

Bouncing back: Getting over the 'I'm an engineer' mindset

By Ottawa Business Journal Staff

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Book chronicles tech worker tales of reinvention

Despite his education, Amjid Zareef was laid off twice in his early 30s after the tech bust caught up with him in 2002. With a young family to support, he needed to learn to bounce back.

"Luckily I had a business background, but I had never really considered opening up my own business because here I was living, working at a good job," he said. "(Being laid off) forced me to think about my career on a different level."

Mr. Zareef graduated university with a degree in commerce and a specialization in management information systems and was working as a test engineer for a large telecommunications firm when he was laid off.

Although he had invested so many years of his life to high tech, he soon came to the conclusion that he had to look elsewhere to be successful. Today, he runs three orthopedic shoe franchises in Ottawa and recently branched off into manufacturing.

"It's always difficult to take that first step and do it because you say to yourself, 'what am I going to do, quit my job and take this risk to start a business that may or may not be a success?'" he said. "When the layoff happened the second time, it was still hard to take the plunge, but more realistic because I had the time and energy to research it."

Anita Caputo, co-author of *Learn to Bounce: from a high-tech layoff to your ideal work*, profiled Mr. Zareef's story along with 27 others who experienced the devastation of the tech wreck in the early 2000s. She also knows what it feels like at a personal level. She was laid off from Nortel in the summer of 2001 and her husband, who had been in IT for 20 years, was laid off 16 months later.

"I saw this as an opportunity to do what I had always wanted. But I didn't know what that was," said Ms. Caputo, an accountant by trade. She started hosting workshops based on the book *Finding Your Perfect Work* by Paul and Sarah Edwards. "I realized there would be tons of different stories and people love to hear stories. I thought I should document them and put them into a book."

That led her to Lee Wallace, a career coach and expert in career transitions with 30 years of experience, with whom she co-authored *Bounce*.

Research for the book started in the summer of 2003, at the bottom of the high-tech downturn in Ottawa.

"It was so sad. People were losing faith that people were going to land and find their way," Ms. Caputo said.

What the two authors found through their interviews was that people "land" in a number of different ways. Some, like Robert Milner, went back to school. He was laid off in his 50s and decided to retrain in nuclear medicine because he thought employers in the field wouldn't mind hiring people in their 60s.

Some became entrepreneurs or opened a franchise, like Mr. Zareef. Some, like Ms. Caputo, found their true passions.

It was not easy for many, as Keith Percival explained in the book. Mr. Percival described how after 20 years as an engineer, he became withdrawn, lacked motivation and spent months on the couch. When he eventually got over of his "I'm an engineer" mindset, he decided to open a wine-making business in



Anita Caputo and Lee Wallace set out to chronicle the stories of how unemployed tech workers "learned to bounce" and move on to new things after the tech wreck. (Photo supplied)

Barrhaven. Although he said he doesn't plan to run the store forever, the business was the first step to getting back on his feet.

"The reality is you're going to bounce from one job to another and you need to have the mindset and attitude to be able to do that," Ms. Caputo said.

All of the stories are about people who bounced back, but there are also tips in the book on how to avoid mindsets and methods which can hamper success.

"These people we spoke to discovered what they were doing wrong along the way. Many have said it wasn't until they got off their computer and out of the house that they started making progress," said Mr. Wallace.

Networking not only led to success for many people, but also helped them to connect with others who were going through the same struggle and improve their emotional state.

And some may end up happier in their new careers than they ever could have been in high tech.

"If I were to have everything taken away from me at this point, I would start all over and go right back into this business," said Mr. Zareef. "There's something about helping people, especially helping people become more mobile and walk ... I really can't imagine wanting to do anything else."

For more information or to order the book, please go to www.learntobounce.com

Fact Boxes

Common traps that laid off workers fall into:

- *The Internet trap – at most, only 25 per cent of jobs are advertised*
- *The Hermit trap – get outside. It's a good way to network and good for your mental health*
- *The Martyr trap – don't keep everything bottled up inside*
- *The Negativity trap – hanging out with negative people will sap energy*
- *The Shyness trap – shyness can stand in the way of success, and is especially a problem with high-tech workers*

Tips on how to bounce:

- *Stay positive*
- *Let go of the past*
- *Be optimistic*
- *Look for opportunities*
- *Focus on what you have, not on what you don't have*
- *Don't limit yourself*
- *Do whatever it takes*
- *Be self-disciplined*
- *Help support others*
- *Change your perspective*
- *Realize you are responsible*

>Source: Learn to Bounce

By Julie Fortier

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