

4 strategies for when you're going to lose your job but you don't know when

01-20-2026 [LEADERSHIP](#)

Losing a job is painful. Not knowing when it'll happen, is even worse. An executive coach lays out strategies for staying grounded.



BY [Ellie Rich-Poole](#)

Most of us know that job loss is [emotionally difficult](#), but what's less talked about is the experience of knowing you will be terminated without knowing when. This process can be drawn out and draining—a form of [anticipatory grief](#)—an emotional response to a loss *before* it occurs. Often experienced by the loved ones of terminally ill patients, a version applies in the workplace when job loss is on the horizon. In today's volatile landscape, this kind of professional uncertainty is increasingly common, prompting leaders—in limbo due to mergers, acquisitions, funding losses, or downsizing—to feel a loss of self-identity, irritability and helplessness at not being in control.

As an [executive career coach](#) and former headhunter, I have worked with dozens of leaders facing these circumstances. Here are four practical strategies to help you stay grounded, proactive, and resilient during uncertain times.

1. Plan for the future (even when you don't feel ready)

It's tempting to wait for clarity on your situation before taking action. But even during the fog of ambiguity, creating time for [thinking](#) is beneficial. One of my clients, Matt, was a director at a global finance firm that was being acquired, creating duplicate functions. He agreed to stay on

to lead the reorganization and focused all his time on the business priorities, not his own. He was so dedicated he didn't start planning for his future until his boss was let go and reality hit home that it could be him at any moment.

Give yourself the gift of forward planning by scheduling time to reflect on what is important to you in your work and life both in the short and longer term. Ask yourself a series of questions to determine what you want your ideal future to look like and steps to move you towards it:

- Where do I see myself in 10 years? Be as specific as you can about what you would love to do, not just what you *could* do. You may even consider creating a [career vision board](#) for your future using images and statements.
- With that vision in mind, what experience do I want to gain in my next organization? For instance, if you aspire to be a nonexecutive director long term, you may wish to strengthen your committee experience in the roles you hold between now and then.
- What are my non-negotiable and desirable criteria in my next role? For example, you might want to be on the same time zone as corporate HQ but are flexible about the business size. Or increasing your compensation may be non-negotiable, but you would be willing to travel more.

2. Refocus on what you need to thrive in the short term

Take an honest look at your role and what you want to prioritize. One equity partner I worked with in consulting, Claire, knew the firm would be sold at some stage but the date was ambiguous. As the time stretched on, she became disengaged and frustrated, especially in meetings which were becoming increasingly political. She was ready for a change but was tied into the business financially. She realised she'd moved away from the work where she most excelled.

Ask yourself: What activities energize you at work? What activities drain you? For example, perhaps you thrive on being client facing, selling the services of the business, but you find writing the proposal document dull. Perhaps you love leading teams but find large leadership meetings sap your energy. This will help you identify your [strengths](#). The more you use them the happier, more [energized](#) and resilient you will feel.

Claire negotiated changes to her role that protected her future package whilst moving into a client practice she excelled in. She took on more mentoring work internally, negotiated greater flexibility, and relinquished elements she no longer enjoyed such as the board meetings.

While many leaders would avoid making waves, when the timeline is unknown, it's worth a discussion with your line manager about ways to do more of the activities you thrive on, build experiences you want to gain, and make your remaining time more meaningful. You may be there longer than you think and it's beneficial to [exit on a high](#).

3. Reconnect with your external network

When I surveyed more than 100 leaders for a forthcoming research project, the vast majority (nearly 90%) said they would like to network more, yet only a handful proactively scheduled time for it. They regarded it as important—but never urgent—so consistently let their regular responsibilities take priority.

Your wider [network](#) is an important source of executive leadership positions. Don't wait until you exit and are job hunting, instead [reach out now](#). Begin with genuine connections you haven't spoken to in a while—your [weak ties](#). Be discreet, but where you can, open up and seek support. If it's been some time since you were last in touch, acknowledge this, and offer support in return.

A simple message might look like this:

Hi [Name], I hope you are well. I've been thinking back to our conversations at [Company/Project] and I always valued your insights. I'd welcome your perspective on a work challenge I am navigating. Would you be open to a short coffee or video call soon? Let me know how I can support you in return.

4. Expect and respect your emotions

When significant change is coming in your work, it is normal to feel a rollercoaster of emotions—worry, sadness, resentment. Serena Williams shared the emotional difficulty of approaching the end of a long-term role, describing transitioning from professional tennis as [painful](#).

[Emotions](#) are interpretations of your feelings and it helps to understand them. Instead of ignoring or suppressing them, pay attention to them and explore what they are telling you. For instance, the sadness you are feeling may, more specifically, be guilt about letting your family down or disappointment that you didn't achieve everything you hoped for in the role.

Reflective writing has been linked to improved mental well-being and laid off professionals being more quickly [rehired](#). Get a notebook, set a timer and let your thoughts flow freely. The [Feelings Wheel](#)—a tool that lists 114 emotions—can help you recognize and articulate what you're experiencing.

You may not be able to control the situation of your impending job loss, but you can control how you respond. Invest time in yourself and your future plans. Harness your professional relationships and manage your emotions. With the right mindset and actions, this unplanned change could serve as a catalyst to a positive career step.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ellie Rich-Poole is an [Executive Career Development Coach](#). A LinkedIn Top Voice for Careers, she works with organisations to retain and develop their senior leaders through Executive Coaching, Workshops and Speaking. Based in London, she has lived and worked in Germany, Chile and Singapore, and partners organisations globally. She was previously a Headhunter of HR leaders for over a decade and previously worked in retail HR. You can download her free [LinkedIn Guide here](#) to help you proactively manage your professional brand. You can also connect with her on [LinkedIn](#).