

# 'All I Want for Christmas Is a Layoff'

Why Some Workers Are Hoping Their Companies Will Let Them Go

COLUMN

By MICHELLE GOODMAN

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I was at a holiday gathering earlier this month when I heard something completely surprising, especially considering how many people are out of work (not to mention holiday cheer).

"Getting laid off before the new year would be a holiday gift," Matthew, a software project manager from Boston, told me over eggnog.

"Morale in my department is nonexistent," said the exasperated employee, who's survived two rounds of layoffs this year. "Meanwhile, the workload grows and grows. I've been putting in 15 extra hours a week since the summer with no relief in sight. It's not like I can afford to leave though, not in this job market."

Instead, Matthew, whose employer offers long-term employees a generous severance package (we're talking months and months), said praying for a layoff is his best option.

But he's not the only one who views collecting unemployment checks and severance pay as the key to sanity and solvency. My inbox is sprinkled with e-mails from embittered employees who say they're hoping Santa gives them the old heave ho this Christmas.

"Since [my] company started slowing down, I hardly have any work to do," e-mailed Jessie, a sales account manager who didn't want her real name mentioned. "It's boring, I've stopped learning and a lot of the remaining staff are feeling the negative atmosphere here."

Like Matthew, Jessie's caught in a game of career chicken with her employer.

"If I leave by myself, I don't get the cash," said Jessie, who says that she's eligible for several thousand dollars of severance pay if let go. "That's a big incentive to stick around."

For the lucky few whose employers offer a generous severance, waiting for a layoff seems to have replaced writing the resignation letter. In this era of mass unemployment, you can't blame them. Between gouged paychecks and towering health care costs, personal savings are in short supply. And getting hired anywhere else can seem like a Herculean feat.

Brother, Can You Spare a Layoff?

Jim Woods of San Francisco was one of these employees in waiting. But the commercial real estate analyst didn't just pine for a pink slip. He begged his boss to add him to the layoff list.

"I asked to be laid off in December of 2008, two weeks after the first round of layoffs," said Woods, who in 2006 launched the organic beer company MateVeza on the side and was ready to concentrate on his business full time. "I was really nervous about how to frame everything. I said that I would not mind being part of the next round as long as I received a similar package to those that had left in November."

Though his boss seemed receptive to Woods' request, the budding entrepreneur didn't get his wish until the firm's third round of layoffs this summer.

"It was totally bizarre," said Woods, who received four months' severance pay (plus benefits) for his five years with the company. "People were congratulating me and offering condolences to those who were let go against their will. I almost felt guilty for celebrating my layoff."

No need, says Karen Florence-McMullen, an executive career coach based in the greater Philadelphia area.

"If I were an employer facing 10 people to lay off and one of them volunteered to go, regardless of the motivation, I now only have nine hearts to break," she said.

But other career management experts warn that showing your cards like Woods did is one of those "don't try this at home" stunts.

Sure, placing your head on the chopping block if the company asks for volunteers is perfectly acceptable, as long as you're confident about your future job prospects, said headhunter Nick Corcodilos, author of "How Can I Change Careers?" and host of AskTheHeadhunter.com, an online clearinghouse of job hunting tips.

But, Corcodilos advised, "I would not step up and ask for a layoff if the company is not offering it. You'll brand yourself lazy or unmotivated or an opportunist. And you probably won't get a deal anyway."

Ungrateful Whiners or Despairing Wage Slaves?

If you're one of the countless Americans who's sent out hundreds of unanswered resumes this year, you might be scowling about all the hand-wringing over a job a person actually has.



## 'Sick of Living in Limbo'

But being miserable in one's job is nothing new, as years of pre-recession polls conducted by organizations like The Conference Board and Web sites like CareerBuilder.com will attest. Even in flush economic times, many surveys have reported that one in two U.S. workers don't exactly feel warm and fuzzy about their place of employment.

Factor in the stress, paranoia, pay cuts, morale killers and mind-boggling workloads that have gripped employees this year and you have a recipe for some serious job dissatisfaction.

In a CareerBuilder survey of 4,300 U.S. workers released this November, 47 percent said their workload had increased in the past six months, 40 percent said their stress level was through the roof and 24 percent said they didn't feel one iota of loyalty to their employer.

"Giselle," a marketing manager at a New York accounting firm, can relate.

"Several colleagues and I are dreaming of a layoff," the self-described "abused temp" said in an e-mail. "Everyone is searching for another job, some openly. The firm is half the size it was in fall 2007. Clients aren't paying their bills, and we've lost some clients. Every day it's another psychodrama.

"Today my boss and I were reviewing photos from our holiday party," Giselle continued. "One person enthusiastically had his hand up when he won a holiday prize. We joked, 'John X has an inappropriate reaction to his pink slip.'"

As for Matthew, the software project manager who was dreaming of a downsized Christmas, he's retiring his hope for a golden parachute.

"I'm sick of living in limbo, wondering whether and when my employer might cut me loose," he said. "I think maybe it's time to give up the layoff fantasy and make the most of the crummy job I've got -- at least until I can find something better."

So no plans to tell his boss how he feels about the job?

"Are you kidding?" he said. "That's what's known as resigning."

*This work is the opinion of the columnist and in no way reflects the opinion of ABC News.*

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