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Strangers Lend a Hand to Job Seekers

BY SARAH E. NEEDLEMAN

Once you've tapped out your network and run out of recruiters to contact, where do you go to get help finding a job these days? For a growing group of job hunters, total strangers have become the answer.

In late January, Jason C. Blais began following JobAngels, a group on the social-networking site Twitter.com that is dedicated to helping people find jobs. Mr. Blais saw a message posted by a laid-off technology professional asking for support and he volunteered to take the woman under his wing.

Mr. Blais suggested improvements to her résumé. He then sent a copy to a hiring manager at a teaching hospital he knew was seeking candidates for a position matching the job hunter's qualifications and interests. A week later, the woman was invited to interview for the job. She is still waiting to hear back.

Alarmed by the nation's rising unemployment rate, many working Americans are going out of their way to help their laid-off counterparts—often complete strangers—secure new positions. They're sharing job leads, leveraging their networks and making referrals and often putting their own reputations on the line.

"Adversity often brings out a generosity and compassion," says Tim Irwin, an organizational psychologist in Atlanta.

Career experts agree that the majority of the best jobs are found on the basis of networking or a relationship. "The power of a referral is tremendous," says Mr. Irwin, author of "Run With the Bulls Without Getting Trampled." "When I lend my name to a person's résumé, they benefit from the influence that I have with that individual. Their résumé is going to get different attention. That's just a reality."

Mr. Blais, business-development director at JobsInTheUS.com, says he developed a strong desire in recent months to help laid-off workers find new positions due to the increasing competitiveness of the job market. "A lot of good people are not even getting their résumé seen because employers aren't digging that deep into the pile," he says. "This is just one small way I



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could help somebody that's a good candidate."

Mr. Blais, who lives outside Springfield, Mass., is now mentoring two more job hunters he met through JobAngels. He says his efforts also will likely have a positive effect on his career. "My reputation can only be elevated, as more people see that I'm just one more person trying to make a difference," he says.

Others are taking a different tack. Recently, J.T. O'Donnell, a career strategist and workplace consultant in North Hampton, N.H., signed on to help a stranger who contacted her on LinkedIn. "This isn't something I would normally do," says Ms. O'Donnell. But the woman, who was looking for a senior-level art-design position in the San Francisco Bay Area, impressed Ms. O'Donnell with her intelligence and ability to communicate. When a job came up at a firm where Ms. O'Donnell knew the human-resources director, she referred the woman. She didn't land the position, but Ms. O'Donnell is still helping her, and the experience led Ms. O'Donnell to launch a Twitter effort to get career coaches to answer job-seeker questions free of charge.

Giving back was part of what prompted Mark Stelzner, a management consultant in Washington, D.C., to start JobAngels early this year. That morning, he says, he wondered to himself,

"What if each of the folks who followed me on Twitter helped one person find a job?" At the time, Mr. Stelzner had about 650 followers, mostly clients and associates of his firm, Inflexion Advisors LLC, which works with executives in the human-resources industry. He posted a message—or "tweet"—describing his idea and within hours received several replies from people saying they'd be willing to participate.

Mr. Stelzner opened a separate Twitter account for JobAngels, a name he says he came up with off the cuff, and created JobAngels groups on LinkedIn and Facebook. He posted a message on each offering to help people with their job searches and encouraged others to do the same. JobAngels has 3,894 followers to date on Twitter and nearly 1,200 group members on Facebook.

Among the first to seek help was Mary White-Cornell, a Seattle marketing professional who was laid off in September from a restaurant franchise company. Mr. Stelzner agreed to edit her résumé and any cover letters she wanted to send to employers. He also emailed 10 people in his network asking to contact Ms. White-Cornell if they knew of any jobs matching her background and interests. Several quickly responded. "I was amazed by how many people would take time out of their day to help a virtual stranger find a job," she says. "I

got goose bumps."

Recently, one woman even emailed Ms. White-Cornell to say that her husband worked in sales at a Seattle-based firm and offered to make sure he passed on her résumé to one of its hiring managers. "Coincidentally, this was a company I had targeted," says the 50-year-old. Ms. White-Cornell says the company isn't currently hiring in marketing, but she feels like the personal recommendation will get her résumé noticed when they do.

As she continues her job search, Ms. White-Cornell is looking to help to others in her situation by making introductions and forwarding links to employment ads. "It feels good to give back," she says. "And it's the right thing to do."

Of course, there are potential downsides to offering support to strangers. "There are those who will take advantage of the kindness of others," says Mr. Stelzner. "You don't want to represent someone who's lied about their background."

Paula Marks, a career coach in New York and executive recruiter, recommends do-gooders pre-screen potential mentees to get a sense of whether they are serious about finding a job.

Mr. Blais says he takes several steps to ensure he's helping people he can trust. "I try to get a feel for what kind of work they're after and gain some insight through what is essentially a phone screening," he says. "I also make it clear to employers that this is an altruistic initiative."

Of course, those seeking help should do their own due diligence. A referral from someone who isn't in good standing in the field or who has a less-than-stellar reputation can harm your job search. "You may not know their career history and you don't know if they're viewed as credible," says Ms. O'Donnell, who advises job seekers to do some Internet research on their would-be mentor and take a little time to build a relationship before you accept a referral from a stranger.

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BY TODDI GUTNER

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