THE CAREER DECISION SERIES

Laid Off Survival Guide

Read This Before Making Irreversible Decisions

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Opening: Why the guide 5

What This Is (and What It Isn't) 5

The Uncomfortable Truth 6

How to Use This Guide 7

Part 1: Before "it" Happens 9

Chapter 1. The signs you're supposed to notice 9

What NOT to Do When You Suspect a Layoff 9

Chapter 2. Preparing without Panicking 10

Networking Before You Need It (The Right Way) 11

Résumé & LinkedIn Hygiene (Before Emotions Hit) 11

Financial Readiness Without Overreacting 11

Part 2: The First 48 Hours 12

Chapter 3: Day Zero. Breath 12

Chapter 4: Keep quiet 12

What NOT to Do on Social Media (CRITICAL) 13

Chapter 5: Unemployment, Severance, and Leverage without Delusions 13

What to know: 14

Review (and Negotiate) Your Exit Package 15

Part 3: The Next 30 Days 16

Chapter 6: The Checklist 16

The Job Search Most People Screw Up 16

Explaining the Layoff, Less is More 16

Explaining the Layoff in Interviews (Without Overexplaining) 19

Part 4: The Stuff No One Tells You 20

Chapter 7: The Rehire Reality..... 20

Chapter 8: When HR Takes Notice: 20

References, Reputation, and Backchannel Checks 20

Opening: Why the guide

You've just been laid off. Or you think a layoff is coming

Let's skip the condolences.

You don't need a stranger telling you, *"Everything happens for a reason."*
You need situational awareness.

I've been laid off.
I've also been the person delivering the news.

I've sat in the rooms where the lists were made.
I've watched how decisions were justified.
I've seen who landed on their feet quickly and who quietly sabotaged their next opportunity without realizing it.

The patterns are not subtle once you've seen them enough times.

This guide exists for one reason:

Most people don't damage their careers by being laid off.
They damage them by what they do next.

Usually within the first 24–48 hours.

What This Is (and What It Isn't)

This is not a motivational guide.
It's not therapy.
It's not a résumé template or a collection of LinkedIn platitudes.

This is a **preventative manual**.

It's written to stop you from:

- Saying something emotional that gets remembered
- Posting something that feels good short-term and costs you long-term
- Negotiating badly when you still have leverage
- Walking into interviews carrying bitterness, you don't realize you're showing

Hiring managers don't announce these mistakes out loud.
They simply move on.

Why You Should Listen to Me

There are plenty of "interview coaches" who have hired a handful of people in one function, at one company, in one industry.

That's not this.

I have:

- Executed layoffs
- Been laid off
- Coached leaders through reductions in force
- Watched HR and executives decide who gets rehired
- Led backchannel conversations, employees and candidates never know happened

I've sat on the other side of these decisions more times than I can count.

No one explains this part out loud. Not because it's secret. Because it's uncomfortable. What you're about to read isn't theory. It's pattern recognition.

That gives you a very different map.

This isn't theory.
It's pattern recognition.

The Uncomfortable Truth

Recruiters and hiring managers can tell when someone hasn't emotionally processed a layoff.

They don't call it out.
They don't argue with it.
They just don't advance the candidate.

Bitterness shows up in tone.
Panic shows up in urgency.
Confusion shows up in over-explaining.

None of those are disqualifying on their own.

Together, they are.

How to Use This Guide

Read it **before** you:

- Post on social media
- Email former colleagues
- Sign anything
- Start explaining your situation
- Rush into “doing something” just to feel productive

This guide walks through:

- What to do if you see a layoff coming
- How to handle the first 48 hours
- What HR and managers notice but never say
- How to protect rehire and reference potential
- How to position yourself without sounding defensive or desperate

You don’t need to agree with everything in here. You don’t need to solve your career today.

You need to avoid doing anything that makes tomorrow harder. You just need to understand how it’s perceived on the other side.

One Last Thing

You are not broken.
You are not damaged goods.
Your skills did not disappear overnight.

But the margin for error right now is thinner than you think.

So, take a breath.
Slow down.
And read this before you say or do anything stupid.

If this feels simple, that's intentional.
You're not supposed to make complex decisions today.

I'm calling this out because I've watched well-intentioned moves quietly backfire.

Most people don't hear this part explained until after it's already cost them leverage.

More writing like this can be found at **https://hrnasty.com/hr-guides/**

Read it when you're ready. Not today.

Part 1: Before “it” Happens

You suspect it is “coming.”

Chapter 1. The signs you’re supposed to notice

Layoffs can happen at any time of year.

FWIW, most companies do not conduct layoffs in Q4.

The optics of laying off employees (the larger the number, the worse the optics) before Thanksgiving or Christmas couldn’t be more insensitive.

Below are just a few reasons for a layoff that may or may not be explained:

- Missed forecasts
- Investor pressure
- Client concentration risk (especially agencies)
- Change in ownership or CEO

What NOT to Do When You Suspect a Layoff

There are two types of employees:

Camp 1: Insecure and unsure

- Talk loudly at the water cooler and in meetings about how the company is probably going to have a layoff
- Poke holes in everything. Become very negative.
- Post halfhearted effort and results. Mentally, they are employed. Emotionally, they have quit.

Camp 2: Quiet Confidence

- This group is professional.
- This is not their first rodeo and won’t be their last.
- Continue to perform at the high level they always have
- Engage. Like a professional athlete, they don’t give up till the game ends.
- Publicly Support manager decisions or announcements

Chapter 2. Preparing without Panicking

Should I be looking for a job?

The two most common questions I am asked when employees sense a layoff coming:

1. Should I be looking for a job?
2. What if I find a job and I wasn't going to be on the list?

Keeping your options open and exploring opportunities is never a bad thing.

It amazes me when employees say they survived 3, 5, and 7 rounds of layoffs. Why did you stick around? That is just Russian roulette.

- You are not being disloyal to the company.
- You are being loyal to yourself and your family.

If you are offered a new position, it doesn't mean you have to accept it. Stability is better than instability.

Get your ducks in a row.

Talk to references.

Bolster the networking.

Preparation makes the transition easier

Preparing for a layoff gives you momentum and a head start over your competitors. You don't want to be looking for a job when your colleagues with the exact same experience and industry knowledge are looking for a job as well.

You don't want to go on a date with someone who hasn't gotten over their ex. I don't want to interview a candidate who is still bitter about their prior employer.

Networking Before You Need It (The Right Way)

If you think a layoff or re-org is coming, trust your gut.

- Start networking now.
- Buy colleagues coffee.
- Catch up with prior coworkers.
- Attend events that focus on your discipline of work

References: Securing Them While You Still Have Access

How many references do I need?

Most companies require 2-3 references.

Prepare for more.

The process slows down when the HR department requires 3 references, and they only hear back from 2 of the 3 that the candidate provided.

When you are networking and hear: “Let me know if I can help”, just say you may reach out for a reference, but you will give them a heads up.

Résumé & LinkedIn Hygiene (Before Emotions Hit)

Always keep your social media profiles up to date.

Here is what you need to know:

- Updated headshot. Nothing fancy.
- Too many recommendations in a short period of time will be obvious to your current and future employers. Ask for them over time.
- Headshot should feature your face. Stylistically, it should be suitable for a corporate webpage.
- Everyone who is applying for the same job has the same responsibilities. Accomplishments are the separators.

Financial Readiness Without Overreacting

Stress test your expenses. You don’t have to cut anything yet, but everyone should know their monthly expenses

Part 2: The First 48 Hours

Here's what to do in the first 24–48 hours after being laid off.

Chapter 3: Day Zero. Breath

First — Breathe. You're Not Damaged Goods.

In this economy, a layoff isn't a black mark.

Feeling disoriented doesn't mean you're weak. It means something familiar just ended abruptly.

Recruiters and interviewers are accustomed to seeing gaps in employment on resumes. Recruiters are also used to seeing candidates taking time off.

It doesn't matter that you are not working.

What matters is how you spend your time and how you talk about the time off.

Chapter 4: Keep quiet

What Not to Say to HR, Your Manager, or Anyone in Power

How you are perceived matters more than how you feel.

Recruiters and managers can smell blood and bitterness in the water.

Silence for a short period of time is read as composure, not avoidance or panic.

Employees who yell, scream, and blame the company are biting the hand that will provide introductions, references, resume help and general support.

What NOT to Do on Social Media (CRITICAL)

"Your first audience after a layoff isn't recruiters — it's *future hiring managers watching quietly*." Not just outside the company but internally as well.

Resist making emotional changes to your LinkedIn or social profiles on day one. Think twice before you post anything disparaging about the company, your manager, the CEO, or the layoff process.

Public frustration is rarely interpreted as honesty.
It's interpreted as risk.

Complaining about leadership, the process, or "how it was handled" doesn't read as transparency. It reads as someone who may have the same tone under pressure with their next employer.

What you say publicly in the first week tends to outlive the moment you're in.

If you feel compelled to post something, this is the time to thank your manager, CEO, and company for the opportunity.
If you don't feel comfortable doing that, say nothing.

Silence is safer than candor right now.

This is the time to thank your manager, CEO and company for opportunity. If you don't feel comfortable with that, just resist and keep quiet.

Chapter 5: Unemployment, Severance, and Leverage without Delusions

Apply for Unemployment Today

Go to your state's applicable unemployment site before you even pack your desk.

Unemployment isn’t charity.

Unemployment insurance is a fund that all employers pay into on their employees' behalf for this purpose.

Don’t wait “to see how the job search goes.” The state won't honor retroactive claims. If you don't sign up, you must not need to work.

Quick notes:

You usually need to have worked for at least 12 months.

Expect your first check to take ~2 weeks.

This benefit won’t make you whole. It will keep you afloat and extend your runway. This benefit buys time.

Don’t Sign Anything (Yet)

Your company may slide a release agreement across the table. It’ll sound reasonable — you agree to not disparage the company, steal employees, share secrets, etc.

What to know:

- You do not have to sign immediately.
- Releases are often negotiable, but only if you approach the conversation calmly and professionally.
- Tone matters. Negotiation is a choice for both parties. No one negotiates with someone they see as hostile, emotional, or accusatory.

If you are **over 40**, you are typically entitled to **additional time by law** to review a severance agreement before signing, and a short window *after* signing to change your mind. This exists to protect you from making rushed decisions under pressure.

Use that time.

This is not the moment to react emotionally or try to “win.” It’s the moment to understand what you’re agreeing to.

Pro tip

Before you talk to anyone, decide what matters most to you:

- Additional weeks of severance
- Continued health coverage (COBRA)
- Timing of payments
- Equipment you rely on personally

Companies don't have to offer severance at all, which limits leverage. But **reasonable requests, asked respectfully, often start a conversation**.

Review (and Negotiate) Your Exit Package

Even if "everyone's getting the same deal," that's rarely 100% true. Ask politely if any terms can be adjusted.

Examples include extra weeks of severance, benefit coverage, or equipment you rely on, to name a few.

If you don't ask, you don't get. It's ok if this one takes a few days or weeks.

The company wants this release signed, and if you are polite, most will be flexible.

Part 3: The Next 30 Days

Chapter 6: The Checklist

The Job Search Most People Screw Up

Candidates who only submit online through job boards are at a disadvantage.

Execs and senior leaders' network and ask for introductions to hiring companies.

Successful candidates network to identify upcoming roles before they are posted.

Explaining the Layoff, Less is More

Don't feel you need to bring it up. If they want to know, they will ask.

A gap in employment is the new normal in these whacky political times. This isn't personal; it's math and politics, and recruiters get it.

Talk about the layoff in a matter-of-fact tone.

There is no reason to be embarrassed.

The layoff wasn't your fault.

Do the Math: What's Your Runway?

Figure out how many months of living expenses you've got.

Fixed costs:

- Medical premiums
- Deductibles
- Kids' education
- Car payments
- Negotiable costs
- cable TV

- Designer everything
- Meals out

Then cut where you can. Downgrade streaming, ditch brand names, grab basics at Uniqlo. You're not cutting style — you're buying time.

Keep Busy (Seriously)

This isn't fluff — staying mentally active keeps you interview-ready.

Build a "sanity plan" and post it where you are reminded of it every day:

- Exercise
- Hobbies or personal projects
- Online course or certification
- Home projects
- Networking
- Practice interview questions

The goal is to stay busy, stay active, and avoid the funk. Once you're in a funk, it's tough to climb out.

Define Your Next Role

Primary Priorities

- Title
- Compensation
- Industry

Secondary Priorities

- Remote work
- Benefits
- Start date
- Commute

When you're in interviews, **don't** lead with these—they can sound misaligned. But *knowing* them helps you evaluate offers later without emotion.

- Determine your job search strategy
- Decompress
- Don’t just rush to the job boards.

Remember that job searches are marathons, not sprints. The more senior the candidate, the longer the search.

Candidates who come to the interview with purpose are more desirable than candidates who will take anything. It is assumed candidates coming off a layoff will jump at the next better opportunity.

Practice the Top Interview Questions

You know they’re coming:

- “Why do you want to work here?”
- “What are you looking for in your next role?”
- “What’s your 3-year plan?”

Most candidates practice the first sentence and fade halfway through. That fade is noticeable.

You don’t need a perfect answer right now.
You do need to be able to speak clearly without rambling, apologizing, or over-explaining.

A simple starting point is enough. A quick search for common interview questions in your industry will surface the themes you’ll be asked about. Use that to steady yourself, not to memorize scripts.

You’ve got time. Use it to sound grounded, not rehearsed.

Interview Framing

How we are perceived they day we are laid off and moving forward will impact our future opportunities more than candidates think. We all believe that grace should be given to a candidate who was just laid off. The reality is that employers want to hire candidates who can move forward. They know that their company is going to face setbacks and they want employees with a positive outlook – regardless of the potential outcome.

Explaining the Layoff in Interviews (Without Overexplaining)

Don’t worry about being questioned about your gap in employment.

Recruiters are used to candidates who have been laid off in this economy.

COVID-19 changed how employers view employee work-life balance. Sabbaticals are commonplace.

The company layoff wasn’t your fault, and recruiters know this.

Explain that the company had a layoff without drama. That is all they need to hear.

Part 4: The Stuff No One Tells You

Most careers aren't damaged by layoffs. They're damaged by what happens immediately after.

Chapter 7: The Rehire Reality

After every layoff, there are rehires. These are roles that were let go, but the company realized they should not have been. In addition, there are openings because:

- Employees who remain may leave
- The company faces a large, unexpected project
- Employees don't return from maternity or paternity leave

Emotions, behavior, and professionalism shape the rehire list. If HR was treated badly on the day of the layoff, they aren't going to forget it. When we have an opening after a layoff, the first place we look is the list of affected employees.

Chapter 8: When HR Takes Notice:

References, Reputation, and Backchannel Checks

The HR person who is explaining to you that you are being let go is the same person who will provide references to your next employer.

Usually, HR will only confirm hiring start date, exit date, salary and title. Most HR departments don't want to go into performance because a great performer at one company with one manager can be a very different employee in a different company with a different manager.

This isn't a hard rule.

Professionalism matters even when emotions are high. Companies assume that prior behavior is the best indicator of future behavior.

What HR Is Watching (That Candidates Never See)

HR sees all the behind-the-scenes meetings.

Are you:

- Asking thoughtful, reasonable questions, or are you making accusations?
- Composed and helping others, or is it obvious it is every person for themselves with you
- Negotiating an unreasonable severance and accusing the company of trying to get away with as much as possible.

The easiest way to lose support is to unknowingly ask others to absorb your stress.

Closing

You're Building the Next Chapter

Being let go feels personal even when it isn't.
It scrambles identity, timing, confidence, and judgment all at once. That's why the first mistakes people make after a layoff are rarely about effort or skill. They're about **reaction**.

If this eBook did its job, you should feel two things at the same time:

Less alarmed by what just happened.

More aware of how easily small, unexamined moves can compound into real damage.

That awareness matters more than optimism.

Most careers don't stall because of one big failure. They stall because of a handful of quiet decisions made under stress, decisions the person didn't realize were being watched, remembered, or interpreted.

Being let go is not the end of your career.
But it *is* a moment where your choices carry more signal than usual.

You don’t need to rush.
You don’t need to explain yourself to everyone.
And you don’t need to “fix” your story before you understand it.

What you do need is time to regain orientation, to notice your own patterns under pressure, and to avoid moves that feel relieving in the moment but costly in hindsight.

That’s the work now. Not proving. Not performing. Not panicking.

Just seeing the terrain clearly enough to move through it without making it harder than it already is.

If this helped you slow down even slightly, avoid one unnecessary misstep, or see your situation with more distance, then it did what it was meant to do in the first 48 hours.

Take that steadiness with you. The rest can come later.

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This guide was written by the founder of HRNasty, drawing on over two decades of experience leading HR teams.