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## Layoffs hitting men hardest

More than 80 percent of recession layoffs affect men

By Aimee Heckel Camera Staff Writer

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Dennis Mead-Shikaly, left, talks to Zigy Kaluzny during a help session. Dennis has been a men's coach and counselor for 25 years. ( CLIFF GRASSMICK )

Kevin Hunt had a job lined up in Boulder even before he graduated the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He would be the new product manager for a business called Eclipse.

The name foreshadowed what came next.

In 2007, the company that owned Eclipse sold it, resulting in a wave of layoffs, including Hunt. But he picked himself up off the floor and within the month found another product manager job for a Boulder-based startup.

In August, that startup went under.

The next month was rough, to say the least, says Hunt, 30, of Boulder.

"I felt like the wind had gotten knocked out of me," he says.

But he dragged himself back to his feet and began searching for another job. Aggressively. Two months later,



he says he finally hit the "jackpot: one phone interview yesterday and three today, but nothing for next week."

Jackpot?

Hunt says today's job market is "a night and day difference" to 2007, when he suffered his first career blow but at least found other offers knocking at his cubicle door.

Some experts say it's even harder for men, who have befallen a whopping 82 percent of the job losses since the recession started, according to a New York Times article. Male-dominated fields, such as construction and manufacturing, were hit especially hard.

On the other hand, women, who are more often employed in fields that slipped under the layoff cutting block -- such as health care and education -- have seen few changes in their careers.

Some experts say these forced changes in the workforce could have serious, potentially lasting, effects on American society: on family structure, on gender roles and on how men and women see themselves.

### **Gender roles: a changing landscape**

Whether or not you agree with it, the "working man" concept is so deeply entrenched in the definition of masculinity that, in Audrey Nelson's words, "Men suffer more psychologically than women do." Nelson is a Boulder-based gender expert and trainer and author of multiple books on gender communication in the workforce.

That's not to say layoffs aren't crushing for women, too. It just hits deeper for men, Nelson says.

She cites research from the Journal of Health Economics, among other sources, that shows after a man loses his job or even retires, if he does not find replacement work within five years -- sometimes as early as three -- men often suffer a major physical or medical ailment, like a heart attack. Cancer is significantly increased for male retirees in the United Kingdom.

"It's basically too much of a change to go from working that defines who he is, defines him as a man, to now doing not

nothing, but nothing that feels as important as his work was," Nelson says.

She references a quote from Ernest Hemmingway: "Retirement is the ugliest word in the language."

This is especially amplified for Baby Boomers, Nelson says, a generation that highly values productivity, from physical fitness to mental stimulation.

Historically in recessions, a greater percentage of families are supported by women. The Bureau of Labor Statistics shows in its latest statistics, women held 49.8 percent of jobs.

"There is a domino effect. He is staying home, and she is going to work," Nelson says. "And the primary way men define their self-worth is by their work and the ability to survive."

Women can also get confidence from work, but they also tend to tap more into relationships, garnering self-worth from their families and children. Often, women brag about their children with the same fervor that a man might gloat over a pay raise, Nelson says.

Furthermore, a poll by the Rockefeller Foundation found that women now earn 57 percent of the college degrees, and make 75 percent of the buying decisions in the home.

The current shift could help better balance out the workforce for women, some say. And despite the blow for laid-off men, some women seem pleased with their new position of power, according to Dennis Mead-Shikaly, of Boulder, a men's coach and counselor who has been doing gender work for 25 years.

"Men are saying, 'I've been trained to be the protector and provider. Picking up the kids, PTA meetings and doing the laundry isn't what I was bred for,'" Mead-Shikaly says. "Women say, 'Get over it. It's your ego.'"

But it's not that simple, he says.

Men take on thousands of years of social and genetic programming. To suddenly have their identity pulled out from under them -- "It takes a whole re-orientation for a man, in terms of who he is in the world," Mead-Shikaly says.

This isn't the first time gender demographics in the workforce have changed. Except with the women's movement, it was a choice. Same with the increasing number of men who choose to be stay-at-home fathers. But today's sense of powerlessness -- where men are forced out of the workforce and can't find an entrance back in -- can be dangerous.

"He'll either turn that energy outward or inward. Either explode or implode, if that powerless lasts long enough," Mead-Shikaly says. "This is not our choosing. There's still a patriarch that lives in me because I learned it from my father and grandfather and culture. To make that shift in one generation isn't an easy thing to do, so he'd rather take the status quo."

This can lead to resentment, on both sides of the gender coin, Nelson says.

"I believe even though women say, 'I'm all for equality,' they still have the expectation that their husbands should be out there making a dime. Even if he's been laid off and is looking for jobs, she might be passive-aggressive," Nelson says.

"When we talk about these traditional sex roles, it's not just men who buy into them. Women buy into them, too."

### **What to do**

Being aware of gender boundaries -- and how they are increasingly more outdated, but nonetheless difficult to penetrate -- is the first step in moving out of this seeming rut.

You see, Mead-Shikaly says, you are not really stuck.

"Every time we get stuck, it means something needs to change," he says. "Realize what is happening, and that you are not alone. Push past that resistance, and don't be afraid to ask for help."

Or to offer help. He says the worst thing is for women to be dismissive, with statements like, "Get over yourself" or "Stop wallowing."

"Be aware that this man is going through a very deep and painful change. Like any sensitive, loving person, give them space to have their feelings without taking it personally," Mead-Shikaly says.

Draw emotions out of him and encourage him to find someone to talk to, such as an issue-specific men's group, coach or counselor. Talking in a non-hierarchical circle can be healing.

"Women don't realize how much pain men carry in their bodies," Mead-Shikaly says. "I've worked with thousands of men. The grief that lives in men's bodies is like a river. I've had so many men say to me, 'I'm afraid if I start to cry, I may never stop.' When we isolate and internalize, all we do is add torrent to that river."

For men, he recommends keeping a journal, talking to friends, starting a new hobby, taking a new class, coaching the kids' team, volunteering or fixing up the house. Articulate how you feel, "how difficult and painful and scary it is," he says.

Keep your body in motion, rather than sitting on the computer all day obsessively applying for jobs you don't even want. Reinvent yourself, he says. Do things that make you feel good about yourself, no matter how small.

"Then a man realizes he is more than his job," Mead-Shikaly says. "Become more aware, rather than rigidly holding onto an old definition that may not fit anymore."

Colin T. Williams, 32, of Boulder, earned his MBA last August. It's been more than a year, and still no solid job offers.

Williams is living off his savings, and in the meanwhile doing free consulting and volunteer work to get his foot in the door.

"I'm generally quite optimistic," he says. "Anyone who is looking for work, whether with a family to support or not, whether man or woman, it's difficult for anybody."

As for Hunt, the Boulder man who was recently laid off for the second time, he admits being out of work can erode a person's confidence.

"But at the same time, it can make you take a step back and identify what makes you unique," he says.

For the rest of his life, he says he'll worry in the back of his mind that his job could fall through. He has learned the value of saving money.

"I'm completely paranoid, and I always will be the rest of my life. You have to fight every day," Hunt says. "You have to completely change your lifestyle."

As Mead-Shikaly sees it, this is a point of tremendous evolutionary change. Either you evolve with it, like Hunt and Williams, or you become extinct.

"This is as transformative of a time we have seen on this Earth," Mead-Shikaly says. "We are running out of time, everything seems under pressure, fear is rampant, genetics are changing. Women will be the predominant gender on the planet. Clearly women do not need men to protect and provide anymore."

"The old programs of our fathers and grandfathers are gone."

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