

Slim Pickings on the Job Bush

by Gary McGath

In *Atlas Shrugged*, Hank Rearden's brother, Philip, whines, "It's a moral imperative, universally conceded in our day and age, that every man is entitled to a job." Hank answers, "Pick it off the bush where you think it grows." In today's weak market, many job-seekers agree with Philip. There is even a political group calling itself the "A Job Is a Right Campaign." They believe that there ought to be a job bush, probably named George, from which they should be able to pick jobs at will.

Like many other people, I've been having a difficult time finding steady income recently, and this has led me to follow job discussion lists on the Internet. Most people approach the situation with determination, frustrated though they may be. A substantial and noisy number, however, react to the situation with a victim's mindset, believing that they're entitled to work that provides the income and satisfaction they've enjoyed in the past. Not finding such work, they blame malicious employers and look for governmental solutions to their problem—a "war on joblessness," as one poster put it.

When people are out of work, they find it easy to convince themselves that they are being oppressed. After all, in a fair-minded world wouldn't someone see their obvious value and quickly hire them? This displacement of blame isn't limited to the traditional victimized minorities; any group can be built up into a persecuted target when jobs are

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scarce. Many claim that it's those over 50 who are being targeted, or married people. A post on a job-networking list declared, "Sounds to me like the employment world is for the young and unmarried. All others need not apply."

At the same time, we read in the news that graduates will be having a tough time of it this year. They feel that they're caught in a trap because they can't get a job without experience and can't get experience without a job. I've seen classified ads that require more years of experience in a specialty than have passed since it was created. This suggests that it's the people with age and experience who have a lock on jobs.

Any given employer will have preferences. Some want young people who are full of energy and willing to put in long hours. Some want single employees because their health-insurance costs are lower. Some want the experience and stability of older, married employees. Preferences vary from employer to employer, and tendencies vary from industry to industry. Construction companies understandably favor young, strong, male employees for their sites. Domestic services may favor older women, whom people feel more comfortable letting into their homes.

Every group meets disfavor some of the time, but being unable to find work can seem like the result of the whole world's combined malice. Let's imagine a typical job-seeker; call her Jane Engineer, age 52. Her company laid her off eight months ago, and she hasn't found a job since. She's applied for lots of positions that more or less

matched her abilities; she's talked with networking groups; she's combed the library and the Internet for ideas. She's had some interviews and has come close once or twice, but hasn't gotten a job offer.

She's starting to think that companies won't give her an engineering position because she's a woman. Or perhaps it's because she's over 50. If she's dark-skinned, she may think all the jobs are going to whites; if she's light-skinned, she may think affirmative action has closed the door on her. Maybe the businesses are hiring only from within and are advertising just to taunt the unemployed. Regardless, it's obvious she isn't being given a chance for reasons that have nothing to do with her merit.

Her next thought is that the companies which won't hire her are depriving her of her due. Someone *should* be giving her a job. After all, her engineering degree cost her parents a lot of money and her a lot of time and work. Since then, she's given her best efforts to several companies. Isn't she entitled to something in return?

The "War on Joblessness"

She starts thinking of the companies that should be hiring her as adversaries. They're withholding something that is rightfully hers. It becomes harder to continue the search, since it's work that she really shouldn't have to do. The government should be fighting a "war on joblessness" on her behalf. It should be passing laws to keep employers from taking anything into account except her qualifications.

She starts to doubt whether it's worthwhile to learn new skills. What's the use if employers have already decided against her; and why should she have to, when her right to a job is being denied? Her resentment starts showing when she makes networking contacts or gets the occasional call from an employer, and interviews become rarer. Finally, perhaps, she gives up, moving in with the kids and rationing out her savings till Social Security starts.

In going down this road, Jane Engineer

forgot that being "unemployed" is actually a job that requires its own set of skills, which are quite different from those at her last paying position. She has to be a researcher. This is a difficult task, since the Internet has created a vast change in research techniques over the past ten years. She has to be a salesperson, selling her own skills to potential buyers. She has to compete with other people who are exercising their own research and sales skills. Sometimes, unfortunately, people who would be excellent employees once hired aren't so good at finding employers and selling their services.

No researcher is ever guaranteed to find the necessary information, and no salesperson is ever guaranteed a sale. It isn't research if you can just look something up and be certain that you'll find what you want, and it isn't selling if the customer is compelled to buy from you. Would the "A Job Is a Right Campaign" people want to go shopping on a car lot run by the "A Sale Is a Right Campaign."

Some people would like a society in which researching jobs and selling one's ability was unnecessary. In their vision a wise authority would assign the right job to each person. Would everyone get a fulfilling, satisfying job in such a society? If so, who would sweep the floors and clean the sewers? The Soviet Union gave us one answer to this question: people would take the jobs they were given. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* gives us another: people would be conditioned from conception to find their assigned task fulfilling and satisfying. But as long as people are free, working to find the jobs they want must be part of their lives.

Adversity brings out the worst in some people and the best in others. Some respond to a difficult job market by improving their marketability in imaginative ways. Others respond by proclaiming their entitlement and demanding that the job bush blossom for them. Neither group is guaranteed victory, but the ones who fully accept the responsibility of trying are much more likely to succeed. □