

AFTER THE CUT

As layoffs mount at Seattle's largest tech employers, the newly unemployed are entering a job market reshaped by artificial intelligence

Orlagh Neary worked her way through the ranks at Microsoft over the course of more than 22 years. She moved to the Seattle area with her now-ex-husband and got a job working in Microsoft's content development department in 2003. Neary, who is originally from Ireland, earned promotions, racking up chief of staff roles in the process. She eventually landed in artificial intelligence, overseeing marketing for emerging technologies, including quantum and AI. It was her last role at Microsoft, which had 52,900 Puget Sound Area employees as of June. When the company commercialized its budding technology, Microsoft's mainstream marketing machine took over, and Neary's team was no longer needed.

Last May, Neary was one of about 2,300 employees laid off at Microsoft's Redmond headquarters. Like other terminated Microsoft employees, she had two months to find a new role within the company. She had connections and some soon-to-vest stock, but Neary decided not to stick around. It was time to try something new.

"I started second-guessing a lot," Neary says. "Should I have done that? Should I have gone to that team? That was spiraling me, and I had to stop that."

Neary's experience mirrors that of many tech workers in the Seattle area. The end of their employment is just the beginning of a journey into a rapidly evolving job market.

'The pond is shrinking'

For years, the common knowledge around layoffs was – assuming you had the right logos on your LinkedIn resume and the layoffs were beyond your control – someone was going to come calling soon.



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Those days are over.

"AI has had such a great impact on how companies are addressing their productivity and software needs, how they're engineering their products," says Donald Strankowski, founder and president of the career services firm Ascend Career and Life Strategies. "You have a lot of engineers and developers all fishing for the same type of position – and the pond is shrinking."

Over the past six months, the tech layoffs in the Seattle area have been staggering. In addition to Microsoft, Amazon laid off 14,000 people in October and another 16,000 in January, impacting more than 5,400 Washington employees. Other major Seattle-area employers – such as Smartsheet, T-Mobile, F5, Expedia, Zillow and Meta – have also trimmed their workforces.

For many laid-off employees, the first step in finding a new role is working with an outplacement firm. These firms are often paid for by the

company conducting the layoffs, and the services are free to affected employees. Although there is sometimes trepidation from the newly unemployed to use these services, many workers come around when confronted with the reality of finding a new role on their own.

Talk to someone in outplacement for more than five minutes, and you're likely to hear the cardinal rule: Don't spray and pray.

"I'll spray my resume all over town and be very reactive to job posts, and maybe I'll hit near the target if I respond to 300 job postings online," says Caroline Vernon, a vice president at the outplacement firm Intoo.

Job candidates are more likely to land a job if they target their approach and make sure their resume and cover letter match the job description. Blindly applying to

every job a candidate can find just leads to rejection and pain.

"Please, for your own sanity, do not spray and pray," says Lora Poepping, president at Seattle-based Plum Coaching and HR Consulting. "Just because you're putting more out there doesn't mean you're going to get more replies, and that will absolutely impact your soul. It will hurt you, and that is not the space you need to be in while you're doing

this work. Because let's be honest, it's work. You have to do this as a job."

AI is another reality of the new job market, often filtering applications before they ever reach a human.

ATS, an acronym so ubiquitous in HR that it isn't even explained by industry experts, stands for applicant tracking system. These tools screen resumes, schedule interviews and track job candidates as

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they move through the process.

To sidestep the robots, some candidates are using a technique called "white fonting." This is when job seekers put invisible keywords or phrases in their resumes, done using an all white font, with the hope these keywords will appease ATS and push them to later rounds of screening.

Clever as this play might sound, Vernon cautions against it. Many companies have caught on and use

DEEP CUTS

Some of the Seattle area's largest tech companies have laid off employees since last summer. Here are numbers from some of the biggest rounds:

Microsoft

15,000 people since May, including more than 3,200 in Washington

Amazon

30,000 people since October, including more than 5,400 in Washington

Expedia

Undisclosed number of people in January, with 162 confirmed cuts in Washington

T-Mobile

524 Washington employees since August

Verizon

165 Washington employees in November

F5

106 Washington employees in August

Zillow

200 employees in February. The company said the layoffs impacted employees whose "performance did not meet expectations"

Smartsheet

An undisclosed number of layoffs in October and February

tech to catch white fonting.

"Desperate times call for desperate measures. The first couple of people that it actually worked for, my props," Vernon says. "It will backfire. There will be nothing that will get you out of the running for a specific role like burying those prompts."

Still, successful job seekers are finding ways to make AI work to

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