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**RECOVERING FROM A TRAUMATIC JOB LOSS**

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**A Research Project**

**Presented to the Faculty of**

**The George L. Graziadio**

**School of Business and Management**

**Pepperdine University**

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**In Partial Fulfillment**

**of the Requirements for the Degree**

**Master of Science**

**in**

**Organization Development**

---

**by**

**Ann Chu**

**December 2012**

This research project, completed by

ANN CHU

under the guidance of the Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the faculty of The George L. Graziadio School of Business and Management in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE  
IN ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

Date: December 2012

Faculty Committee

Committee Chair, Christopher G. Worley, Ph. D.

Committee Member, Ann E. Feyerherm, Ph. D.

Linda Livingstone, Ph. D., Dean  
The George L. Graziadio School of Business and  
Management

## **Abstract**

In addition to satisfying basic human needs such as food and shelter, jobs can also satisfy an individual's need for identity, creative expression, and purpose. Job loss constitutes a major life stressor that can negatively affect one's financial stability, social standing, and sense of well being. Resilience represents those characteristics that help an individual bounce back quickly from a traumatic event. This study examined the role of resilience in laid-off employees recovering from job loss. Ten participants completed a survey and interview in this mixed methods study. Personal competence, social support, and family coherence were determined to most strongly influence resilience. Based on these results, it is critical for organizations, human resource professionals, and the displaced employees themselves to initiate and support these activities in the aftermath of job loss. Key limitations to this study included using a small sample size and a non-validated survey instrument.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Layoffs, reductions in force, and widespread unemployment have become the norm in recent years. The national unemployment rate in June 2010 was 9.5% (Fitzgerald, 2010) and projections for the future remain dismal (Lee & Lazo, 2010). Fitzgerald added that in June 2010, “652,000 discouraged people gave up their job searches and effectively left the labor market” (para. 2).

Job loss can involve adverse consequences for an employee, ranging from diminished self-esteem to conflicted relationships and jeopardized finances (Joseph & Greenberg, 2001; Linn, Sandifer, & Stein, 1985). The loss can be experienced as traumatizing to the extent that job loss affects basic human needs for food and shelter, safety, relationship and belonging, self-esteem and confidence, and self-actualization (Suleiman, 2008).

The trauma of job loss undermines the affected employees’ abilities to function as well as find future employment due to depression, anxiety, and other difficult emotions. Additionally, the loss of a job can involve secondary losses of structure, routine, productivity, identity, and purpose and can leave the laid off employee feeling adrift. Fosha (2002) explained that often the most difficult part of loss is the loss of identity individuals may suffer.

While laid-off employees are often offered outplacement services that help them through the mechanics of a job search, some research suggests that job-seeking activities may not be enough to help people regain employment due to the distress these acts invoke and the absence of emotional and cognitive processing about the loss involved in these activities (Joseph & Greenberg, 2001). Therefore, it is important to understand what



factors might help affected employees cope with the trauma of job loss. Resilience is believed to one of these factors, as it is defined as an individual's ability to adapt and respond productively to adversity (Bonanno, 2004).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to better understand the process individuals go through to successfully recover from job loss. Specifically, the study sought to determine the main factors needed to recover from a traumatizing job loss among laid off employees. The research questions were:

1. What were the participants' paths of recovery from job loss?
2. What was the nature of the participants' resilience?
3. In what ways did resilience influence their process of recovery?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study generated insights related to the factors that affect a laid-off employee's ability to maintain mental and emotional resiliency after a traumatic job loss. These insights are useful for people who have lost their jobs, for friends and family members of affected employees, and for organization development practitioners and organization members, whether they are involved in laying off workers, helping laid-off workers recover following the layoff, or hiring employees who have been laid off. Understanding what is needed for an individual recovering from the impact of a layoff provides information with which to effectively structure re-entry for the individual into the workforce.

### **Organization of the Study**

This chapter provided a background of the problem of job loss and the resulting trauma that may affect employees. Chapter 2 explores the relevant literature surrounding

recovering from traumatic loss, including a discussion of job loss, trauma, and resilience. Chapter 3 outlines the study's methodology including the research design and procedures concerning participants, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 4 reports the interview results and focuses on the themes that emerged from the interview data. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the key findings, recommendations, limitations, and directions for future research.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

This chapter reviews existing literature and studies to provide a foundation for the present examination of the role of resilience in recovering from a traumatizing job loss among laid-off employees. The chapter is organized as follows: First, studies about the trauma of job loss are reviewed. Second, resilience is discussed to better understand how it acts as a protective mechanism in the midst of trauma. Third, the chapter concludes by summarizing what is known and not known about recovering from job loss and how this study will help to increase knowledge of this topic.

#### **The Trauma of Job Loss**

A job can satisfy many basic needs in life. A primary need it fulfills is a living wage, which enables an individual to secure food and shelter as well as meet other basic physical needs. Additionally, work can satisfy one's creative urges, promote self-esteem, and provide an avenue for achievement and self-realization (Linn et al., 1985). As a result, losing a job constitutes a major life stressor that may create psychological reactions similar to those for bereavement, terminal illness, or other trauma (Joseph & Greenberg, 2001).

To understand the impact of job loss, it is helpful to consider the concept of trauma, which is defined as an emotional wound or shock often having long-lasting effects (Suleiman, 2008). Suleiman elaborated that traumatic events generally involve threat to life or bodily integrity. When presented with a trauma, sometimes the brain is not able to fully assimilate or process the event. Therefore, it responds through various mechanisms such as psychological numbing, shutting down, or stifling normal emotional responses. The stress of job loss can result in psychological distress and disorder,

physical illness, and even death (Linn et al., 1985). Due to the potentially significant impacts of job loss on individuals and, in turn, their families and communities, it is important to understand the typical secondary impacts and losses associated with job loss; the strategies, resources, and processes used to cope with job loss; and the possible outcomes of job loss.

**Secondary impacts and losses triggered by job loss.** The job loss event itself can be considered traumatic. Layoffs can violate an implicit psychological contract that the worker will continue with the organization, especially if the worker has not exhibited any behaviors that are grounds for firing (Pugh, Skarlicki, & Passell, 2003; Robinson 1996). The aftermath of job loss also can be traumatic because it involves many secondary losses and impacts far beyond losing a paycheck. These impacts can affect one's mental and emotional well-being as well as one's social standing.

Negative emotions are one common outcome of job loss. Common reactions include depression; anger; worry; and threats to identity, self-concept, and self-esteem (Joseph & Greenberg, 2001). Gowan, Riordan, and Gatewood (1999) explained that the distress resulting from the uncertainty caused by job loss can leave an unemployed individual with debilitating anxiety.

Linn et al. (1985) conducted a study on the impact of stress on health using a sample of 300 men. Over a 2-year period, health indicators showed elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and somatic disorders in the 30 men who lost their jobs over the course of the study. For some, these symptoms were shown only initially; for others, the emotional stress persisted even when their unemployment ended. A panel study of involuntary job loss by husbands showed that being without work was strongly associated with higher levels of psychiatric symptoms, but once reemployed, the strain diminished.

According to a *New York Times*' poll of 708 unemployed adults in December 2009, almost half of respondents suffered from depression or anxiety and 55% suffered from insomnia (Luo & Thee-Brenan, 2009). Additionally, nearly half reported feeling embarrassed or ashamed as a result of being out of work. Men were significantly more likely than women to report feeling ashamed, probably due to a cultural standard that men should be the breadwinners of the family.

Spera and Morin (1994) found that if the distress of job loss is not dealt with and expressed, psychosomatic diseases (e.g., hypertension, respiratory ailments, gastrointestinal disturbances, migraine and tension headaches, sexual dysfunction, or dermatitis) can result. The distress also can diminish the individual's ability to cognitively process or work through the many aspects of the job loss and other negative events. Failure to resolve these events can result in continued ruminations and negative emotions, which can further exacerbate health and psychological problems. Further complicating these physical and psychological problems is the fact that many unemployed workers lack health insurance and resources to afford even basic medical care (Luo & Thee-Brenan, 2009). This can result in untreated conditions that lead to further compromised mental and emotional well-being.

Joseph and Greenberg (2001) hypothesized that a degraded sense of well-being can, in turn, negatively impact one's motivation and performance. In addition, job loss can evoke a perceived loss of control as helplessness takes root and the world may suddenly seem threatening and grim. Laid-off employees can consequently develop learned helplessness, which also undermines motivation and performance. The lack of motivation and diminished performance can result in extended unemployment, which can further exacerbate all of the secondary impacts of job loss (Fosha, 2002).

Impaired social well-being is yet another impact of job loss. In Feldman and Leana's (2000) study of 517 senior managers who had lost their jobs due to downsizing, participants reported that losing their jobs disrupted their social network and undermined their self-confidence. Similarly, nearly half the respondents in Luo and Thee-Brenan's (2009) poll reported they felt in danger of falling out of their social class, with those out of work 6 months or more feeling especially vulnerable.

Finally, the negative impacts experienced by the unemployed worker as a result of job loss can naturally impact those closest to them. In the 2009 *New York Times* poll, 4 in 10 parents reported noticing behavioral changes in their children that they attribute to their difficulties in finding work (Luo & Thee-Brenan, 2009). Thus, job loss has a staggering range of adverse effects that can negatively impact the worker's mental, emotional, physical, and social well-being as well as that of their family.

**Coping with job loss.** Dealing with job loss and searching for a new job involves rejection, lack of feedback, and uncertainty and can trigger significant distress and anxiety. People recovering from a layoff need to find coping strategies that relieve discomfort and help them maintain hope and self-esteem (Joseph & Greenberg, 2001). *Coping* is defined as the processes individuals use to modify adverse aspects of their environment and minimize internal threats induced by stress (Voges & Romeny, 2003). The job loss literature discussed several coping strategies, resources, and tools for recovering from job loss.

**Strategies.** Gowan, Riordan, and Gatewood (1999) defined coping strategies as an individual's attempt to mitigate the stress of job loss. Four primary strategies have been discussed in the literature related to recovery from job loss. These include finding a new job, dealing with emotions, dealing with symptoms, and cognitively reframing the loss.

Strategies related to finding another job have been called a problem-focused strategy (Bennett, 1995; Gowan et al., 1999), which includes activities such as planning and conducting a job search, changing one's career or field, and retraining or obtaining more education (Luo & Thee-Brenan, 2009). Feldman and Leana (2000) added that this strategy is particularly effective when participants receive advanced notice of the layoff as this gives them time to adjust to the news and line up new opportunities.

An emotion-focused strategy focuses on mitigating the negative emotions surrounding the job loss without taking action to regain work (Gowan et al., 1999). Paradoxically, Joseph and Greenberg (2001) found in their study of unemployed workers that those who buffered negative psychological effects tended to find reemployment faster. Emotion-focused activities could include denying negative emotions about the job loss and maintaining a perception of control, distancing oneself by avoiding focus on the fact one has no job, or not dealing with the actual emotions that surface (Gowan et al., 1999; Joseph & Greenberg, 2001; Luo & Thee-Brenan, 2009; Westphal & Bonanno, 2007). Specific to job loss, Feldman and Leana (2000) found that unemployed workers who sought professional help believed the psychologists were helpful in battling depression and motivating action.

A *New York Times*' poll of 708 unemployed workers found that 25% of those who experienced anxiety or depression sought professional help and that women were significantly more likely than men to acknowledge emotional issues (Luo & Thee-Brenan, 2009). Emotional expression was significantly associated with resiliency in Alim and Feder's (2008) study of African American adults who had been exposed to a range of severe traumas. Accordingly, a primary goal in helping people recover from trauma is

helping to restore their capacity to feel and relate. This is necessary for them to seek help, interact with others, and secure another position (Fosha, 2002).

The third strategy is called symptom focus, where the symptoms of job loss are believed to be the loss of identity, role, daily structure, and rewards. Therefore, focusing on managing these symptoms of job loss involves engaging in non-work activities to provide structure and rewards that one's job previously provided (Gowan et al., 1999). Fosha (2002) elaborated that what is most traumatic to individuals in the face of loss is not necessarily the scariest or most normatively horrible aspect of it. Instead, the trauma centers in the extraordinary disloyalty, assault, or betrayal of who we know ourselves to be. Thus, adopting a symptom focus might prompt individuals to immerse themselves in another role, for example, in one's church or community.

A symptom-focused strategy also could be seen as related to finding a sense of purpose in one's life, which was strongly associated with both resiliency and recovery status in Alim and Feder's (2008) study of individuals who had suffered severe trauma. That is, work can provide a sense of purpose. Just like the concept of identity loss, it follows that when one's job is lost, the sense of purpose also may be lost. Dedicating oneself to other pursuits and finding purpose in those can help alleviate the sense of dislocation and disruption.

The fourth and final strategy is cognitive framing or viewing the job loss as reversible, which Gowan et al. (1999) found to alleviate distress in unemployed workers. Part of cognitive reframing can include "positive illusions," which suggest that people distort the information about a situation to diminish the threats involved in the job loss situation or to enhance the sense of one's abilities to gain another desirable position (Westphal & Bonanno, 2007, p. 421). Bonanno (2004) described this as repressive



coping, which means avoiding unpleasant thoughts, emotions, and memories through emotional dissociation. In the short-term, these activities can help the individual restore their self-esteem, develop an optimistic outlook, regain a sense of mastery over the event, and foster adaptation to extreme adversity (Bonanno, 2004; Westphal & Bonanno, 2007).

However, cognitive reframing that involves emotional repression can result in elevated distress on indirect measures (e.g., autonomic arousal), can lead to long-term health costs (e.g., hypertension), and are viewed as a maladaptive approach to handling stress. For example, Fosha (2002) warned that detachment, trivialization, stagnation, and the loss of feeling and meaning, which can happen through emotional repression, often becomes an enemy of healing from trauma and loss.

Armeli and Gunthert (2001) discussed the need for schema reconstruction, arguing that stressful life events like job loss disrupt previously stable beliefs, requiring reorganization or restructuring of these beliefs. Over time in the aftermath of job loss, an individual's schemas are eventually rebuilt. When the trauma of job loss is successfully managed, it can be integrated into a greater sense of confidence and mastery as the schema is rebuilt and the person moves forward in life.

**Resources.** Coping resources are defined as the internal personal characteristics and external conditions that individuals draw upon to deal with job loss (Gowan et al., 1999). Coping resources include one's education level, financial resources, spirituality (e.g., regular attendance at religious services), and mindset, as well as the availability of social support from friends and family (Westphal & Bonanno, 2007). Finally, it is important to be able to flexibly apply different coping resources, strategies, and tools as the stressor calls for it.

As these coping resources increase, one's ability to cope with job loss is believed to increase (Westphal & Bonanno, 2007). One study of African American adults who had experienced severe trauma revealed that spirituality was a significant factor in bolstering individuals' mental health (Blank, Mahmood, Fox, & Guterbock, 2002). It is important to note, however, that it is common in African American culture to find mental and emotional support in one's church community more than in professional therapists or support groups outside the church. Therefore, it is difficult to determine whether this finding is applicable across all cultural groups.

Sherwood (2009) emphasized that another key coping resource is one's mindset; this distinguishes the survivors or "lucky" people from those who flounder or fail after trauma. He explained that "good things" happen to certain people when they are open to possibilities, see opportunities where others do not, follow their instinct, have faith that the outcome will be to their benefit, and are able to find a way to turn misfortune into a positive outcome. Alim and Feder (2008) added that an optimistic outlook may promote resilience and recovery by enabling individuals to experience positive emotions even in the face of adversity.

Another aspect of a positive mindset is self-esteem. Linn et al. (1985) observed in their study that those men with high self-esteem perceived less stress from job loss than those with low self-esteem; in addition, those who had high self-esteem tended to receive more support from family and friends than those with low self-esteem. Similarly, positive emotions have been associated with greater flexibility of thinking and exploration (Alim & Feder, 2008). Optimism, positive emotion, and laughter also have been linked to active coping, relying on social support, undoing negative emotion, and lowering the amount of avoidant coping (Alim & Feder, 2008; Bonanno, 2004).

Of these resources, Gowan et al. (1999) found in their study of 202 employees dealing with job loss that social support was a particularly critical resource. However, people rarely seek social support to talk about events that are humiliating or embarrassing, and experiencing job loss may fall into this category. Further, people who have been hurt, betrayed, and discarded by others they have loved can become afraid of seeking social support. Afraid of making contact, they seek safety in isolation, detachment, and a relentless but brittle self-reliance (Fosha, 2002). In their efforts to seek safety, they actually cut themselves off from attachment, one of the two greatest sources of help and adaptation in the face of trauma. Several studies have found that the inhibition to seek support or to discuss job loss may seriously impede one's progress toward reemployment (Alim & Feder, 2008; Linn et al., 1985; Spera & Morin, 1994).

**Tools.** Some authors have devised certain coping tools for working through and overcoming job loss. One of these combined approaches is to engage in self-generated imagery that consists of processing the trauma and visualizing a new future (Joseph & Greenberg, 2001). Joseph and Greenberg outlined four components of this imagery. First, the individual should mentally experience, express, and resolve his or her thoughts and emotions surrounding the job loss. Second, the individual should mentally construct a valued and successful possible self. Third, the individual should mentally rehearse job interviews and then imagine attaining his or her desired job. The fourth step is constructing psychological and spiritual growth opportunities to help make the imagined future come true. In addition to dealing with one's emotions and cognitively reframing the loss, this approach helps the individual boost self-esteem and enhances their sense of control and competence, which in turn enhances the unemployed worker's outcomes (Joseph & Greenberg, 2001; Ulrich & Lutgendorf, 2002).

Another successful combined approach is journaling, specifically when it involves a component of emotional expression as well as facilitating cognitive processing. This approach was found to be more effective than journaling on emotions alone or writing factually about the job loss event (Spera & Morin, 1994). In Spera and Morin's study of 63 unemployed professionals, participants who wrote about the trauma of losing their jobs were significantly more likely to find reemployment in the months following the study than control subjects.

An important feature of both Joseph and Greenberg's (2001) approach and journaling is *psychological debriefing*, which involves telling the story of the job loss in detail (Bonanno, 2004; Fosha, 2002). Expressing the experience helps individuals acknowledge their own humanity, which was threatened by trauma, and facilitates the cognitive and emotional release that may be required to understand and integrate the loss. Fosha (2002) added that simply asking the individual, "What was the worst part of the incident?" can become a key to healing.

Joseph and Greenberg (2001) tested the effectiveness of their recovery approach using a randomized experiment of 52 unemployed business people. Half of the participants went through their program of exercises that helped them deal with their emotions, cognitively reframe their job loss, boost their self-esteem, and enhance their sense of control and competence. The control group was instructed to simply visualize their job search plans. Full-time reemployment was higher for the program group than the control group, as assessed at the 2- and 4-month follow-up to the program. A randomized controlled test like this is a helpful approach for testing the impacts and efficacy of an intervention.

These findings show the importance of giving people who are recovering from job loss an opportunity to emotionally and cognitively process the loss and to address their ego needs for mastery, identity, and purpose while conducting a job search (Joseph & Greenberg, 2001). Without addressing these multifaceted needs, the job search may be extended. This can further exacerbate issues initially created by the job loss.

**Possible outcomes of job loss.** While the basic outcomes of recovery from job loss are continued unemployment or reemployment, a range of emotional and professional shifts can result from the recovery process. One positive outcome of the stress and trauma of job loss is that the individual gains the opportunity to grow and transform (Armeli & Gunthert, 2001; Fosha, 2002). “Growth from stressful events is one of the basic assumptions of crisis theory,” (Armeli & Gunthert, 2001, p. 367) as crisis leads to a psychic fluidity that is necessary for growth (Fosha, 2002). Thus, one’s growth potential is greatest when the stress is greatest. Saakvitne and Tennen (1998) explained that trauma can lead to the “reconstruction of meaning; the renewal of faith, trust, hope, and connection; and the redefinition of self, self in relation, and sense of community” (p. 281). Growth is best achieved when coping and support resources are present before, during, and following the job loss event and when the individual makes use of adaptive coping strategies, such as actively coping with the event, cognitively reframing his or her understanding of the loss, and seeking social support (Armeli & Gunthert, 2001).

Alternately, the experience of job loss and subsequent job searching activities can heighten an individual’s feelings of distress and distrust as they deal with the sense of betrayal in being laid off and the inherent rejection involved in job seeking activities (Gowan et al., 1999). These feelings can persist even once the employee regains employment. Feldman and Leana (2000) explained that laid off employees can have

lower trust in their subsequent employers and be more cynical about the nature of their careers. In some cases, the trauma of being laid off and the distress involved in job seeking prompts employees to seek vastly different environments for their next employment, even if that means taking a lower salary or settling for a position that does not match their aspirations. Thus, it appears that the trauma and distress of the recovery process can result in career decisions that may be unsustainable, which may precipitate continued job loss and trauma. Based on this, it seems critical to better understand and leverage the factors that help people grow through job loss.

**Summary.** Jobs help satisfy many basic needs in life. Losing a job constitutes a major life stressor that can affect financial sustainability, mental and emotional well-being, social standing, and even family cohesion (Feldman & Leana, 2000; Joseph & Greenberg, 2001; Luo & Thee-Brenan, 2009). When the distress of job loss is not dealt with productively, further complications can result, including physical illness, degraded motivation and performance, continued unemployment, and distrust upon reemployment.

Strategies for coping with job loss include finding a new job, dealing with emotions, dealing with symptoms, and cognitively reframing the loss (Gowan et al., 1999). These strategies are further bolstered when the individual has a higher level of education, financial resources, social support from friends and family, and a mindset that helps them recognize and capitalize on opportunities (Gowan et al., 1999; Sherwood, 2009). Effectively dealing with job loss can result in tremendous growth for an individual; however, for others, the complexity of the process can make it quite difficult for satisfactory reemployment. Based on these findings, it would be helpful to understand what internal characteristics prompt a laid off employee to recover productively. The next

section reviews resilience, one internal characteristic that may distinguish those who successfully recover following job loss from those who flounder.

### **Resilience and Trauma**

Resilience has been defined as the ability to maintain a stable equilibrium (healthy psychological and physical functioning) amidst the vicissitudes and adverse experiences of life. Resilience enacts a protective mechanism that fosters the development of positive outcomes and healthy personality characteristics (Bonanno, 2004). Resilience can exist within an individual, a family, or even a community (Landau, 2007).

Resilience is different from recovery, in that recovery connotes a trajectory where normal functioning temporarily gives way to compromised health or functioning, usually for a period of at least several months, and then gradually returns to pre-event levels. Full recovery may be relatively rapid or may take as long as 1 to 2 years (Bonanno, 2004). Based on these definitions, resilience is distinct in that the resilient individual may experience some upset in their emotional and physical well-being; however, they are able to “maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning . . . as well as the capacity for generative experiences and positive emotions” (Bonanno, 2004, pp. 20–21).

Based on Bonnano’s (2007) telephone interview of 2,752 residents of the New York City area following September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, women were half as likely to be resilient<sup>1</sup> as men, and people aged 65 years and older were over three times more resilient than people between 18 and 24 years of age. Asians were nearly three times more likely to be resilient than Caucasians, and surprisingly, people with a college degree

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<sup>1</sup> In Bonnano’s (2007) study, resilience was defined as having zero or one post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms in the 6 months following the terrorist attack.

were less resilient than those who had not completed high school. Other demographic factors of interest included the fact that the absence of chronic disease was strongly associated with resilience, and most of all, resilience was strongly associated with the absence of additional life stressors.

Because resilient individuals may not need to recover from a trauma or adverse event (Bonanno, 2004), the aftermath of trauma may play out very differently for the resilient individual versus the recovering individual. Resilient people may experience short-term disturbances in their emotional and physical well-being; however, these reactions tend to be temporary and usually do not impede their functioning or their mood to a significant degree (Westphal & Bonanno, 2007; Bonanno, 2004). This is considered the essence of healthy adjustment (Bonanno, 2004). Resilient people are able to more quickly recover their baseline level of functioning after a traumatic experience (Alim & Feder, 2008). As a result, resilient individuals experience little need or opportunity for growth following trauma (Westphal & Bonanno, 2007).

Therefore, resilient individuals do utilize some approaches to bounce back from loss or trauma. Despite the distinction between resilience and recovery, the leading tactics resilient people utilize in the aftermath of trauma are finding purpose in life, having self-confidence and a sense of mastery, believing in one's ability to learn and grow from both positive and negative life experiences, cognitively reframing the event (including the use of illusion and distortion), repressive coping, relying on positive emotion and laughter, and leveraging social support (Bonanno, 2004). It is notable that these tactics are consistent with the strategies, resources, and tools people use to cope with and recover from traumatic job loss (Alim & Feder, 2008; Gowan et al., 1999; Joseph & Greenberg, 2001; Luo & Thee-Brenan, 2009; Westphal & Bonanno, 2007).



## **Summary of the Literature**

Due to the dramatic impacts of job loss, it is important to understand what distinguishes those who successfully recover from its effects from those who flounder. Based on the collected findings of this literature review, it is possible one factor that distinguishes these two groups is resilience, which refers to internal and external characteristics that help individuals bounce back quickly from loss. While resilient individuals appear to utilize the strategies, resources, and tools advised for individuals recovering from job loss, they may take less time and feel less disrupted by the job loss than other individuals. This study further explores this concept by studying the resilience and path of recovery from job loss in individuals who have experienced a layoff. The next chapter outlines the methods used in this study.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods**

This chapter outlines the methods used in this study. The purpose of this study was to determine the role of resilience in recovering from a traumatizing job loss among laid off employees. This purpose was addressed through three research questions:

1. What were the participants' paths of recovery from job loss?
2. What was the nature of the participants' resilience?
3. In what ways did resilience influence their process of recovery?

To address those questions, this chapter describes the research design, participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures.

#### **Research Design**

The research paradigm for this study was mixed methods, which emphasizes pragmatism (Creswell, 2003). In research, pragmatism debunks the idea that a chasm exists between quantitative and qualitative research or that one form is better than another. Instead, mixed method researchers hold that both forms of data and research have value and that research questions often can be answered more thoroughly by blending these methods. For example, a mixed method approach can help the researcher generate more depth and contextual richness than a pure quantitative design would yield. Similarly, a mixed method approach can help the researcher strengthen the credibility and transferability of the data than a pure qualitative design would produce. Thus, the weaknesses of each approach can be compensated for while the strengths of each approach can be leveraged.

Two popular ways of administering a mixed method study is sequential (administering the qualitative portion before the quantitative portion or vice versa) or

parallel (administering both the qualitative and quantitative portions simultaneously, Creswell, 2003). A parallel mixed methods design was chosen for this study to gain a reliable measure of participants' resilience (quantitative portion), a rich account of their recovery from job loss, and a sense of how resilience may have influenced that path (qualitative portion). A parallel design was utilized because the researcher desired to collect both a qualitative and quantitative measure of resilience and its influences without either form unduly influencing the other.

### **Participants**

Participants were drawn for this study using convenience and snowball sampling. According to this sampling strategy, the researcher searches for study candidates using personal and professional networks. When qualified candidates were identified, recommendations of other participants who also might qualify for the study were gathered and contacted (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A qualified participant needed to satisfy certain criteria to help assure they would offer insights and data relevant to the study. Candidates had to meet the following criteria to participate in the study:

1. The candidate had been laid off at least once, and the participant should not have caused the layoff in any way. This criterion assured that the candidate had relevant data to share.
2. The candidate had been laid off between 1 and 5 years ago. This criterion helped assure that the candidate had not experienced the layoff too recently to have not recovered and not so long ago that his or her memory of the event had faded.
3. The candidate considered the layoff traumatic at the time but no longer feels traumatized by the experience. This criterion helped assure that the candidate would not face undue psychological risk by participating in the study.
4. The candidate did not believe he or she would feel re-traumatized by discussing the experience. This criterion helped assure that the candidate would not face undue psychological risk by participating in the study.

Candidates were screened using a brief telephone conversation to assure that they qualified for the study and would not face undue psychological risk by participating. Candidates received an invitation to participate that outlined the purpose of the study, nature of participation, and selection criteria (see Appendix A). The letter of invitation also contained a link to a screening survey (see Appendix B) to assure that participants qualified for the study. Participants who qualified for the study proceeded to review an online consent form (see Appendix C). After providing their consent electronically, they completed the survey and then scheduled an interview.

### **Measurement**

The researcher created a resilience scale based on the scales from Friborg, Hjemdal, Roseninge, and Martinussen (2003). Their research, which focused on rating resiliency, cited the five factors described below as comprising the distinctive tactics utilized by resilient individuals. Bonanno (2004) also stated that resilience encourages the development of positive outcomes and characteristics. Landau's (2007) research moreover stressed the importance of family coherence as a factor for recovery. For the purposes of this study, the assumption was made that resilience is a standard component of an individual's personality. This instrument conceptualizes resilience in terms of five scales:

1. Personal competence: the sense of being able to count on oneself to succeed despite adversity. This scale consists of 10 items. For example, Question 1 asked participants to indicate their agreement with the statement, "I believe in my own abilities," and Question 5 asked participants to indicate their agreement with the statement "No matter what happens, I always find a solution." Items were rated on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).
2. Social competence: one's sense of confidence in being with and socializing with others. This 7-item scale asked participants to indicate their agreement

with statements such as “I easily establish new friendships” and “I enjoy being with other people.”

3. Family coherence: the degree of support, belonging, and enjoyment associated with one’s family. This scale consists of 7 items and asked participants to indicate their agreement with statements such as “In our family, we are loyal toward each other” and “In my family, we have a common understanding of what’s important in life.”
4. Social support: having an inner circle of friends or family members one can count on for help or encouragement. This eight-item scale asked participants to indicate their agreement with statements such as “I always have someone who can help me when needed” and “I can discuss personal matters with friends and/or family members.”
5. Personal structure: one’s ability to structure one’s time and effort. This scale consists of five items. For example, Question 36 asked participants to indicate their agreement with “I work best when I reach for a goal.”

The instrument was used to provide a quantitative measure of the participant’s resilience.

### **Interview Procedures**

The interview script (see Appendix D) was organized into four categories. The first section of the interview gathered basic information about the participant to build rapport and orient the researcher and the participant to the focus of the interview.

Questions focused on learning about the timing of the layoff and reflecting back to the time that felt traumatic.

The second section focused on what the participant experienced following the layoff to help answer Research Question 1 (What were the participants’ paths of recovery from job loss?). Participants were asked about their feelings toward their job just before they were laid off, how they received the news of their own layoff, and what happened from that point until they started working again.

The third section inquired about the factors that helped and hindered their recovery from job loss. This section began with open-ended questions to solicit a broad range of answers. For example, one question asked participants, “When you reflect on

your overall journey following your layoff, what do you believe helped you recover from the trauma?” Next, participants were asked specifically about the resilience factors assessed on the survey to probe deeper about the role of these factors in participants’ recovery. These questions help answer Research Question 3 (In what ways did resilience influence their process of recovery?).

The fourth and final section involved questions to cool-down and wrap up the interview. This was necessary to diffuse any tension that built up in the course of the conversation, especially given the emotional impact of the topic. Questions asked participants to share what they learned from the experience and what advice they would give to others in this situation.

One-on-one interviews were conducted following the survey. The interviews lasted approximately one hour. Interviews were conducted by telephone or in person if the participant was located in the Los Angeles metro area. Interview data were captured through handwritten notes.

### **Data Analysis**

A mean score was calculated for each person and each scale on the survey. A higher score on each scale meant higher resilience. Interview data were analyzed as follows:

1. The researcher read the notes for each interview several times to become familiar with the data.
2. Based on that familiarization, initial themes were generated to capture the broad categories of events, feelings, and recovery strategies for each research question. Participants’ responses were not restricted to being mutually exclusive so that more than one theme could emerge from their data. This allowed subjects to express their full range of reactions. For example, one participant described both great relief from the situation as well as intense fear and anxiety for their future.

3. The participant profiles were then compared and examined to generate themes regarding the general process of recovery from job loss and the role of resilience in doing so. Because themes were not mutually exclusive, subjects were able to report whether one, more than one, or no factors of resilience played a role in their recovery. Because subjects were free to report all relevant factors, rather than just picking one, it was possible to determine the role played by resilience as compared to other factors. Keywords such as connection to family or friends, and regaining a sense of self, would indicate that factors of resilience play a role, whereas an absence of these keywords would suggest that other factors were considered more significant.

### **Summary**

This mixed method study involved administering a survey and interview to 10 participants who experienced a traumatic job loss between 1 and 5 years ago. Data analysis involved creating a profile for each participant that included a resilience score and themes related to their recovery. Participant profiles were compared to generate themes across the participants regarding recovery from job loss and the role of resilience in recovering.

## Chapter 4

### Results

This chapter reports the results of the study, which included 10 participants (five men, five women, see Table 1). Six had been laid off once, two had been laid off twice, and two had been laid off three or more times. All participants had at least one layoff occur between 2005 and 2009. This chapter reports the study findings based upon these participants' accounts.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

Who*	Number of times laid off	Year(s) laid off and position
Chuck	2	1989, 2008; Manager
Kevin	1	2005, Fork lift operator
Nancy	2	2006, Staff accountant
Wendy	1	2007, Assistant controller
Vivienne	Several	2008, Security consultant
Don	1	2008, Controller
Meg	3	2009, Accounting manager
George	1	2009, Sales manager
Alana	1	2009, Medical transcriptionist
Robert	1	2009, Inside sales support representative

\*All names are disguised.

### The Layoff Experience

All the participants had at least some positive attitudes and experiences related to their employers before their layoff (see Table 2). Seven of the 10 reported having a good relationship with their supervisors. George shared, "My boss was great. I really respected him. He was a mentor. He showed me how to think outside the box, and he pushed/challenged me." Six of the 10 participants described being dedicated and loyal to the organization. Wendy elaborated,



Although I didn't enjoy what I was doing, I was still dedicated and completely loyal. In fact, my boss had even mentioned to me that I shouldn't be so loyal to the organization, him, or the controller, as he knew what was happening.

Four of the 10 described having some negative attitudes and experiences at their company before their layoff. Three were dissatisfied with their jobs. For example, Vivienne shared, "It was a stressful job because it could easily put you [physically] in harm's way and for the pay, it wasn't really worth it."

**Table 2**

*Attitudes Toward Work Before Layoffs*

Theme	<i>N</i>	%
Positive Attitudes and Experiences	10	100%
Had a good relationship with my supervisor (70%)		
Was dedicated and loyal to organization (60%)		
Enjoyed co-workers and the environment (50%)		
Satisfied with job (40%)		
Negative Attitudes and Experiences	4	40%
Dissatisfied with job (30%)		
Unhappy with the organization (20%)		

*N* = 10

The participants received the news of their layoff in different ways (see Table 3). Half the group received the message through personal communication from their supervisor or department head. For example, Don had multiple discussions with top management about the situation. He also was offered the choice to work in Arizona, but he did not take it. Three received an impersonal, blanket communication. In Kevin's situation:

There was a company meeting at our location, where they told us they were downsizing that location. They didn't mention when it would actually happen. It was very much [in the spirit of] . . . "We still have projects to do. When the project is over, then we'll know better." When my day came, I was ready to go.

**Table 3*****Notification Received of Layoff***

Theme	<i>N</i>	%
Personally delivered by supervisor or department head	5	50%
Impersonal, blanket communication	3	30%
Personally delivered message from human resources	2	20%

*N* = 10

In the initial aftermath of the layoff, 60% of the participants reported having mixed reactions to the event (see Tables 4 and 5). That is, for most people, the initial reaction to the layoff announcement was both positive and negative. A range of reactions were reported, without a strong consensus on any one theme. The majority, 60% of participants, reported feeling “blindsided, betrayed, and frustrated.” Nancy shared, “I was shocked when it happened; completely blindsided, especially since I liked my boss and the company so much.” Wendy recalled,

I was even discussing an exit strategy with my boss that could have included that same timeframe. I was already looking for a new position. . . I guess I felt a level of betrayal from him, despite the fact that I respected him so much.

The next most common response, reported by 40% of participants, was spending time “licking wounds” and pursuing personal needs, indicative of the importance of personal competence as one of the resilience factors reported by most participants. Meg “spent time curled up reading—[I] read, skated, decompressed.” Wendy shared her experience:

After the layoff, I just took some time off to decompress. I took that time to focus on making progress toward some of my bigger personal goals. In the end, it all worked out perfectly, as it always does, just not on my timeline.

**Table 4**  
*Initial Aftermath of Layoff*

Theme	N	%
Positive or neutral reactions	7	70%
Spent time licking wounds and pursuing personal needs (40%)		
Didn't take it personally (20%)		
Not over anxious about future and finances (20%)		
Actively searched for another job (20%)		
Negative reactions	9	90%
Felt blindsided, betrayed, and frustrated (60%)		
Diminished my sense of personal value (30%)		
Concerned about future and finances (30%)		
Concerns over "starting over"/Confidence in the future (20%)		
N = 10		

**Table 5**  
*Reaction to Layoff*

Reaction	N	%
Negative	3	30%
Mixed (some positive and negative)	6	60%
Not Negative	1	10%
N = 10		

### **Paths of Recovery**

Participants were asked to describe the factors that both facilitated and obstructed their recovery from being laid off. Table 6 reveals two leading factors; connection to others (70% of participants) and gaining a restored sense of self (60% of participants). Six participants emphasized that the support of their family and friends helped them. Don shared, "My family was incredibly supportive, especially my wife. She might have gotten on me just once or twice, but that was it." Regarding a restored sense of self, three participants explained that it helped to gain the time and space to make better decisions

for themselves. Meg elaborated that the time was highly beneficial and that she had “no additional stress that might have been generated had she taken on a new job right away.”

**Table 6**

*Facilitators of Recovery from Layoff*

Theme	<i>N</i>	%
Connection to Others	7	70%
Support of family and friends (60%)		
Reconnected to the larger world (30%)		
Restored Sense of Self	6	60%
Gaining time and space to make better decisions for self (30%)		
Confidence in self and ability to find another job (20%)		
Action-Orientation	2	20%
Staying busy/and taking action		

Subjects were asked to list all facilitators to recovery to allow a more complete picture as to the relative importance of resilience compared to other factors. Again, the majority of participants considered factors of resilience such as social or family competence (connection to others) and personal competence (restored sense of self) to be facilitators to recovery.

Participants identified two key forms of obstacles to recovery: self-imposed limitations and environmental limitations (see Table 7). Six participants named both forms. Participants named a range of self-imposed limitations without strong consensus on any one theme. Themes included such things as the stress of uncertainty (two participants), the stress of personal failure (two participants), and having to choose between one’s dreams and practicality (two participants).

Participants converged on the environmental limitations they faced. Four participants cited poor economic conditions and the limited availability of jobs. For example, Vivienne shared, “I’m older now, and the jobs are becoming more scarce in the

area that I live in.” Three participants described anxiety over the financial and practical responsibilities they faced without a job. For example, Nancy explained, “My daughter was two years old at the time. That was stressful trying to fulfill the financial needs there.” Table 7 shows that when participants were prompted to identify the top obstacle to recovery, they were roughly split between environmental limitations (five participants) and self-imposed limitations (four participants).

**Table 7**

***Top Obstacle to Recovery***

Theme	<i>N</i>	%
Environmental Limitations	5	50%
Economic conditions and hiring freezes		
Self-imposed limitations	4	40%
Sense of personal failure (20%)		

*N* = 10

Participants identified three main lessons they learned from their layoff experience (see Table 8). The most commonly cited lesson (50% of participants) was greater self-confidence and direction. Meg shared that she learned the importance of “listening to my gut rather than needing to impress management.” Robert added, “I learned to focus on what I want, rather than just get scared about not having a job.” Three participants also gained faith that things will work out. Wendy elaborated,

In retrospect, that layoff was one of the best things that have ever happened to me. It gave me time to take classes, I no longer had a crazy commute, I had stopped doing what I did not enjoy, and I found an organization that allowed me the time I needed to go back to school and complete my degree.

Participants offered four main suggestions to others experiencing traumatic job loss (see Table 9). The leading suggestion, offered by 80% of participants, was to keep perspective. Seven of these participants urged displaced employees to persevere and have

faith that things will work out. Don explained, “The situation often is what it is. If you can stay focused on being productive, it’ll happen.” Kevin added, “Learn your lessons and constantly search to seek answers. Your situation can change based on how you frame the situation in your head.”

**Table 8**

*Lessons Learned from the Layoff Experience*

Theme	<i>N</i>	%
Greater self-confidence and self-direction	5	50%
Faith that things work out	3	30%
Changed psychological contract—free agent, shorter durations	2	20%

*N* = 10

**Table 9**

*Advice to Others Experiencing Traumatic Job Loss*

Theme	<i>N</i>	%
Keep Perspective	8	80%
Persevere and have faith that things will work out (70%)		
Don’t personalize it; it’s just business (20%)		
Perspectives change with life experience (20%)		
Take Productive Action	7	70%
Continue developing yourself and your network (50%)		
Pursue your interests (30%)		
Create structure and routine for the present and a strategy for the future (20%)		
Seek Support	5	50%
Seek emotional support (50%)		
Express your emotions (20%)		
Take Care of Self	2	20%
Practice self-care (20%)		
Enjoy the time off (20%)		

*N* = 10

Seven participants also urged displaced employees to take productive action (see Table 9). Advised actions took many forms, such as continuing to develop oneself and one’s network, pursuing one’s own interests, and creating a structure and routine for the

present and a strategy for the future. Other advice focused on seeking support (five participants) and practicing self-care (two participants).

### Participants' Level of Resilience

Participants were asked to complete a survey that assessed their level of resilience at the time of the layoff (see Table 10). Five types of resilience were assessed on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) regarding having a specific type of resilience. Personal competence refers to one's sense of being able to succeed despite adversity. Participants' scores ranged from 2.70 for Nancy (who had experienced two layoffs) and Robert (who had experienced one layoff) to 4.90 for Vivienne (who had experienced several layoffs).

**Table 10**

#### *Resilience Scores*

	Personal Competence Mean (SD)	Social Competence Mean (SD)	Family Coherence Mean (SD)	Social Support Mean (SD)	Personal Structure Mean (SD)	Overall Resilience Mean (SD)
Chuck	4.20 (0.63)	4.00 (0.58)	4.14 (1.21)	4.13 (0.64)	3.80 (0.45)	4.08 (0.72)
Meg	4.10 (0.57)	4.14 (0.90)	3.29 (0.95)	4.13 (1.13)	3.80 (0.45)	3.92 (0.86)
Nancy	2.70 (0.95)	3.43 (0.53)	3.00 (0.82)	3.50 (0.76)	3.00 (0.71)	3.11 (0.81)
Wendy	4.50 (0.53)	4.71 (0.49)	3.00 (1.00)	4.75 (0.71)	4.40 (0.55)	4.30 (0.91)
Alana	3.30 (0.48)	3.86 (0.38)	3.00 (0.58)	3.50 (0.53)	4.00 (0.00)	3.49 (0.56)
Vivienne	4.90 (0.32)	5.00 (0.00)	5.00 (0.00)	5.00 (0.00)	4.80 (0.45)	4.95 (0.23)
Don	4.50 (0.53)	3.86 (0.38)	4.71 (0.49)	4.25 (0.46)	4.20 (0.45)	4.32 (0.53)
Robert	2.70 (0.82)	3.57 (0.79)	4.43 (0.79)	4.88 (0.35)	3.40 (0.55)	3.76 (1.06)
George	4.50 (0.53)	4.71 (0.49)	4.71 (0.49)	5.00 (0.00)	4.20 (0.84)	4.65 (0.54)
Kevin	4.40 (0.84)	4.57 (0.79)	4.00 (0.82)	4.75 (0.46)	3.60 (0.89)	4.32 (0.82)
Overall	3.98 (0.97)	4.19 (0.75)	3.93 (1.05)	4.39 (0.79)	3.92 (0.72)	4.09 (0.90)

Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree that they have this factor.

Social competence refers to one's sense of confidence in being with and socializing with others. Scores ranged from 3.43 for Nancy to 5.00 for Vivienne.

Family coherence refers to the degree of support, belonging, and enjoyment one has with one's family. This type of resilience earned the lowest average score across participants (along with personal structure). Four participants (Meg, Nancy, Wendy, and

Alana) rated family coherence as roughly neutral with scores ranging from 3.00 to 3.29.

Vivienne rated her family coherence as 5.00.

Social support refers to having an inner circle of friends or family members one can count on for help or encouragement. This category earned the highest scores, ranging from 3.50 for Nancy and Alana to 5.00 for Vivienne.

Personal structure refers to one's ability to structure one's time and effort. This category (along with family coherence) received the lowest average score across participants. Scores ranged from 3.00 for Nancy to 4.80 for Vivienne. Overall resilience ranged from 3.11 for Nancy to 4.95 for Vivienne. Cronbach's alpha was applied to assess reliability of the collected data (see Table 11).

**Table 11**

***Cronbach's Alpha Scores***

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
Personal Competence	0.94	10
Social Competence	0.84	7
Family Coherence	0.92	7
Social Support	0.91	8
Personal Structure	0.76	5

**Role of Resilience in Recovery**

Participants were directly asked about the role of each type of resilience in their recovery from job loss (see Table 12). Nearly all participants reported that four types of resilience were essential or of strong importance in recovering job loss: personal competence (100% of participants), family coherence (90% of participants), social support (80% of participants), and personal structure (80% of participants). Fewer participants believed social competence played a large role in this kind of recovery: 40%



believed it was essential or of strong importance, 50% believed it play some or a minimal role, and 10% believed in played no role in recovery from job loss.

**Table 12**  
***Role of Resilience in Recovery***

Type of Resilience	Essential	Strong	Some	Minimal	None	Overall Role
<u>Personal competence</u> : Your sense of being able to count on yourself to succeed despite adversity	7	3	0	0	0	Essential or Strong: 100% Some or Minimal: 0% None: 0%
<u>Social competence</u> : Your sense of confidence in being with and socializing with others	3	1	2	3	1	Essential or Strong: 40% Some or Minimal: 50% None: 10%
<u>Family coherence</u> : The degree of support, belonging, and enjoyment you have with your family.	4	5	1	0	0	Essential or Strong: 90% Some or Minimal: 10% None: 0%
<u>Social support</u> : Having an inner circle of friends or family members you can count on for help or encouragement	7	1	1	1	0	Essential or Strong: 80% Some or Minimal: 20% None: 0%
<u>Personal structure</u> : Your ability to structure your time and effort	4	4	2	0	0	Essential or Strong: 80% Some or Minimal: 20% None: 0%

*N* = 10

Participants were then asked to rank the necessity of the types of resilience in order from 1 (of highest necessity) to 5 (of lowest necessity). The results of the ranking are reported in Table 13. These scores were roughly consistent with the importance rating participants provided. Family coherence was ranked in the top three by nine participants, and personal competence was ranked in the top three by eight participants. These appeared to be the two most important types of resilience. Social support was ranked in

the top three by seven participants, and personal structure was ranked in the top three by four participants. Social competence again appeared to be the least important form of resilience according to these participants as it was ranked in the top three by only two participants.

**Table 13**

***Ranking the Types of Resilience for Recovery from Job Loss***

Type of Resilience	Ranking
<u>Personal competence</u> : Your sense of being able to count on yourself to succeed despite adversity	1-3: 8 4-5: 2
<u>Social competence</u> : Your sense of confidence in being with and socializing with others	1-3: 2 4-5: 8
<u>Family coherence</u> : The degree of support, belonging, and enjoyment you have with your family.	1-3: 9 4-5: 1
<u>Social support</u> : Having an inner circle of friends or family members you can count on for help or encouragement	1-3: 7 4-5: 3
<u>Personal structure</u> : Your ability to structure your time and effort	1-3: 4 4-5: 6

Scale: 1 = top rank, 5 = lowest rank

**Synthesis of Qualitative and Quantitative Results**

The first step in synthesizing the qualitative and quantitative results was determining whether the interview themes that emerged regarding participants paths of recovery, lessons learned, or advice to others correlated with any of the 5 resilience scales. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 14. Personal competence was mentioned most, showing up in seven themes. Support from others was mentioned in three themes; however, it was uncertain whether participants were referring to family coherence, social support, or both. Personal structure was cited in two themes. Environmental limitations were mentioned by participants (60%); however, this theme did not correlate to any of the types of resilience. Table 14 is significant because it shows that, while resilience factors were cited as facilitators by the majority of participants

(family coherence, social support, personal structure), a non resilience factor, Environmental/economic limitation, also had a material impact (60%).

Examining the combined results suggests that a leading factor in recovery from job loss may be an ability to keep perspective, which may lean toward one's own ability to keep perspective as a situation changes, or the support from friend and family to help one maintain perspective (see Table 14).

**Table 14**

*Mapping of Interview Themes to Resilience Scales*

Theme	Type of Resilience
Facilitator of Recovery	
Connection to others (70%)	Family coherence or social support
Restored sense of self (60%)	Personal competence
Action-orientation (20%)	Personal structure
Obstacles to Recovery	
Self-imposed limitations (60%)	Personal competence
Environmental limitations (60%)	None
Lesson learned	
Need for greater self-confidence and self-direction (50%)	Personal competence
Need to have faith that things work out (30%)	Personal competence
Need for changed psychological contract—free agent, shorter durations (20%)	Personal competence
Keep perspective (80%)	Personal competence or Social support
Take productive action (70%)	Personal structure
Seek support (50%)	Family coherence or social support
Take care of self	Personal competence

After this, personal competence, followed by social support and/or family coherence were most common among participants, suggesting that these resilience factors are significant for people recovering from job loss. Personal structure is the next most important factor, but social competence was not believed to play an important role in these participants' recovery from job loss.

## Summary

Ten participants were interviewed about their experiences recovering from a traumatic job loss. All had positive attitudes and experiences toward at least some aspects of their jobs before the layoff while four had negative attitudes and experiences toward at least some aspects of their jobs. More than half received the message of their layoff personally delivered from their bosses or from human resources. Seven had positive or neutral immediate reactions. All but one participant also had negative initial reactions to the layoff. Participants named connection to others, gaining a restored sense of self, and having an action orientation as facilitators to their recovery. Obstacles to their recovery included their own self-imposed limitations as well as environmental limitations (e.g., poor economy). Three key lessons they learned from their experience included the need for greater self-confidence and self-direction, faith that things work out, and a changed psychological employment contract. Participants advised others experiencing a traumatic job loss to keep perspective, persevere and have faith that things will work out, take productive action, seek support, and practice self-care. Based on the survey results, participants appeared to have relatively strong resilience at the time of their job loss, with overall resilience scores ranging from 3.92 to 4.39 on a scale of 1 to 5.

Examination of the combined results suggests that a leading factor in recovery from job loss may be personal competence followed by social support and/or family coherence. Personal structure is the next most important factor; however, social competence was not believed to play an important role in these participants' recovery from job loss. The next chapter provides a discussion of these results.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to determine the role of resilience in recovering from a traumatizing job loss among laid-off employees. The research questions were:

1. What were the participants' paths of recovery from job loss?
2. What was the nature of the participants' resilience?
3. In what ways did resilience influence their process of recovery?

This chapter provides a discussion of the study results. Conclusions are presented first, followed by recommendations, limitations, and directions for additional research.

### **Conclusions**

Ten participants were interviewed about their experiences recovering from a traumatic job loss. Most participants (60%) expressed both positive and negative reactions to their situation, 10% did not report any negative reaction, and 30% described their reaction as negative. Several of the laid-off workers reported feeling blindsided by the layoff as well as a strong sense of betrayal by their employer. It was not a lack of understanding the financial reasons behind the layoff that was bothersome; rather, it was the lack of communication from management to the employees of the organization's situation and intention, which was the underlying factor of the employee's sense of having been betrayed. They did not feel prepared for the actions by their employer and thus did not prepare for the emotional and financial impact of being laid off as well as they could have had they been given early notice and counseling.

The leading resilience factors in recovery from job loss may be the combination of personal competence (having the sense of being able to count on oneself to succeed despite adversity) and support from one's friends and family (see Table 12). The

devastation to one's sense of value after a layoff is more manageable when the laid-off individual is able to keep the event in perspective, as the result of multiple factors, rather than because the individual was not valued by his or her employer. Participants (80%) reported that the ability to keep perspective played a more significant role than any of the other reported resilience factors (see Table 14).

Personal structure (the ability to structure one's time and effort) also played an important factor for some of the participants. Those who created structure for their daily activity commented that it helped them keep from dwelling on the layoff and forced them to take action. While this action related to both personal/self-care goals as well as finding a new job, the discipline of having goals and taking action allowed some sense of accomplishment to counter the depression of being laid off. Although there are other facilitators in recovery from job loss, resilience factors play a significant part in the recovery process.

Reflecting on the stories the participants shared about their experiences, receiving immediate emotional support seemed particularly influential with regard to the speed at which the individual rebounded and moved on. The emotional support from family and friends went beyond understanding and compassion for the participant's situation; it reassured the laid-off employee of their value beyond the workplace. The support from these relationships allowed the workers to maintain a sense of contribution to society despite their financial situation. Other important parts of the recovery process included having a bit of down time after the event, having a period of time to focus less on the world around them and more toward their own self-care. When participants were able to go through this process, they described feeling better able to focus on their job search and re-engage their life.

These findings are consistent with the literature on recovering from traumatic job loss. Joseph and Greenberg (2001) pointed out that people recovering from a layoff need to find coping strategies that relieve discomfort and help them maintain hope and self-esteem in the face of the rejection, lack of feedback, uncertainty, and distress associated with job loss. Leading coping strategies mentioned in the literature included finding a new job (Luo & Thee-Brenan, 2009), dealing with emotions (Gowan et al., 1999), creating personal structure, restoring the sense of self (Fosha, 2002; Gowan et al., 1999), and cognitively reframing job loss as being reversible (Gowan et al., 1999). Researchers also have observed that people draw upon personal strengths and credentials, support from others, and having perspective and a positive mindset (Gowan et al., 1999; Sherwood, 2009). Of these resources, social support was believed to be a particularly critical resource (Alim & Feder, 2008; Fosha, 2002; Linn et al., 1985; Spera & Morin, 1994). These findings are congruent with the current study's findings that personal competence and support from family and friends are important.

Based on these findings, it is important to assure that laid-off employees are supported in restoring their sense of self and in seeking and finding support from others. This support should be multifaceted to address the individual as a whole, including technical training as well as emotional support/counseling (including family members impacted). Practical recommendations to facilitate this are described in the next section. In addition, limitations of the study's research and data collection methods also follow.

### **Recommendations**

In response to the economic downturn in the United States, American businesses have laid off hundreds of thousands of workers between 2007 and 2011 and they continue to employ these downsizing methods as a means for minimizing labor costs for the

organization and managing the financial bottom line. Since 2007, the economic downturn has become a global problem, reminding us all of the intricate nature of our co-existence as a global community and environment.

The participants of this study were American employees and, therefore, reflect the values of those living in the United States. The belief in one's personal competence (confidence in one's sense of self and one's abilities) and receiving emotional support were reported to be critical factors for an individual to recover from a traumatic job loss. Thus, emphasis on providing these essential support mechanisms should be a priority in order to maintain the robustness of our workforce. Support to help these employees re-establish self confidence and personal value may take the form of counseling for the employee as well as their family, technical training, help with financial planning, and other services which provide the individual a method of regaining a sense of hope and control over their life. Combinations of methods may be necessary in order to address the individual as a whole and work to help the laid-off employee manage those areas which bring them the most psychological trauma from the layoff.

Although initial negative reactions, down time, and some personal disengagement are all part of the process of recovering from a job loss, it is essential not to get "stuck" in feeling down. For example, one participant advised others experiencing job loss to allow themselves a defined period of time for decompressing and then, when that time is up, to start re-engaging with life.

Considering the emotional and psychological impact of layoffs, human resources departments would be an ideal entity to lead the effort in supporting displaced employees. For example, human resources professionals could provide initial attempts at alleviating some of the employees' anxiety over the unknown by sharing information about the



psychological impact of a layoff and the typical process of recovery, including the importance of validating one's sense of personal competence and receiving support from others. This informational outreach could also include suggestions for activities that improve one's sense of self as well as methods for finding the kind of support the displaced employee may need (including contact information for coaching, counseling, recruiting, and job hunting). In addition, human resources departments may have better access to profiling displaced employees based on their history and their managers' assessments. These activities can help the human resources representative better tailor their approach to the laid-off employees and, thus, create a more effective method of helping them during the transition.

Outplacement agencies who work with laid-off employees, government agencies that deal with laid-off employees, and family and friends of laid-off workers all can benefit from the shared understanding of the psychological and emotional impact on a displaced individual. This knowledge may assist in their ability to help these laid-off workers through the transition.

Although an unexpected layoff may be traumatic to the employee being laid off, it can also psychologically impact those employees left at the company. Organizations that provide care for displaced members of its workforce with education and support would likely create tremendous social capital with its remaining employees, laid-off employees, and its community. These actions could enhance current and future employees' perceptions of the organization, which could also lead to improved loyalty and goodwill. Coaches and organization development consultants also can play powerful roles in helping displaced employees get the support they need and help the organization provide

this kind of support. In both cases, it is critical to provide education, tips for initiating these activities, and support in carrying out these activities.

### **Limitations**

A leading limitation of this study was its reliance on a small sample size. Additionally, 90% of the participants were drawn from an urban environment. Moreover, due to the small sample size, the analysis could not detect possible differences based on participant demographics (e.g., stage of career, psychological contract, industry, position). These factors mean that the data cannot reflect the full range of recovery strategies people use to recover from a traumatizing loss. Further research is needed on a much larger scale to generate more transferable conclusions.

A second limitation concerned data collection. First, the validity and reliability of the survey utilized in the study was not determined. Testing a new survey instrument for validity and reliability is a complex endeavor (Creswell, 2003). The scope of this research did not allow for either the financial or time investment involved in validating this survey instrument. Additionally, it is likely that some data loss occurred during the interviewing, as the researcher took interview notes rather than audio taping the interviews and creating complete transcripts. These factors mean that the data might not be complete or reliable. Future studies should utilize validated instruments and the creation of complete interview transcripts.

A third limitation of this study resulted from the method in which the interview data was categorized. The categorization of the responses was not validated by other researchers and could have resulted in a biased interpretation of the interviewees' statements. Future studies should include validation of the categories applied to the

interview transcripts in order to mitigate any bias the interviewer may have interpreting the data.

### **Directions for Additional Research**

Although this study generated important insights that were largely congruent with past literature, it did not address the significant role of the economic condition in the process of recovery. In the current sample, most but not all the participants mentioned the impact of the current economic recession and the obstacles it posed for their recovery. It is uncertain how participants' resilience helped them deal with these economic limitations. The current economic environment has resulted in prolonged periods of unemployment, and it would be helpful to conduct in-depth research on how a recession affects the unemployed and their recovery from job loss. It is possible that the process of recovery is different when economic conditions are particularly dire and jobs are extremely scarce. This kind of situation is affecting a great number of people in the current global environment; consequently, it is vital to understand how to support this very vulnerable population. Research to this effect would help begin that effort.

A second direction for additional research would be to gauge the outcomes for organizations that implement an education and support program for helping laid-off employees recover from job loss (see Recommendations section). This research would provide important validation to support or refine the key recommendations provided in this study. In particular, the research could examine any effects on productivity, goodwill, or other important measures, which may influence decision-making in an organization.

### **Summary**

Jobs help satisfy basic human needs such as physical sustenance and shelter, but can also provide a sense of identity and purpose that offers opportunities for creative

expression and productivity. Financial stability, mental and emotional well-being, and social standing are all potentially affected by job loss. Due to the dramatic impact job loss can have on individuals and the likelihood that job losses will continue in the future, it was important to understand the process of successfully recovering from this experience.

Resilience, which refers to internal and external characteristics that help individuals bounce back quickly from loss, is a major success factor in successful recoveries. The purpose of this study was to determine the role of resilience in recovering from a traumatizing job loss among laid off employees. This mixed method study involved administering a survey and interview to 10 participants who have experienced a traumatic job loss between 1 and 5 years ago.

Results suggested that resilience factors, particularly personal competence followed closely by social support and/or family coherence, were important in recovery from job loss, although facilitators other than resilience also were reported to be significant. Based on these results, it is critical for organizations, human resource professionals, coaches, organizational development consultants, and displaced workers themselves to be aware of these resilience factors and to support activities that could strengthen resilience in the aftermath of job loss. Specific activities could include educational outreach, which could help with personal competency; access to counseling and help networks, which would help establish social support, one of the most commonly reported factors of resilience among participants; and listing resources and tips for coaching, recruiting, and job hunting, which could help with personal structure and boost personal competence.

Key limitations of this study included using a small sample size, a non-validated survey instrument, and taking interview notes rather than creating complete transcripts.

Directions for additional research include examining the impact of poor economic conditions on the process of recovery and assessing the outcomes for organizations that implement an education and support program for helping laid-off employees recover from job loss.

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## **Appendix A: Study Invitation**

[insert date]

Dear [insert name here],

I am conducting a study of how people recover from job loss. This study is being conducted as part of the requirements for a master's degree in organization development at Pepperdine University.

I am seeking candidates who experienced a layoff between 1 and 5 years ago. Participants in this study will be asked to complete a survey and participate in a 1-hour, one-on-one interview by phone or in-person. Completion of these procedures will require up to 1 ½ hours of participation.

Participation in this study is VOLUNTARY and data will be kept confidential. Participation will not be damaging to one's organization, employability, or reputation.

Please contact me by telephone (310-650-4537) or email ([awcmsod@gmail.com](mailto:awcmsod@gmail.com)) if you might be willing to participate. Please feel free to forward this email to anyone you believe might qualify for the study.

Thanks for your help!

Ann Chu

**Appendix B: Screening Survey**

## Screening Survey

Thank you very much for your interest in participating in my study of how people recover from job loss.

This research is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master's thesis. Your responses will be kept confidential and any data I collect will be kept in a locked cabinet.

Your participation is voluntary, which means that you can decline to answer any question and you withdraw at any time without penalty.

I would like to ask you a few questions to make sure you qualify to participate in the study.

1. Have you ever been laid off?

*If yes, proceed with the next question.*

*If no, respond, "Unfortunately, you do not qualify to participate in the study because I am looking for people who have experienced a job loss. Thank so much for your time and interest."*

2. When were you laid off? If you have been laid off more than once, when was the most recent layoff you experienced?

*If the layoff occurred between 1 and 5 years ago, proceed with the next question.*

*If not, respond, "Unfortunately, you do not qualify to participate in the study because I am looking for people who have experienced a job loss between 1 and 5 years ago. Thank so much for your time and interest."*

Trauma has been defined as an emotional wound or shock often having long-lasting effects.

3. Would you consider being laid off traumatic when you think back to how you felt when you first heard the news and dealt with the aftermath?

*If yes, proceed with the next question.*

*If no, respond, "Unfortunately, you do not qualify to participate in the study because I am looking for people who felt traumatized by the job loss. Thank so much for your time and interest."*

4. Do you still feel traumatized regarding your layoff experience?

*If no, proceed with the next question.*

*If yes, respond, "Unfortunately, I cannot enroll you in the study at this time, as I do not want to probe an already difficult subject for you. Thank so much for your time and interest."*

If we discussed your experience, do you think you would feel re-traumatized?

*If no, proceed with the next question.*

*If yes, respond, "Unfortunately, I cannot enroll you in the study at this time, as I do not want to probe an already difficult subject for you. Thank so much for your time and interest."*

5. Based on your answers, you qualify to participate in the study! The first step in participating is to formally indicate your consent to participate. You may proceed to review and give consent here <link to consent form>.

**Appendix C: Consent Form**

## Participation Consent Form

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator: Ann Chu

Title of Project: ***Examining the Role of Resilience in Recovering from Job Loss***

1. I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the research study being conducted by Ann Chu under the direction of Dr. Christopher Worley.
2. *The overall purpose of this research is:*  
to determine the role of resilience in recovering from a traumatizing job loss among laid off employees.
3. My participation will involve completing 1 survey and participating in 1 telephone interview.
4. My participation in the study will require up to 90 minutes of participant. The study shall be conducted in a private location of my choosing where I will not be interrupted or overheard.
5. I understand that the possible benefits to myself or society from this research are: Understanding how resilience and its components influence the experience of job loss. This information could deepen my understanding of my own experience and produce knowledge that could benefit others who experience job loss in the future.
6. I understand that there are certain risks and discomforts that might be associated with this research. These risks include:  
I might feel emotional discomfort as I recall my experience of losing my job and recovering from that experience.
7. I understand that I may choose not to participate in this research.
8. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may refuse to participate and/or withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the project or activity at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.
9. I understand that the investigator(s) will take all reasonable measures to protect the confidentiality of my records and my identity will not be revealed in any publication that may result from this project. The confidentiality of my records will be maintained in accordance with applicable state and federal laws. Under California law, there are exceptions to confidentiality, including suspicion that a child, elder, or dependent adult is being abused, or if an individual discloses an intent to harm him/herself or others.



10. I understand that the investigator is willing to answer any inquiries I may have concerning the research herein described. I understand that I may contact Dr. Christopher Worley at [contact information] if I have other questions or concerns about this research. If I have questions about my rights as a research participant, I may contact Dr. Doug Leigh, chairperson of the Pepperdine University Graduate and Professional Schools Institutional Review Board (GPS IRB) at [contact information].

11. I understand to my satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have received a copy of this informed consent form which I have read and understand. I hereby consent to participate in the research described above.

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Participant's Signature

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Date

---

Witness

---

Date

I have explained and defined in detail the research procedure in which the subject has consented to participate. Having explained this and answered any questions, I am cosigning this form and accepting this person's consent.

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Principal Investigator

---

Date

**Appendix D: Interview Script**

## Interview Script

Thank you very much for your willingness to participate in my study of how people recover from job loss.

I want to reiterate that this research being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master's thesis. Your responses will be kept confidential and the data will be kept in a locked cabinet. Your participation is voluntary, which means that you can decline to answer any question and you withdraw at any time without penalty.

You have already completed a survey and this final phase of participation involves sharing your story of recovering from job loss.

My first set of questions gather basic information about you and your experience.

1. You have shared that you have been laid off in the past. Have you been laid off more than once? <If so, ask how many times.>
2. For each time:
  - a. When did it occur?
  - b. Where were you working?
  - c. What was your position?
  - d. How long had you been in the position? With that organization?

Trauma has been defined as an emotional wound or shock often having long-lasting effects. During our first conversation, you shared that being laid off felt traumatic at the time. For the remainder of our time together, I'd like you to think back to this time. If you have been laid off more than once, I'd like you to think back to the time that felt most traumatizing at the time.

### **Path of Recovery from Job Loss**

My next set of questions focuses on what you experienced following your layoff.

<Restate the details of the job they held: place of employment, position, length of time in position, layoff date>

3. What did you think about your job just before you heard about the layoffs?
  - Thoughts, attitude, or feelings
  - Job satisfaction
  - Engagement
  - Commitment to position or organization
4. How did you receive the news that you were being laid off?
5. What was it like afterwards?
 

Prompts:

  - How did you feel?
  - What did you do?

Probes:

- Right after hearing the news
- During the first week after the layoff
- During the first 30 days
- During the first three months
- During the rest of the time until you started working again
- What was it like to start in a new position? Did you reengage with that position or organization?

### **Influence of Resilience on Process of Recovery**

6. When you reflect on your overall journey following your layoff, what do you believe helped you recover from the trauma?
7. Of these things you named, what were the top three most important factors?
8. When you reflect on your overall journey following your layoff, what made it harder to recover from the job loss?
9. Of these things you named, what were the top three obstacles to recovery?
10. Did any of these factors play a role in your process of recovering from job loss? <Show participants the factor and definition sheet>

Probes:

- a. Please tell me more
- b. How did that help?
11. Which of these did **not** play a role in your process? Why is that?
12. How would you rank these factors in order from most important to least important in your recovery process?

Factor	Definition	Role*	Rank (1-5)
Personal competence	Your sense of being able to count on yourself to succeed despite adversity		
Explanation:			
Social competence	Your sense of confidence in being with and socializing with others		
Explanation:			
Family coherence	The degree of support, belonging, and enjoyment you have with your family.		
Explanation:			

Factor	Definition	Role*	Rank (1-5)
Social support	Having an inner circle of friends or family members you can count on for help or encouragement		
Explanation:			
Personal structure	Your ability to structure your time and effort		
Explanation:			

\*Role: none, minimal, some, strong, essential

### **Cool Down and Wrap Up**

13. What did you gain or learn from your lay off experience?
14. What advice would you give someone experiencing a traumatic job loss today?
15. Is there anything else you would like to share that would be helpful for understanding of this topic?

Thank you very much for your time and for sharing your story. I will be combining the information you shared with the rest of the group and determining key themes about recovering from job loss. These findings will help others facing this experience.