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## **White-collar jobless blues**

**For some professionals who lost their jobs in the 2001 recession, weeks of unemployment have stretched into years, forcing them to take 'survival jobs'**

By Barbara Rose  
Tribune staff reporter

July 17, 2005

William Spolec sips iced tea at a window table in a busy downtown Starbucks.

Dressed in slacks and a knit shirt, a brown leather attache case at his feet, he easily could be mistaken for a casually dressed professional taking a late afternoon break.

Instead, the veteran human resources executive is early for a seven-hour shift behind Starbucks' counter.

Laid off two years ago at age 62 from a bank vice president's job, he took the \$7.50 per hour job because his health insurance was running out. He felt lucky to find it.

"I'm getting good benefits," he says.

Spolec is one of hundreds of thousands of professionals who lost their jobs during the 2001 recession and its aftermath, a long jobless recovery.

They were caught in an unusual economic downdraft, a period marked less by the sheer number of people thrown out of work--2.7 million in all, or about 2 percent of the workforce--as by unrelentingly high rates of long-term unemployment, economists say.

While previous recessions hit less-educated blue-collar workers harder, this downturn took a greater toll on white-collar workers, who made up 44 percent of the long-term unemployed during 2001-04, according to a study by the Economic Policy Institute and National Employment Law Project.

In June 2005, long-term unemployment dropped below 20 percent of total unemployed for the first time in nearly three years.

"This was a very unusual expansion and downturn," said Yolanda Kodrzycki, senior economist and policy adviser at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston.

High-paying industries such as software, telecom and finance fueled the late 1990s boom, she said. "In the downturn, those same industries were the ones shedding jobs."

The economy didn't start adding jobs again until late 2003, when more than one in every five jobless Americans had been looking for work six months or longer. Even then, job growth was weak.

"That puts the long-term unemployed in an incredible bind," said National Employment Law Project policy analyst Andrew Stettner.

"People who have been out of work longest are going to have a hard time getting back to work," Stettner said.

These are the stories of Spolec and other professionals for whom weeks of unemployment stretched into months, then years. They are largely overlooked in an economy where unemployment is trending down and things are looking up for many job seekers.

Like others in their predicament, they are no longer unemployed. They work "survival" jobs while trying to climb back into their fields.

From banks to special blends

Starbucks is not where Spolec, a DePaul University MBA, imagined ending his working years.

For more than three decades he worked in administrative and human resources jobs, mainly at foreign banks.

His last job, managing a staff of eight at Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi's Chicago branch, ended when the bank laid off half the branch and consolidated Spolec's human resources function in New York.

That was July 2003, at the tail end of a jobless recovery when unemployment was near a 9-year high and 2 million Americans had been unemployed for more than six months.

Spolec had gone through layoffs twice before, but he knew this one would be different.

"I was very apprehensive," he recalls. "I knew it was going to be difficult for me to find another job at my age. I figured it would take at least a year, and by then my severance and unemployment would run out.

"So I really began making plans--survival plans, basically," he says.

Almost immediately, he put his modest home on a leafy street in west suburban River Forest on the market and prepared with his wife of 40 years to move to Berwyn, the blue-collar suburb where he grew up.

A childhood friend who is a financial adviser helped him reorganize. With his home equity, he paid off debts and bought a Berwyn two-flat with his younger brother. By the time his unemployment ran out, he had applied for Social Security and converted his 401K to dividend-producing investments to provide income.

By economizing, he and his wife could get by while he hunted work. A career center affiliated with Old St. Patrick's Church in downtown Chicago gave him support and a place to go when his outplacement help ran out.

His darkest time came early this year when his temporary insurance was running out. "I was down," he says. "Financially I was OK, but we needed insurance."

Peers in his job group suggested Starbucks, where he started in February. "Basically you do what you have to do," he says.

These days, his attache case is stuffed with resumes, a cell phone, a mystery to read on his train commute and his bright green Starbucks apron.

His hours are all over the map--some weeks he starts at 4:45 a.m. one day, then works 7 p.m. to 11 p.m. the next--but the job is getting easier.

"I'm learning more and getting very proficient," he says, adding that making Frappuccinos can be tricky. "They're very messy--it gets all over."

He hasn't given up looking for a human resources job, but he knows his odds of landing one are slim.

"I don't want to sit home," he says. "I've worked all my life. I'd like to work another 10, 11 years if I can."

Tech still feels right

Computer consultant Jill Wohlbedacht, a fortysomething professional, is still struggling to come to grips with the layoff that jolted her comfortable life and stalled her career.

She took great pleasure in being able to walk into a Fortune 500 company, pick up a software project and run with it. For 2 1/2 years she'd been assigned to an insurance company in downtown Chicago.

Then came the tech meltdown in 2001, when employers were throttling back spending. Higher-paid consultants like Wohlbedacht, who made six figures and supervised three workers, were first to be cut.

She spent one month on her consulting firm's "bench"--idle and without a client--before the firm let her go.

At first, she wasn't overly concerned. "I've always been employable, I never had a problem finding a job," she says.

But this time was different.

The market was so glutted with tech workers in early 2002 that more than 500 resumes poured into a downtown bank in a single day after it announced information technology openings.

Some employers told her she was overqualified; others wanted experience she didn't have, like the firm that passed her over in favor of a candidate who knew foreign currency exchange.

Friends advised her to quit the tech world and strike out in a new direction, but when she weighs her options she always comes back to the same conclusion: "This is where I should be. This is what I enjoy doing."

Hoping to improve her chances, she's back in training for the third time since her layoff to add yet another credential to her resume: Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer.

She has refinanced her Lisle home to dip into her equity. She has quit her health club, canceled magazine and newspaper subscriptions, and stopped going out except for an occasional dinner at a friend's house.

To slow the rapid drain on her savings, she works part-time as a sales associate at J. Jill, a woman's clothing store. Since her health insurance ran out more than two years ago, she has gone without.

"The biggest change in my life is worrying about money," she says. "You gotta watch everything. You pinch pennies so tight."

Career center regular

Charles Crimmins never went long between jobs until the summer of 2001.

That's when the certified public accountant moved back to Chicago from Montana, where he was a state university vice chancellor, figuring there would be no shortage of opportunity for an experienced business manager and financial officer.

What he didn't count on was a series of unprecedented jolts--the Sept. 11 attacks, the stock market's dive and the collapse of the Andersen accounting firm where he had started his career.

Four years later, the Downers Grove resident, now 60, works survival jobs between consulting gigs. He recently earned \$10 an hour conducting telephone interviews for a research center.

He is easy to spot at the suburban career centers where he's a regular at networking groups. He is the genial, mustachioed man with a name tag dangling from a yellow lanyard over his dress shirt and tie.

His tagline reads: "Composing, Orchestrating and Conducting Business and Financial Affairs for Colleges and Not-for-Profits."

"What you try and do is develop a brand so people recognize you from all the other `Chucks,'" he explains.

One of his specialties is turnarounds, like the work he did cleaning up a financial mess at the Illinois College of Optometry in Chicago in the late 1990s.

He carries a folder with four different resumes, but it's been hard to branch outside his financial niche after 26 years at private colleges such as Vassar and Bard, both in New York.

So he researches the nation's colleges, assessing who's nearing retirement, who's angling to move, who may be on the way out.

His long jobless spell has forced him and his wife to dip into their retirement savings. Their combined \$30,000 annual income is less than one-fourth of what they used to make. Her sales job at Chico's, a woman's clothing chain, provides health insurance, but he goes without such basics as regular eye exams.

"One of the things I badly need is glasses," he says, pulling off his wire aviator frames to peer at small print.

One way he stays upbeat is by reading autobiographies of figures like Benjamin Franklin, who achieved success despite setbacks. Franklin, he notes, was well into his 70s when he was named ambassador to France.

What's more, Crimmins adds, "He was very big on networking."

Not the security he envisioned

LeRoy "Joe" Zebley's voice is confident, his shoulders erect. Briefcase open on a table in front of him, he's talking to a group of high-tech workers.

He looks and sounds like a project manager trying to pump energy into the room. Only these professionals are not designing a network or a software system. They are looking for work.

Zebley has been out of a job longer than any of them.

When he took early retirement from SBC Communications Inc. at age 55 in late 2000, figuring he'd land another job and work 7 to 10 more years, the telecom market was cooling. Few predicted the depth and duration of the bust that followed--the industry's worst downturn in history.

"I've been searching ever since," says the McHenry resident. "The hardest work I've ever done is finding a job."

Two years ago, he organized a networking group as a free resource for tech professionals. The NorthWest Information Technology networking group meets Wednesday evenings at a career center in Barrington.

On a recent evening, dressed in a sport jacket and collar-less black shirt, he set out paper plates of his homemade peanut butter cookies and brownies--baking is a hobby--before getting the discussion rolling with a "good news roundtable."

Not all the news is upbeat.

"I'm really depressed," says a software engineer. "I'm looking at going into a sandwich business and saying good-bye to my professional career."

Another member announces good news: After two years of driving a truck, he finally landed an IT job. "So there is hope, even if you are smart," he quips.

Zebley's career started in the early 1970s after a stint in the Navy. He earned a four-year degree from DeVry Institute of Technology, went to work as a technician at Illinois Bell, now part of SBC, and was promoted into management six years later.

The initials "PMP" after his name signify certified Project Management Professional. He's also a Certified Professional Management Consultant.

His long stretch of unemployment has taken a heavy financial toll. He and his wife, who cares full-time for their 24-year-old mentally retarded son, moved into an apartment last year after selling their three-bedroom home and one of two

cars.

They've exhausted their savings and his pension; it's a struggle to pay the monthly premiums of nearly \$700 on his retiree health insurance. If something doesn't break soon, they will be forced to move again.

His 37-hour weeks as a security guard earn him \$10 per hour, less than \$20,000 a year. He works Saturdays and Sundays to keep as many weekdays open as he can for his job search.

"After four years of this you start talking to yourself and thinking, 'What is wrong with me?'" he says. "People tell you, 'There's nothing wrong with you,' but there's not a whole lot of comfort in that.

"To me, this is like the Great Depression. I didn't expect to arrive at this point at this stage in life."

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#### WHITE-COLLAR JOBLESS BLUES

William Spolec

Age: 62

Profession: Human resources

Laid off: July 2003

Today: Works at Starbucks.

Charles Crimmins

Age: 60

Profession: University vice chancellor

Laid off: Summer 2001

Today: Consulting, telemarketing

Jill Wohlbedacht

Age: 40s

Profession: Computer consultant

Laid off: 2001

Today: Part-time sales at clothing store

LeRoy `Joe' Zebley

Age: 60

Profession: Project manager

Laid off: Took early retirement in 2000

Today: Security guard

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Displaced workers' stories at [www.chicagotribune.com/workers](http://www.chicagotribune.com/workers)

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