer.

### **STIFF COMPETITION**

When the company he helped build for 13 years filed for bankruptcy, Sonny Sarabia didn't want to be part of the liquidation, so he started looking for another position.

The 36-year-old former director of operations for Shabby Chic, a luxury furniture distributor, started working with Power Connections after he left the company in March. Sarabia has been in meetings and interviews with prospective employers and said he is hopeful he will find the right position.

"People have cleaned house and they're looking for new blood, they're looking for people who can think outside the box," Sarabia said. Companies have gone down to bare bones and are starting to rebuild and prepare for an economic recovery, he said.

But though more jobs are becoming available, there's a lot of competition for the positions that do exist, Sarabia said.

"There's so much talent that's on the street, it's almost that there's more talent out of work than placed," he said. "It's just going to take some time."

### **TOUGH HOMECOMING**

As for Jay Dixon, he's working on getting his teaching credential but says he's concerned that in a year and a half there won't be any teaching jobs available. Many of his friends are in the same boat, he said.

"When we graduated high school, it was good times – the economy was sticking by us," Dixon said. "I never even thought of a recession. We never in our life really expected anything but good times."