
Three Lessons From Tech Layoffs on Building Career Agility



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The importance of diversifying early, prioritising self-discovery and keeping your pipeline open for opportunities.

The wave of layoffs in Silicon Valley in the past two years is far from over. After a brutal 2023 that saw over **100,000 tech workers** laid off in the United States, 2024 shows **no signs of letting up**.

While the headlines are shocking, the human stories behind the numbers are just as important. How do tech professionals respond to **layoffs**? Do they view it as an opportunity for exploration or are they gripped by fear and the need for self-preservation? Would they seek similar roles or seize the moment to question everything, reinvent themselves and find work with greater meaning and impact?

In an ongoing study, Winnie Jiang (one of the authors of this article) and Yuna Cho from the University of Hong Kong found that individuals tend to be more contemplative about the meaning of life following a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. This often leads to a desire for change in their life, including reevaluating the role of work.

For example, some people may change their views about work, seeing it as a means of serving others rather than solely for financial gain, while others may reassess the importance of work in contributing to their family's financial security.

To understand how recently laid off tech professionals have managed their personal “crises”, we spoke to three professionals in the sector. Each of them provides a key lesson for coping with an unexpected career transition.

1. Don't wait to diversify: Side gigs open career doors

In 2003, Steffen joined Google in Hamburg as an account manager. In the course of over 20 years, he took on various roles, became a project and product specialist for emerging markets and the EMEA region, and eventually led a global programme for sustainable start-ups.

His passion for connecting with business founders and scalers led to several side gigs, some of which he took on during Google's famous 20 percent time, where employees can pursue projects that they believe are of value. He began advising start-ups and tech ventures, creating an investment syndicate for ex-Googlers' companies. While building his network, he prioritised his family life and began rejecting unfulfilling projects.

When Steffen was laid off in early 2023, he took a moment to thank his network on LinkedIn and was overwhelmed with messages of support. Instead of focusing on what was next, he kept up his side gigs and gave himself space to look back and reflect.

Steffen's severance deal afforded him time to pause and reassess. He acknowledged that Google was an ideal environment to build his ecosystem of diverse interests, adding, “Clearly, I am not going back to any sort of five-days-per-week corporate role. I want to be able to tell my son that I did something to change the world instead of just increasing advertising sales.”

He has now established a setup that fulfils his varied interests: working three days a week for a non-profit angel investment club; devoting one day to his syndicate; and one day advising sustainability start-ups, as well as spending time with family.

2. Slow down to find your spark (and pass on tempting offers)

Ekaterina's background was multifaceted, beginning with studying medicine in Moscow and transitioning to medical journalism in the United States. After working for the health ministry and an advertising agency in Russia, she went on to pursue an MBA at INSEAD.

Upon joining Google in Paris, Ekaterina quickly rose through various product partnership roles, eventually leading regulatory programmes for an EMEA (Europe, Middle East, and Africa) vertical. After over a decade with the company, she began contemplating her next career moves while taking on part-time sustainability work.

Seeking guidance from Antoine (a co-author of this article) to coach her through her career transition, Ekaterina aimed for a more intentional approach, recognising that her career had developed reactively. However, budget constraints and layoffs prompted her to reassess her situation sooner than expected, leading her to opt for a voluntary severance package.

Ekaterina recognised the value of her network and transferable skills. With financial security from her savings and severance package, she chose to take time for introspection rather than rushing into a new job. She dedicated time to networking, pursued non-executive director training and stuck to her plan to slow down and deliberate for at least six months.

Her approach led to experiment with volunteering her time on boards and associations, resulting in several offers and a realisation: she would never again rely solely on a single role or income stream.

3. Keep your pipeline - and network - open

Ben's fascination with the night sky as a child led him to study astrophysics at Cambridge University. However, a detour during his studies into the field of business ignited a new passion, steering him towards a consulting career. He climbed the ranks quickly at Deloitte before transitioning into the advertising technology (adtech) industry, where he held increasingly senior roles.

Ben faced a somewhat traumatic setback when he was laid off nine weeks into a job after nine months of interviews. Despite the mental scars, he pushed through and secured a role at Meta almost four years ago, rising from regional to global lead of a business vertical.

When Ben was laid off in late 2023, he felt no hostility and dove straight back into job search. He envisaged staying in tech, but began to reassess his career direction, exploring opportunities in AI, machine learning and space technology (space tech). Without much luck in his search in these fields, he refocused on adtech, even though the job search proved as challenging.

Ben grappled with the balance between investing time applying for jobs and deepening and bettering his chances in interviews. He learnt to maintain an open pipeline of opportunities after a job offer fell through at the last moment, forcing him back to square one.

While Ben was actively networking, he focused on building connections within Meta, which led to progression internally. Building networks beyond his current role and exploring and experimenting along the way was instrumental for Ben to emerge from the experience with greater resilience.

Unlock career agility with the 4 E's framework

These stories demonstrate that exploring and trying new things, moving into new roles, and expanding skills and experiences are continuous processes. Our **4 E's Framework** (see figure 1), created nearly a decade ago, emphasises that effective career management involves four iterative steps: explore, experiment, engage and expand.

The 4 E's Framework

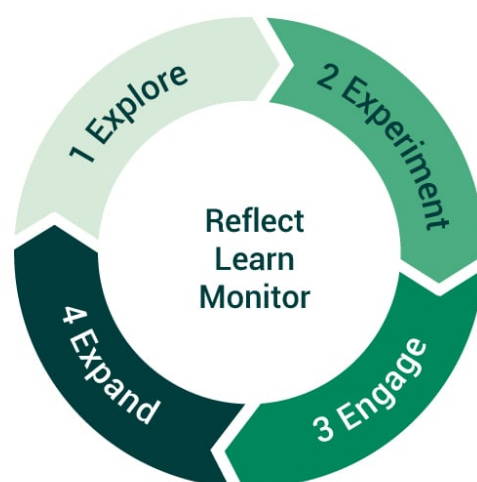


Figure 1: The 4 E's framework

The first step, “explore”, is a means to take ownership of your career by reflecting on your strengths and motivations, considering what aspects of your career you want to change, and researching potential new paths. The “experiment” phase involves trying new activities, building connections in the field of interest and refining the focus of your job search.

Having identified a good fit, engage by actively pursuing the new role, adapting to its demands and acquiring the necessary skills. Finally, the “expand” stage is about excelling in your new position, further developing your capabilities and reflecting on your career journey.

It is important to add that the 4 E's framework isn't a one-time fix. It's a continuous cycle that fuels ongoing career development. The more you engage with it, the greater the returns.

Read the extended version of this article [here](#).

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About the author(s)

Winnie Jiang is an Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD. She studies the dynamics of meaning-making at work, work as a calling, career mobility and transitions, and personal and professional development.

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