

Here's the real story on America's unemployment

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KEY DATA: Real total U.S. (U-6) unemployment exceeds 17 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Take-away: The modern office/factory-model job as we know it actually could be headed for extinction.

I'm one of the many casualties of the Great Recession. My position -- along with 200 others -- was eliminated 13 months ago at a major nonprofit organization in Colorado Springs. Permanently.

Oddly, I keep finding myself referring to it as a "layoff." It's not like there's going to be any callback. Is it denial? Perhaps in part. (Reality and I aren't on the best speaking terms right now.)

More likely, however, it's a kind of collective future shock. Some of our thinking just hasn't quite caught up with the realities of this Brave New Economy. We tend to assume, for example, that when recovery comes (and it's right around the corner, the partisan cheerleaders keep promising), we're going to pick right back up where we left off pre-recession.

Well, probably not. Already this recession has wiped out all job growth from the previous expansion. And when the dust finally settles, there's likely to be a net permanent loss of jobs -- jobs, at least, with the kind of pay and benefits we've become accustomed to.

One of the ways we kid ourselves is calling our unemployment rate 10 percent. In government-speak that's the "U-3" number, which counts just current job seekers. What it doesn't count are "discouraged" workers, who have given up looking, and the "involuntarily part-time" or underemployed workers, who also can't find full-time work.

That's the "U-6" number, a more recent U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics metric. Today it's more than 17 percent, which means real unemployment is approaching one in five Americans. And, yes, that's a (post-Depression) record.

Growing evidence suggests that something far more fundamental than just another economic cycle may be going on. The modern office/factory-model job as we know it actually could be headed for extinction. Goodbye, permanent employment. Hello, contingent work, contractual employment and "composite" careers.

Many of us know people like my relative (by marriage) who's a part-time associate pastor who also delivers newspapers, does home remodeling and sells Melaleuca. It's a living -- in fact, he's been doing it for years by choice. We're also seeing more and more six-month and one-year contract jobs with employers who don't want to commit to workers beyond that. This may well be the shape of things to come.

William Bridges, the visionary executive development consultant and author who named this phenomenon "dejobbing," foresaw this years ago: "What is disappearing is not just a certain number of jobs -- or jobs in certain industries or jobs in some part of the country or even jobs in America as a whole. What is disappearing is the very thing itself, the job."

Try this experiment: If you've worked long enough to have had multiple jobs, tally up that total number. Then subtract however many of those positions no longer exist. Unless you're in health care, education or some other recession-resistant field, the number you have left may surprise you by its tininess.

In my own case, I've had (not counting freelance writing stints) six full-time jobs. Of those, only two still exist. And of the four that went bye-bye, three of those employers no longer exist (two newspapers and a public relations firm).

Actually, work in the form of jobs is merely a 200-year blip in the human experience. From time immemorial before the Industrial Revolution, the workplace was the village, the field and the home. Our forebears were largely self-employed farmers, craftsmen and merchants who worked as needed and quit when the larder was full.

The pendulum seems to be swinging back that direction. If you play the game of musical chairs long enough, eventually everybody runs out of a place to sit. More and more of us will need to learn how to make a living as self-employed professional independent contractors or as entrepreneurs who start our own businesses.

The good news is there will still be work for those who know how to get it. We can all take our cue from the many organizations that have had to make radical changes to survive -- change product lines, even rebrand their very identity. Individuals today have to do much the same thing in terms of reinventing their careers.

And let's face it. In many ways, full-time "permanent" employment by paternalistic corporations has been a very mixed blessing. It has tended to breed attitudes of dependency and entitlement in us that are quite counter to the American spirit of ingenuity and self-reliance. And when this comfort and security are taken away, we don't do well because we've been somewhat disabled.

Is it a pain to have to figure out how to market my services, provide for my own fringe benefits, manage my own tax withholding and calculate my project fee or billable hourly rate? Yes, but those are details. And if that's the price of freedom and self-respect, I'll take it.

Veteran journalist Steve Adams is author of the new book, "Back to Work! Create New Opportunities in the Wake of Job Loss" (Moody Publishers) -- back2workbook.com.

http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/columns/Sunday_Reflections/Here_s-the-real-story-on-America_s-unemployment-8679698-80076392.html