

March 29, 2013

Career makeover: Longtime IT manager must draft new career plan

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By Lora Shinn / Special to NWjobs

For 17 years, Barry Nichols was the IT manager at the U.S. Census Bureau's Seattle regional office. But in 2012, the bureau office closed, forcing Nichols to look for a job for the first time in his career.

"With the exception of my first job right out of college, everything else has been through networking and/or word-of-mouth," Nichols says.

He enjoyed his time at the Census Bureau, but views this as a wonderful chance to explore new career options and opportunities.

"I have a lot more to offer and need the income," says Nichols, 50, who is married and has a daughter in college. "My biggest frustration is still not knowing what I want to be when I grow up," he wrote in an [online survey to participate in a NWjobs career makeover](#).

The family has savings, and Nichols draws a fraction of his previous salary -- enough to keep them afloat, but not forever. With the help of career experts Seia Milin, Matt Youngquist and Lisa Quast, Nichols drafted a job-search plan.

"Being impacted by company downsizing or a reorganization can often be traumatic," says career coach Quast, founder of [Career Woman Inc.](#) But don't rush into a new job, she says, if at all possible.

"Give yourself permission to take a step back, relax, put some distance between yourself and your previous job," Quast says. "Spend time contemplating your next career move. Think about all the possibilities out there and let yourself feel the excitement."

A few online career tests confirmed the IT/management field as a good fit for Nichols. After an informal interview, Quast suggested that Nichols could try project management, process improvement, business analysis or business intelligence. He also read "[What Color is Your Parachute?](#)" the renowned career-reboot book by Richard N. Bolles.

Other options include volunteering or asking his favorite businesses for an informational interview. "Because Nichols is an avid outdoorsman, he could also consider looking for a job at a company where he could combine his IT expertise with his love of the outdoors, such as REI," Quast says.

Another approach would be signing up for project work with a technical staffing service or temporary employment agency. "Temp agencies aren't just for secretarial positions anymore," Quast says. Many temp agencies employ people in accounting and finance, engineering, IT and hospitality. Project work helps job seekers determine enjoyable positions -- and could even turn into full-time employment.



Redmond resident Barry Nichols is job hunting for the first time after the closure of the Seattle regional office of the U.S. Census Bureau, where he was employed for 17 years. (Lora Shinn / Special to NWjobs)

LinkedIn profile tips

Add a crisp, well-lit photo of yourself to your profile that truly does justice to your professional brand -- and make sure to smile.

Write a headline under your name that immediately gives the reader a sense of your job function and industry focus.

Flesh out your Skills & Expertise section with 15-20 relevant professional competencies, not only for keyword purposes, but also so your contacts can "endorse" you for these capabilities.

Source: Matt Youngquist, Career Horizons



THE SEATTLE TIMES

March 29, 2013

"After such a long time with the same workplace, it would be great for me to have exposure to different work environments, experiences and skills," Nichols says.

"Don't be shy about letting all your family, friends, former co-workers and acquaintances know you're looking for work," Nichols says. Youngquist, president of Bellevue-based [Career Horizons](#), told him. An Excel spreadsheet can track contacts, and an email blast can remind friends that you're still looking. "Everyone you know is another set of eyes that could be looking for a job for you," Nichols says.

Being proactive and differentiating yourself can move you ahead in the job game, says career specialist Milin. When an interesting job pops up on the staffing agency's website, apply immediately and contact the recruiter to schedule an interview. "When candidates work with recruiters, recruiters work with the candidate," Milin says.

It was also time for a LinkedIn update. Nichols spent an evening improving his profile according to Youngquist's suggestions, incorporating keywords to improve his "findability" among recruiters.

Nichols' resume also needed to be cleansed of generic statements like "quick learner." Instead, Nichols and Youngquist promoted a keyword-rich skills and qualifications section to the top of the resume; previously, those important skills had been buried on the second page. But how to explain the break in employment?

"In this economy, continuous education is a good way to justify gaps in employment," Milin says. As a result, since meeting with the experts, Nichols completed an Information Technology Infrastructure Library certification and will soon start on a Six Sigma certification. "Both of those I can do online and relatively affordably," he says. "I have the experience, but what I keep noticing is employers are also looking for the paper."

Nichols is excited about the future, and says the biggest takeaway from his time spent with the experts was how to conduct an effective job search. "With the help of the three career coaches," he says, "I have an action plan."

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