

Hard Truths for Hard Times

By CARI TUNA

In the cafeteria of a small factory in Caldwell, Ohio, nine graveyard-shift workers gather before dawn to hear some job-hunting realities.

"You're going to have to do stuff that you've never done before," counselor Dick Gaither tells the group, clad mostly in denim shirts, baseball caps and work boots. "The world's done changed on you."

The plant, which makes engine bearings and other parts, will close at the end of the year, idling about 140 hourly and 40 salaried employees. Managers say the facility is losing money, so its machines -- and the jobs associated with them -- will be moved to more cost-effective factories in Mexico, Iowa and nearby McConnelsville, Ohio.

Enter Mr. Gaither, a 62-year-old veteran and former life-skills coach for the mentally disabled. In 1983, he founded Job Search Training Systems Inc., now based in Franklin, Ind., to help dislocated workers find jobs.

With his long, gray ponytail and Harley-Davidson screensaver -- displayed proudly on a projector screen -- Mr. Gaither does not seem like a traditional outplacement counselor. He peppers his seminars with stories, jokes and profanity -- hoping to rouse workers who he says often resist help from human-resource managers and government agencies.

"If I smell you before I see you, the interview's over," he says, to chuckles. Job hunting once meant "applications, résumés and a prayer," he adds. "That is an unsuccessful approach."

Hands rise when Mr. Gaither asks if the workers would take any job. "Will you do hemorrhoid operations on a bullfrog?" he fires back. "No? Then you won't do anything."

Most employees began working here decades ago (average tenure is 24 years), long before Mahle Engine Components USA Inc., a unit of Germany's Mahle Group, bought the factory in 2007. Some have never worked anywhere else. Now, they must seek work amid the toughest recession in a generation: U.S. manufacturers eliminated 791,000 jobs last year.

The workers will receive severance payments of \$5,000 to \$5,500 and can draw unemployment benefits for at least 26 weeks, as long as they show they are actively seeking work. But many are ill-equipped for a 21st-century job hunt. About 12% don't have high-school diplomas. Some, like Sam Cartell, have never written a résumé or cover letter. Mr. Cartell, 62, arrived in 1974, referred by his father, who worked at the plant. He filled out a form, sat for a short interview and was hired. "If they liked you, you got the job," he recalls.

Mr. Cartell says he can't yet afford to retire. (Workers on the manufacturing floor make \$16 an hour, on average, administrators say.) His daughter helped him prepare a résumé and post it on Monster.com, a job-search Web site. But no employer has responded.

Many of his co-workers haven't even posted résumés. In a survey last April, more than half said they wouldn't begin searching for a new job until the plant closes. Kim Stewart, the plant's human-resources director, worries that the workers are too complacent. "Sometimes I just want to slap them and say, 'Why aren't you doing anything?'" Ms. Stewart says.

To jump start their job search, Mr. Gaither recommends unconventional techniques. Churchgoers should leave business cards in the pews on Sunday and ask to address the congregation, he says. "People in church are helpers by nature."

To identify employers who may be preparing to hire, Mr. Gaither recommends talking to bank officers about recent loans, government agencies about employers moving into the area, and construction workers on commercial projects. "If you're there first, you win," he says.

He urges workers to research prospective employers, and not just via the Internet. "Go to bars where people who do the job you want hang out," he says.

Mr. Gaither is frank about the challenges. He tells the workers -- average age 53 -- that they'll be "smacked" by age discrimination, a practice that is illegal but tough to prove. To counter bias, he suggests they stress productivity, good attendance, safety records, career ambitions, computer skills and adaptability in résumés and interviews.

For some, that may mean going back to school, he says. "I need more education," says Eric Worthington, a 41-year-old tool-and-die maker who arrived at the plant 18 years ago. Mr. Worthington says he's considering enrolling in a two-year mechanical-drafting program at a nearby technical college.

To find jobs, Mr. Gaither says, some workers may have to leave the area and "go where the food is." But many grew up here and are reluctant to leave. In the April survey, only 23% said they would be willing to relocate.

Alan Cox, a 53-year-old tool-and-die maker, turned down a job offer at a Savannah, Ga., factory two months ago. "I want to exhaust the resources close to home first," he says.

But the prospects close to home are daunting. The unemployment rate in Noble County, which includes Caldwell, shot to 11.3% in December, from 7.6% a year earlier.

Some Mahle workers found Mr. Gaither compelling and informative. "He had a tough crowd there, and he did well," says Bill Nau, a 41-year-old machine operator. He says some co-workers have walked out of presentations by local work-force agencies.

But Bob Warrick says parts of Mr. Gaither's presentation -- including his use of profanity and frequent references to beer and bars -- were "unprofessional."

Mr. Gaither makes no apologies. "I am what I am," he says.

Mr. Gaither estimates that in the past year, he's addressed between 1,500 and 2,000 job-seekers and outplacement providers, mostly in Ohio, Illinois, New York and Michigan. He knows his sessions offer no guarantees. Some of Mr. Gaither's past counselees say they're still struggling to find work.

Donna Heilmann, 58, heard Mr. Gaither in December, at a meeting sponsored by auto-parts manufacturer Tenneco Inc. and the AFL-CIO in Norwalk, Ohio. Ms. Heilmann, who is seeking work as an administrative assistant or customer-service representative, was laid off in late November by a small storage company. She says Mr. Gaither boosted her confidence and motivation. "I just have a really hard time tooting my own horn," she says. But "he says everyone is a networking person."

Bret Geis, 29, a landscape architect who was laid off by an Indiana company in August, says he took much of Mr. Gaither's advice. He began drumming up job leads, revamping his résumé and broadening his sights to include smaller cities and related fields. He says he spends six to seven hours a day looking for work. "I don't know if it's so much me as it is companies' just not looking to hire," he says.

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