



# Ayers Report

SPRING 2003

*from The Ayers Group, Inc., a co-owner of Career Partners International*

## FLEXIBLE OUTPLACEMENT PROGRAMS GIVE AYERS CANDIDATES AN EDGE

“One of the biggest issues we’re dealing with is that companies continue to cut costs by offering shorter outplacement programs, leaving departing employees to face a tough hiring market with less support,” says Terry Ebert, Ayers’ Managing Director of Career Transition Services. “A job search is a project, and when our project-management role ends, we need to make certain our candidates can continue on their own. That means preparing them not only for the search process but also for managing the search project.

“Our Wrap-Up Seminars are key to this effort,” he continues. “So is our flexibility in structuring programs.” As examples, Ebert notes that Ayers offers candidates who are on short programs extended access to its Internet Resource Center (IRC), designed to aid candidates with online research, and Online Career Center (OCC), an interactive Web-based career transition tool. “We also allow

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## UPCOMING EVENTS

**May 21, 2003 — Breakfast Seminar**  
hosted by Dr. Danieli: “Managing Fear;  
Coping with War, Loss, and Uncertainty”

**June 5, 2003 — “College Day”**  
sponsored by The Ayers Group



## PRESIDENT’S LETTER

### Human Resources at the Crossroads

*Are you scared? Should you be?  
What’s next?*

I’ve never experienced a time quite like this, when nearly all the human resources executives we speak with feel anxious, unsettled, and undervalued within their organizations. You are telling us that your performance expectations and deliverables have never been less clear. Most of you are uncertain about your professional futures—whether you’ll have a job and, if so, where it will fall on the organizational chart—and rightfully so. Many organizations are changing the way they think about HR. And now that the major downsizings are completed, some companies are hitting the “hit squad”—reducing within the HR function.

In our conversations, you are candidly raising some very serious issues: How can I make myself as secure and valued as possible when so many people and functions are being viewed as expendable or, at least, interchangeable? How do I maintain my professional integrity as tough business mandates erode the morale and basic “core” of my workplace?

There are two things every HR professional really needs to know: what the organization’s priorities are and who your decisionmakers are. These are the things on which your future hinges.

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*So what are you doing for you, as an HR executive? As a person? How are you taking care of you? Are you working out, doing something to manage your stress, staying on top of the game in terms of your profession, networking, etc.?*

# THE ROLE OF THE RECRUITER IN A DOWN MARKET

“Employers are looking for the perfect match in a candidate, and in this market they can afford to take their time,” says Bob Deissig, President of Staffing Services at The Ayers Group. “The value-added service we provide as a matter of course has never been more important than in the current environment. We are very good at assessing a client’s needs and doing everything possible to bring the right people to the table without wasting the client’s time.”

“In a market where qualified candidates are abundant, the screening process has, ironically, become more important and specific to employers’ needs than ever before,” adds Bill Kirk, head of the firm’s recruiting office in Rye.

According to Deissig, potential employers continue to make hiring decisions slowly and, given the political and economic uncertainty, spend money reluctantly. “Lately, we find that we’re getting all the way through the placement process, down to dotting the last ‘i,’ and suddenly everything’s on hold—even when head-count was approved,” he says. “We’re told to keep the candidate warm and they’ll get back to us in a few weeks.”

Under these conditions, the Ayers executives observe, the successful recruiter’s job is to maintain a positive outlook while managing the expectations of employers and job candidates.

“It’s easy to turn away when the market is tight and jobs are scarce, but we’re all about the big picture,” says Kirk. “Many of us have experienced bad markets

and industry turnarounds before and know the market will come back. It isn’t our job to predict when and where, even though many clients and candidates want us to. Our job is to be honest and accurate with both sides—something that isn’t always well received in times like these. That means staying current with where the jobs are, what candidates are available, and what the market conditions are for specific skill sets. Deviating from this focus does a disservice to clients, candidates, and ourselves.”

What keeps the firm going at a time when competitors are going out of business and consulting firms are shrinking? “Strong existing client relationships and our ability to win new business and move into new markets,” Deissig responds. “When we get assignments, we deliver. People know that. We’ve maintained a full complement of recruiters and are well positioned for when the turnaround comes.” ■



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## New Staffing Services Practice Focuses on Information Risk & Security

“Building the expertise to move into areas where clients have changing needs is one important way we bring value to our client relationships,” says Bob Deissig, Ayers’ President of Staffing Services. As an example, he indicates that growing demand for high-caliber candidates with expertise in information risk and risk management; information, data, and network security; and

compliance has led the firm to establish a recruiting practice focused on those specialties.

“Until now, data, information, and network security have been orphan children within the corporate structure because they don’t generate revenue,” says Harry Plastik, Vice President of Staffing Services, who heads the new practice. “But the world has become a new place. Geopolitical events and technological trends have brought these issues and the

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## New Staffing Services Practice Information Risk & Security

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newer issue of information risk to the forefront—to such an extent that we’re experiencing what I refer to as a ‘mini-Y2K.’ In the aftermath of September 11, and with ongoing terrorist threats, companies are spending to protect their information processes and systems worldwide.” The move toward wireless technology, which raises a host of security issues, is also a long-term factor in the growth of this sector. “You can steal the information from a wireless network by setting up a receiver across the street,” Deissig observes. “Companies have kicked the tires and decided wireless is too risky. Until the security issues are resolved, we won’t see much growth in the use of wireless for critical business applications.”

Compliance is another area of concentration for the practice. According to Plastik, new legislation, such as the Patriot Act and Sarbanes-Oxley, is increasing the complexity of reporting structures and making compliance more onerous. That means increased demand for candidates with specialized expertise.

Ayers’ Information Technology Consulting group is working in tandem with the new recruiting practice. “We also are seeing increased need in security, risk mitigation, and related infrastructure on the staff augmentation side and have begun to secure business in this field,” says Donna Held, Vice President of IT Consulting.

The Ayers team is recruiting at all levels of the sector, from senior management to support functions. “We’re getting calls for candidates who can manage information security and risk on a global basis,” says Plastik. Positions Ayers is being called on to fill range from managing director of global information security and risk to manager of security operations, and from network security, infrastructure, and firewall engineers to security and systems analysts. For more information, contact Harry Plastik. ■



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## IT Consulting Goes the Extra Mile



Asked what the Ayers Information Technology Consulting group does to make a difference for staff-augmentation clients, practice head

Donna Held replies: “We go the extra mile. That means taking the time to understand what the client really wants and needs and then following through with the optimal match to meet those needs—at the right price. Because we’re a small firm, the client gets our full attention and our commitment.

“It’s all about being responsive, managing costs, and delivering quality,” she continues. “At Ayers, we have a solid process in place for recruiting and vetting our candidates and consultants. It’s been honed by this difficult marketplace. Our reputation helps us to attract high-caliber people.”

According to Held, the Ayers IT Consulting Group continues to expand its presence in industries beyond financial services, including consumer products, insurance, security, and risk mitigation. It recently won a three-year contract from the New York City Transit Authority. The firm, which was one of only a handful selected from among 130 bidders, will be supplying consultants to fill technology positions in a variety of areas at up to six different levels. ■



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# WRAP-UP SEMINARS PUT IT ALL TOGETHER



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Shorter employer-funded outplacement programs and longer job searches mean an increasing number of candidates face the unnerving prospect of “going it alone” after the formal support structure is gone. *The Ayers Wrap-Up Seminar* is designed to provide the tools and confidence that enable candidates to carry on their job searches independently.

Ayers Consultant Damon Montal, who conducts *Wrap-Up Seminars* in the firm’s New York offices, uses the workshops to provide a methodology that enables the candidates to continue the search process on their own.

“During outplacement, candidates learn all the different pieces—research, networking, interviewing, salary negotiation, etc.—under the direction of an individual counselor,” he says. “Once they understand that a job search is not haphazard but a defined process with a beginning, middle, and end, it’s much easier for them to work within the process. But while the search process begins under the direction of a counselor, it’s our responsibility to make sure candidates can direct it on their own if need be, aided by continued access to our on-line research tools and some phone support from their counselors. We want to make the transition to a self-directed search much easier.”

He describes the sessions as two solid hours of strategy. “They aren’t pep rallies. That surprises some people. A job searcher has three roles: product, sales person, and sales manager. The seminar addresses the latter. It looks at how to create and work a marketing plan, infiltrate the right companies, and analyze the effectiveness of the search.”

Montal tailors a portion of each Wrap-Up to the specific issues and concerns participants raise, which means no two workshops are the same. “I had one recently that centered on career direction. Candidates were asking: How do I know I’m on the right path? My industry isn’t what it used to be. Should I be considering a career change?”

The workshops also provide direction on finding resources—libraries, colleges, government agencies—and support in the community. “It’s not good for people who

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## Successful Landings

This is the first article in an ongoing series that will highlight some of our recent outplacement success



stories. As these examples indicate, candidates who are diligent, effective in their networking, and, in many cases, creative in thinking about their careers are making gratifying headway, even in this challenging job market.

- An attorney, out of a major law firm, used the extensive network of contacts built through his professional and pro bono activities to transition to a top legal staff position with a nationally known civil rights organization.
- A magazine space sales/marketing professional used her highly transferable sales and marketing skills to recreate herself as Director of Development for a university.
- An insurance industry attorney used his legal, lobbying, and political skills, coupled with his knowledge of commercial real estate, to land a senior-appointed position in local government.
- A regulatory compliance professional, out of a securities/insurance firm, used networking almost exclusively to land at a similar firm—in minimal time and at increased annual compensation.
- A senior marketing executive purchased a franchise of a high-profile national educational program that provides personalized instruction to students from K-12.
- A long-service mailroom assistant with a learning disability found a job with the New Jersey Department of Rehabilitation, complete with ongoing assistance from one of the department’s job coaches. ■

# Consulting Seminars Help Candidates Pursue Creative Career Directions



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“In the current economic situation, creative career directions are assuming new importance,” says Ayers’ Senior Associate, Dr. Peter Olsinski. “It’s not about jobs anymore; it’s about carrying skills on to new opportunities. And a growing number of our candidates are looking at consulting as an option.” Olsinski conducts the firm’s

*Introduction to Consulting Seminars*, launched in December to address this interest.

The two-hour seminars—offered for candidates once a month in each of the Ayers offices—provide an overview of the pros and cons of consulting, the qualities and skills needed to be successful, and practical aspects of setting up a practice. Most participants are senior-level candidates in outplacement with Ayers who are interested in establishing full-time consultancies, including some former consultants who had “gone inside” as employees but are now looking to reestablish their independence.

Olsinski works one-on-one with candidates who, after taking the seminar, decide to strike out on their own. “Each person’s direction and approach are unique, so I address specific needs while counseling on business structure and office set-up—the nuts and bolts,” he says.

The seminars are also attracting smaller groups of candidates who are interested in consulting on a temporary or part-time basis to supplement their income or who are looking to fill specific technical slots for organizations on a contract basis.

“Contracting requires some of the same skills as consulting, so they’re able to pick up some tools and tips,” says Olsinski. He noted that group size has increased rapidly since the seminars’ inception. “Candidates view consulting as a means not only of getting back into the marketplace, but also of building morale and self-esteem.” ■

## FLEXIBLE OUTPLACEMENT PROGRAMS

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them to stretch their allotted contact with our consultants over a longer period of time,” he adds.

To provide post-program support, the firm has introduced two kinds of informal networking groups into its outplacement programs: structured dyads/triads of candidates with similar backgrounds or interests but different functionalities (to eliminate competition or conflict), and small self-directed support teams of candidates who receive training in specific job-search skills as a group. “The latter provide an efficient approach to training, and participants benefit from the synergy,” Ebert observes. “Of course, they also receive one-on-one counseling.”

Brought together by individual outplacement consultants, candidates within each group are encouraged to stay in contact and support each other after the structured program has ended. The new groups join the firm’s formal networking groups: the Peak Performance Team for senior executives and function-specific networking groups for international, financial, IT, HR, and general senior executives.

Additionally, Ayers has developed a team approach to counseling in which each candidate with a program of three months or longer is supported by a primary counselor along with one or two “teamed” counselors. This ensures ongoing support if the primary counselor is working with another candidate, at a client site, or otherwise unavailable when an important issue comes up. It also enables the candidate to get a broader perspective on most search matters as each counselor has individual areas of expertise, as well as different networks from which the candidate can benefit.

“We can afford to be more flexible in our approach than many of the larger firms,” Ebert observes. “Most are profit-centers of big parent companies, which means making two margins. Career Partners International, of which Ayers is a co-owner, is comparable in size to the bigger outplacement operations, but it comprises regional firms. There’s only a single margin, which allows us to think in a different way.

“We all feel the same pressure from the marketplace, but organizations that have to make a double margin can’t respond on the pricing side,” he continues. “So they are engaging in more cost cutting than we are at a time when they’re taking on higher candidate loads. That forces them to take a more traditional, standardized approach, while we’re in a position to provide individualized programs and a higher level of service.” ■



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## Enhanced Ayers Website Offers New Features, Easier Navigation

If you've visited our Website lately, you probably noticed some differences. In addition to sporting a clean new look, the site is easier to navigate, more interactive, and has a number of new features.



Among the enhancements are the following:

- drop-down menus on a horizontal navigational bar for quicker access to different pages
- a new job search feature located on our IT Staffing Service pages
- a new section—"The OEC Consultant's Corner"—highlighting the latest trends and developments in organizational effectiveness
- a direct hyperlink to past and current issues of the *Ayers Report* e-newsletter

The site continues to provide clients with online reporting for outplacement candidates, access to Ayers white papers—including the new Retention White Paper—and updated news and information about the firm. Candidates have access to the Internet Resource Center and Online Career Center, as before.

If you haven't already done so, check out the changes at [www.ayers.com](http://www.ayers.com). ■

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## WRAP-UP SEMINARS PUT IT ALL TOGETHER

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are depressed, upset, or anxious about their situations to be alone. So we talk about networking as a means of both furthering the search and countering isolation. We all belong to different communities—religious, social, and political groups; professional or industry associations; and alumni organizations, to name just a few—that can provide valuable networking opportunities and support structures.”

“Damon is responsible for taking this important component of our outplacement programs to a new level,” says Terry Ebert, Managing Director of Career Transition Services. Originally developed in Ayers’ Princeton office, the seminars are now offered monthly in each office to all candidates as they near the end of their formal residential program. “We truly care about our candidates, both when they’re here and after they leave us,” says Montal. ■

## PRESIDENT’S LETTER

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Unless you are the firm’s head of HR, you most likely have a responsibility to multiple leaders. Because HR, ideally, partners with line management, one responsibility is probably to someone in senior line management—someone looking for daily, bottom-line results from everyone. The other clearly falls within your HR organization. You need to know how much power and influence the HR leadership really has. Are they calling the shots or are decisions dictated by management elsewhere in the organization? What does your leadership want the HR practice to look like? Can you align yourself with this direction and deal with the political issues or is it time to find a more meaningful alternative?

If you want to stay, conventional wisdom suggests you should align yourself with the doers—the senior team members who are drawing the road maps to get the firm through tough times. Make it your business to have a finger on the pulse of what drives the company’s business: Where is it today? Where will it be tomorrow? At the same time, you need to become a historian. In most companies, the pendulum swings in a repetitive pattern. If you keep track of where it’s heading at all times and know the pattern, it’s hard to be surprised when the directional change occurs.

If consolidation and financial cutbacks are the order of the day, you, as a human resources professional, should be looking at your world with an eye toward gaining a clear understanding of what can and what should not be sacrificed in the short term to provide for long-term corporate strengthening, whether you should be willing to make a stand on this, and, if so, when and where?

A key issue here is that of integrity. When senior line management issues restructuring mandates, it falls to the human resources professional to deal with the soft side of the practice, and to do it in a way that keeps that workforce intact and functioning. It’s about understanding and managing pain. But what happens when the cuts go from fat, to muscle, to bone and then HR itself becomes the target? What will be left to rebuild? How will line management be able to retain, or regain, the trust of its HR partners? Will it come to pass that some of our most talented and dedicated human resources professionals will decide to look outside the function for their next career step?

I welcome your thoughts on the provocative questions above and what you are doing to take care of yourself. You can contact me at [bill.ayers@ayers.com](mailto:bill.ayers@ayers.com). ■

When someone says to me, “This is the fourth person we’ve had in this job in six years; I hope he can make a go of it,” I respond, “It’s not likely.” Why? There is clearly a systemic performance failure: a problem with the position and the system around it. Instead of looking to the individual, you need to look to the staffing and talent-management processes—including succession planning.

Faced with constrained resources, many companies have trouble justifying an investment in talent management or succession planning beyond the traditional use for top executives and high-potential individuals. Following are all-too-common, real-world examples of systemic problems where succession planning becomes an urgent need.

**Situation #1:** *Business growth dilutes experience in key positions.*

**Example:** Most organizations regard growth as a good thing. What they may fail to recognize is that if you have an informal talent-development system—time and grade—growth brings dilution. Such was the case for a company that targeted aggressive expansion based on several years of sales growth. If it continued to add sales staff by entry-level hiring and promoting from within, in two years it would find itself with sales managers that had only three years of experience. Previously, sales managers were required to have 12 years of experience, because the market placed a high value on their ability to deal with clients’ business issues.

If you are filling the same position with less experienced people, they obviously do not have the same capability for making business judgments. The rate of change is no longer slow enough for people who come in at the bottom to assimilate before reaching upper-middle management. When a company fails to recognize that requirements in key positions are changing—whether due to internal change, such as rapid growth, or alterations in the business environment—it puts itself at risk.

**Situation #2:** *A key position is suddenly no longer easy to staff because the number of available positions has increased or the talent pool has shrunk.*

**Example:** As a U.S.-based multinational increased its global presence, it began having difficulty finding sufficient talent to go overseas as country managers. It experienced relatively high rejection rates for these critical senior jobs, as well as collateral damage: people were coming back early, experiencing family problems while abroad, etc.

When it had only a few of these positions, the company could “troll” for the people who wanted them. That pool was exhausted.

The immediate solution was to aggressively rotate people at the levels prior to candidacy for country manager between U.S. and overseas assignments. The longer-term answer was putting processes in place to identify, prepare, transition, and support appropriate candidates.

**Situation #3:** *An urgent demographic issue arises.*

**Example:** This example is closest to the traditional application of succession planning. In a typical scenario, a board of directors suddenly recognizes that a significant number of senior executives will reach retirement age in the next five years and asks, “Where’s our bench strength?” This situation occurs because the corporate focus has been elsewhere: winning business, lower-level staffing, etc. Replacements for top positions are too often dealt with on an emergency staffing basis when an unanticipated exit occurs. At this point, the company, suddenly realizing it should never have allowed itself to be in this kind of crisis, launches a flurry of succession-planning activities.

**The way to prevent systemic problems from recurring is to have renewable solutions in place.** Successful organizations optimize their succession planning by balancing the individual perspective (labor pools, pipelines, competencies) with the position perspective (changing requirements, the position’s role in the business, and the system around it). That’s a very different perspective.

Selection and development tend to be individually oriented; systemic structure tends to be ignored. You may need to rebalance, paying more attention to the position, structure, and systemic problems that cause failure. In times of change, you need to continuously monitor actual circumstances—including the talent supply and demand sides—and adjust position requirements and development as needed. ■



*Karen Searles Brethower is an Ayers Group executive coach and consultant with extensive experience in talent management and succession planning. She has worked with organizations in a variety of industries experiencing radical change.*

# CREDENTIALS VS. CERTIFICATION: The Ayers Group Difference in Executive Coaching

“I began my executive coaching career more than 20 years ago—long before it had a label,” says Joan Caruso, Managing Director of Organizational Effectiveness Consulting at The Ayers Group. “It’s exciting that people have come to understand what executive coaching is about. At the same time, it’s disappointing that the barriers to entry have become so low almost anyone can qualify as a coach.

“Certifying organizations are proliferating,” she continues. “My research shows that, in almost all cases, anyone who pays and completes the programs they offer is certified as a coach—regardless of personal suitability to fulfill the functions required of an executive coach.”

The Ayers Group has rigid standards for its executive coaches. “We use criteria that, to me, are far more important than the process that makes someone a *certified* executive coach today,” Caruso says. “We’re not interested in anyone learning how to coach at our clients’ expense.” To be part of the firm’s OEC practice, a coach must have all of the following:

- an advanced degree in organizational development or behavior, or an MBA with a concentration in organizational behavior
- corporate experience in an OD capacity
- a demonstrated track record as an executive coach

The firm’s high standards have won it a reputation for excellence in the marketplace. “Clients find our

approach refreshing, and it really gives us a competitive advantage,” Caruso observes. “We’ve worked with companies that have waived their rigorous internal screening processes in recognition of how demanding we are in vetting coaches. We have a client that had been working with a stable of providers but within three months of establishing our relationship began entrusting us with all of its new executive coaching assignments—again, because



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*“One of the many things that impresses me about the coaches we are using from The Ayers Group is that they are seasoned professionals with years of corporate HR/OD experience. Understanding the business context and systemic nature of leadership issues is paramount to a successful coaching engagement at our organization.”*

HR/OD Executive, Risk Management & Professional Services Firm

we demonstrated such high standards.”

Caruso points out that another key differentiator is the *Chinese Wall* Ayers maintains between its Career Transition and OEC practices.

Although many of the firm’s outplacement counselors readily meet

the executive coaching criteria, they are not permitted to move between the practices. “It’s important, from the client perspective, that we not send mixed signals,” Caruso explains. “Being coached by someone known to the client organization as an outplacement counselor may be viewed as a signal that the coachee is only a step from dismissal. As an executive coach, you want to be welcomed and regarded as someone who can help people achieve growth and excellence, not ease them into outplacement. Other outplacement firms that have coaching practices tend to commingle the two practices, but we’re as rigorous in maintaining a separation of the practices as we are in maintaining our standards.” ■



*At The Ayers Group, our thoughts  
are with our troops overseas and  
their families here at home.*

