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REGIONAL SPOTLIGHT

Scant thanks for a career

By Linda George

Just when I finally memorized Dad's title at work, he gets laid off," our daughter joked recently. This was among the most minor consequences of his layoff, which revealed disturbing trends in the relationship between employers and employees in our society.

For nearly three decades, since shortly before our daughter was born, my husband worked in information technology for an international engineering company. The title on his business card consisted of five big, interchangeable words.

He spent his workdays troubleshooting computer problems while sitting in a tiny cubicle, staring at a screen. He usually left home before dawn and returned after dark, occasionally working past midnight as if still in college. "Urgent" work calls often interrupted our family time.

Due to hard work and a little luck, he survived eight corporate mergers and innumerable reorganizations. But on May Day this year, two months shy of his 60th birthday, the streak ended.

The final blow appeared to have been planned for a few years. My husband first forecasted his downfall after a nebulous evaluation — his first negative one. Sensing trouble, we started taking precautions, paying off debt, buying less, and avoiding extended vacations.

To add insult to injury, my husband was home recovering from a concussion in a cycling accident when the phone call came. It began with a company director reading the same scripted termination letter many other employees would hear that day. Then a human-resources representative told my husband that his corporate cellphone, an appendage that had seemed permanently attached to his belt, would be cut off at 4 p.m. that

day.

Later that day, the doctor cleared my husband to resume normal activities, including driving. His first task on a mounting to-do list: get a new cellphone. Three days later, he made the hour-plus commute to Princeton for the last time to complete his exit interview. On that farewell Friday, with a security escort, my husband surrendered his badge, phone, and computer. When he returned home, he tried to reassure me: "This is what business is like today."

When his severance package arrived a few days later, he noted the clause saying that he must waive his rights to sue for age discrimination to get severance. Even though it felt like hush money, he signed off on it. When he requested recommendation letters from his managers, HR claimed such letters are against company policy.

Things certainly have changed in a generation. In the late '70s, I attended a dinner for my father-in-law's retirement after 30 years. His colleagues made speeches and joked about his three-piece suits. They also handed him the gold watch that once represented the symbiotic relationship between employer and employee.

Our son and daughter will never hear speeches like those. The only expressions of mutual obligation will be a dwindling list of benefits in a company handbook.

My husband recently said he's glad his father isn't alive to see what's become of American labor. Our politicians decry our slippage in math and science skills, but not the disappearance of ethics and human commitment in the workplace. Disposability has supplanted sustainability in our work and in our lives.

Our daughter no longer has to memorize her father's title. "Unemployed" is easy enough to remember.

Linda George lives in Elkins Park.