

## The layoff lady

Diane Cooper hopes she'll never have to meet you. Likewise, company presidents and managers hope Cooper won't ever set foot in their buildings. She often doesn't know when she'll have to show up at a workplace; she just knows she has to be prepared.



**Diane Cooper, the assistant director of Workforce Operations for the Kane County Department of Employment and Education, reviews unemployment-related information before the next presentation at the KCDEE office in N. Aurora.**

And when she is called in, Cooper arrives with reading materials on topics employees don't want to think about:

- Filing for unemployment.
- Considering budget counseling.
- Putting together a resume and cover letter.
- Notifying creditors of a loss in income.

Cooper hands these folders out while speaking in front of groups of six to sometimes 60-plus people who will all be laid-off that week, that month or in a matter of months.

On one sheet, there's a survey to fill out that asks of one's future plans. Another brochure entitled "What to do when the paycheck stops" details a 12-step plan of action. There's also a packet listing job-related Web sites on the Internet, from apprenticeships to military jobs, printed in a font so small you could go cross-eyed.

I'm here today because your employer cared enough to invite me in and give you information on all the services available to you, Cooper usually starts off.

Of the many questions she poses, one particularly provokes deeper thought: Have you really looked at the job market or how it's been in the last 10 or 20 years since you started here?

The truth is, the job market has changed tremendously -- even recently, according to Cooper, who for the last 23 years has seen every change in the local labor force. She is a workforce training specialist with the Kane County Department of Employment and Education in North Aurora, which offers federally funded job-training programs to those who are unemployed, underemployed or simply seeking to sharpen their skills.

Most workers find out about local services once they file for unemployment benefits at the Illinois WorkNet Center in North Aurora. But there's also a small percentage who have the state and local services come to their workplaces.

That's where they meet Cooper. She is one of the first people in the three county-area to find out about mass company layoffs and closings. And these days, she has never been busier.

### Meeting with Caterpillar

In recent years, Cooper has visited dozens of companies from Elgin and St. Charles to Montgomery and Aurora, to conduct workshops and inform employee groups about free services that most never knew existed.

She meets at least once a week with laid off workers or trades workers. Cooper isn't surprised that employees are quiet during her presentations. Some have never considered getting education beyond a GED, or creating a resume. Most people ask the tough questions in private.

- When can I start getting training?
- How soon can I start these assistance services?
- Do I really have to create a resume?

Cooper has heard all these questions too many times, and that's a frightening sign. Before the recession, responding to mass layoffs was only a part of her job. Today, it has become her main focus.

On Wednesday, Cooper and her Rapid Response team will meet with soon-to-be laid off Caterpillar workers of the Oswego Township plant. A combined 1,411 workers from production and management will be let go in two rounds of layoffs, one this month and one in June. Cooper will be on-site for all three shifts in meetings that will last nearly two hours at a time in the biggest employee sessions she has had to conduct in her career.

"I'm running copiers pretty much non-stop. I have piles and piles of boxes to put together. It's been a continuous process. Everyone pitches in because with something this large you need to have help," Cooper said.

"It's the individuals that I'm working with who are in the difficult position. I already know everything. It's a matter of them getting the information."

### **'Enjoy helping people'**

For a long time, many people never knew that Cooper's department existed, she said.

"Although we were there, we seemed to be a well-kept secret. Or maybe it's just that people are opening up their eyes more. There's a genuine concern to help our workers right now," she said.

In the last few months, she has met privately with state legislators, who want to know exactly what she does and what more she knows about the local employment conditions. They're turning to her for answers on how to respond to constituent concerns.

Cooper's schedule is often booked weeks in advance. Her office is covered with paperwork scattered everywhere that needs to be analyzed, signed or reviewed.

The stack of thick folders she brings with her on her company visits always need to be replenished, it seems. She is constantly preparing for yet another meeting in a few hours or the next day.

Her job requires her to be mobile, too. She usually gets a phone call from the company's human resource manager that they'd like her to talk to employees that day. Some days take her from North Aurora to Geneva to DeKalb or Elgin and then back. Cooper doesn't ever describe her job as stressful, and she does not think twice about why she does this job.

"I love what I do. It fills a need. I really enjoy helping people. Every success we have is my reward," she said. "It all works out. As long as we're optimistic, I think it's fine."

In a lot of cases, these employee meetings are just the beginning of a one-on-one relationship with Cooper. Workers who've been laid-off keep up with her all the time.

People report back to her with good news. Some have gone back to school full-time, others have entered a completely new industry.

There are times when business owners call her and say they don't need her services anymore because they were able to restructure and avoid layoffs. It's rare, but it does happen.

To workers out there worried about their job situation, she says, "If a layoff is eminent, take a proactive rather than a reactive approach. In today's economy, positions won't land in their lap."

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