

Not Working: People Talk about Losing a Job and Finding Their Way in Today's Changing Economy

by DW Gibson

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Within the last several years, unemployment has become an increasingly prominent issue in the United States. *Not Working: People Talk about Losing a Job and Finding Their Way in Today's Changing Economy* chronicles the stories of individuals across the nation who have lost their jobs through no fault of their own. Due to budget cuts and downsizing, many positions once seen as vital are now being eliminated in the current economic climate. Work is a source of pride for many people, and it bestows a sense of dignity. In this book, D.W. Gibson shares dozens of interviews featuring people who have lost that meaning and purpose.

Gibson travelled across the country with his associates, Mallery and MJ, and his wife, Tasha, interviewing people who were laid off in the five-year span between 2007-2011. They met in a variety of places from personal homes to unemployment offices to churches to restaurants, asking people to share their experiences the day they lost their job, the circumstances leading up to it, and how it affected their lives. The stories are not listed in the book chronologically or regionally, but are instead divided into chapters, called books, by theme.

Book 1, entitled "Youth," focuses on people in their twenties and thirties who have been laid off. These young and ambitious individuals felt that their entire careers were before them. Most still have that optimism, but their stories give readers a first glance of the volatility of today's economy. As Jessica Smith finishes her story, she provides a statement summarizing the sentiments shared among the interviews of the younger displaced workers: "pretty much everyone I know went to college, and most people went to grad school, and there's all this knowledge...all this unharnessed energy and desire to give back to the community, to help other people, to really exercise all of your individual talent, and its just dumped" (p. 44). The lack of fulfillment and inability to reach societal expectations seemed to plague many of the young and jobless grouped in this section.

Book 2, "Education," mostly examines the stories of displaced teachers, and their indictments of the current education system; however one interview in this chapter touches on racial and economic inequality in education. Manuel Aguirre shares that high school counselors told him that he wasn't college material. He then moves on to discuss learning of the GI Bill, explaining that he only found out about it after he was told by White colleagues in the Air Force.

Book 3, "Housing," chronicles the experiences of people affiliated with the housing market before it crashed. The highlights of this section are the tales shared by two mortgage brokers. They earned high salaries as the economy boomed and banks lent to everyone, but once the housing bubble burst, they found themselves jobless. Other stories include individuals who lost their homes after becoming unemployed, showing the life-changing financial effects of prolonged joblessness.

Empire, Nevada was a community created for the employees of one corporation called United States Gypsum Company (UGS). Nearly everyone in the town worked for UGS, and the company owned the homes of their employees. The bulk of Book 4, "Community," tells the story of Empire's disappearance following the closure of the UGS plant. Many people had lived in this town their entire lives. All of a sudden, these individuals lost not only their jobs, but they also lost their

homes and became separated from close friends. Layoffs extended to communities surrounding Empire, as the closing of the plant caused a dramatic population decline for the extended area.

Book 5, “Corporate Citizens,” highlights the terminations of many people who were mid-career. Each had built a vast repertoire of skills that was suddenly expendable to their employer during downsizing. Perhaps the most compelling interview in this section features Roni Chambers, a human resource professional that fired hundreds of people for her company before being fired herself.

Government employees are certainly not immune to the effects of the economic downturn. Book 6, “Public Domain,” features a woman who worked for parks and recreation, two women who worked in administration for their city hall, a woman who worked in social services for people with disabilities, and a group of firefighters. Each had a unique story to tell and shared the impact of their particular layoff for the local community and the populations that they served through their jobs.

Book Seven, “Fringe,” begins with the shocking testimonies of Kaitlin and May. Both of these women became strippers to earn a living when faced with unemployment, and Gibson is shocked to watch them take the stage. The other compelling stories from this section include the interviews with people working in conjunction with the Pioneer Adult Rehabilitation Center (PARC). This group seeks to provide individuals who have either mental or physical conditions with contract work and close supervision during their employment. The stories shared by these individuals are truly touching and heart wrenching.

Book 8 is titled “Family,” as it contains several emotional stories showcasing aspects of family functionality during unemployment. Amy De La Rosa’s story stands apart as the most memorable, as she cares for her elderly parents and her husband while all three experience severe medical problems. Another fascinating interview in this section features a woman charged with firing her own husband.

The final chapter, Book 9, “Evolution,” shares the interviews of many individuals in fields that have rapidly changed with the increasing prevalence of technology. Jenny Elig and Judy Wolf are journalists who were laid off due to the decline of printed newspapers. Also featured in the section are Antonio Avalos and Doug Messenger, who both discuss how workers must continually develop and build their skillsets to remain relevant in today’s economy. While this book provides valuable insight for students who will one day enter the workforce, I think that there are other books that would be more beneficial to read in preparation for the college experience. Coming-of-age novels, or other selections pertinent to a student’s social or emotional experience in college, would be more relatable.

Overall, I think that many students could find it difficult to connect with this text, simply because most of them have never experienced being laid off. As they look to begin their college experience, students often have optimistic views of the future as seemingly limitless possibilities lay before them. Most students are not solely focused on what type of job they will seek once they earn degrees. The majority are thinking about their upcoming class schedule and making new friends, while navigating newfound freedom and responsibility.

If this book were to be used as common reading for incoming students, a benefit could be the exposure that students would receive to the harsh realities of today’s economy. There are stories of even individuals with advanced degrees and years of experience being terminated. Faced with the current job market, students must work toward high academic achievement, hold leadership positions on campus, and obtain the most sought-after internships, all to simply remain competitive. This book could be a catalyst for a student engagement conversation, encouraging students to take advantage of all opportunities during their college experience. There are several partners who could help to facilitate the book discussion. Career Services and Academic Advising could provide excellent resources for students as they reflect on the testimonies in *Not Working*. This book could be a strong addition to a career development course curriculum, as it covers many aspects of the job

search process and work culture.

Because of the way the book is divided into multiple sections, various living-learning communities could also easily extract portions for use. It might be an effective tool to start discussions about employment in a particular field of interest. There are also a variety of social issues exposed in this book such as ageism, shortfalls of the unemployment system, and the failures of public education that could be the focus of rich discussion.

Although the cultural relevance of this book is obvious, it should be selected with caution. Some students might feel connected to the experiences shared by the individuals showcased in *Not Working*, as a parent or close family member might have faced unemployment in the past. This could either bring greater sense of understanding, or it could resurface painful memories and sentiments. It is important to note that this book is extremely depressing at times, making it difficult to read because of the wide ranges of emotions that are shared. Additionally, language that could be viewed as inappropriate does appear in this book numerous times. While most incoming college first-year students are legal adults, it would be important for an institution to consider possible implications of selecting this book.

If this book were to be used as common reading prior to the first year, a reading guide with some questions or statements to consider should accompany it. With the wide variety of issues and ideas presented throughout this text, it would be helpful for students to be equipped with guidance and direction for their reading. The amount of interviews included is almost overwhelming, and a reading guide would help to narrow the focus. This book has the potential to ignite dynamic discussion, but it would require excellent facilitation to be successful.