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Charities tap skills of jobless professionals

Meredith May, Chronicle Staff Writer
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When the economy slumped, Althea Collins was among 100 people let go in November from Fair Isaac Co. in San Rafael, the firm that created the FICO credit score system to determine loan interest rates.

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She's been looking for work ever since, but "no one is even calling back."

Now the 30-year-old Mill Valley resident is helping the Conservatory of Flowers in San Francisco redesign its Web site. For free.

The rising waves of layoffs are creating a whole new pool of well-educated, highly skilled volunteers like Collins who are looking for a way, any way, back into the working world.

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Whether charity work provides an opportunity to network in a bad economy, the ideal chance to try

social work as a possible career, or simply a reason to get off the couch and stay engaged, it's what many professionals are doing to ride out the recession.

"In this market, networking is the only way to get interviews," said Collins, who recently interviewed with the Marin Community Foundation after a friend at the conservatory got her in the door.

The command center of this swelling underground workforce is the Taproot Foundation in San Francisco, which places 2,000 business executives in charities annually to work as pro bono charity consultants. Taproot saw a 171 percent increase in volunteer interest in January over the previous year, largely driven by the economy.

Three-fourths of those wanting Taproot volunteer positions are people who lost their jobs, said Taproot founder Aaron Hurst.

Charities' waiting lists

At HandsOn Bay Area, an online volunteer-matching service, volunteer projects are booked six weeks in advance for the first time in the agency's 20-year history.

The trend is showing up nationwide. Similar reports are coming from New York, where traffic on Web-based volunteer-matching services is up 30 percent. The Big Brothers Big Sisters program in Philadelphia has 25 percent more requests from potential mentors.

"Volunteering in the nonprofit world is a good balance for me after spending so many years in corporate America," said Michael Gilman of San Francisco, who was laid off six months ago from his job as a senior business manager in Hewlett-Packard's Web services and software division in Palo Alto.

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Insight into nonprofits

He's now volunteering through Taproot as a project manager at the Community Music Center in the Mission District, helping it improve its professional business environment.

The work keeps him grounded, he said, as he navigates the difficult job market.

He's applied for a dozen jobs and made it through the final interview of a few, only to be told in each case that the company had decided to freeze the position until the economy improves. In the meantime, he is leading a neighborhood support group for laid-off executives.

After gaining a little insight into the nonprofit world, Gilman has broadened his search and interviewed at nonprofits such as GreatSchools.net.

"I'm learning that the nonprofit world is just as organized as the corporate world," he said.

HandsOn Bay Area and VolunteerMatch, another online service, are filling projects months in advance. In November, HandsOn Executive Director Lou Reda said he noticed the months started booking up, and by January, people started bypassing the online calendars and calling the office trying to find a project to join.

Glut of volunteers

"We've never seen that before. It's absolutely stunning," Reda said. "It's getting harder to put together enough projects for all the volunteers."

This illustrates an enormous missed opportunity for nonprofits. As charities scale back in the face of dwindling donations, many are laying off staff, including volunteer coordinators. While charities can easily add volunteers who want to ladle soup or clean a creek, absorbing professionals with complex skills takes management hours charities no longer have.

The glut of laid-off volunteers has forced Taproot to stop all marketing and start turning away applicants, Hurst said.

"Can you imagine working for all those years and then offering your services for free only to be told, 'Thanks, but no thanks?'" Hurst said.

"There needs to be some level of investment on the philanthropic and government side so nonprofits can leverage all this surplus of human capital," he said.

Collins, who also found her volunteer job through Taproot, is thankful to have a routine to keep her from the depression spiral. She's spent a lot of time thinking about aligning her passion and her work and has decided she's a better fit in the nonprofit world.

"The exposure volunteering provides is wonderful, and there's always the possibility of 'catching on fire,'" Reda said.

"You find something that really speaks to you, and all of a sudden you find more purpose, value and connection in your life."

Web resources for volunteers

-- Taproot Foundation:

www.taprootfoundation.org

-- VolunteerMatch:

www.volunteermatch.org

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