Julie Swaner’s specialty is not only helping unemployed people find jobs, but also keeping them focused and their spirits up. The challenge quotient to Swaner’s job has risen dramatically over the past year or so, no thanks to the economic upheaval experienced throughout the country and around the globe beginning in late 2008. While Utah is in better shape than most other states—at this writing, unemployment nationwide is hovering around 10 percent, while in Utah it’s pegged at 7 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics—the jobless numbers are high enough to keep her hopping. Continuum asked Swaner to provide an update on how her office has been handling the rush.

As manager of Alumni Career Services (ACS), you have no doubt seen an increase in alumni coming to you for help in finding a job due to the economic downturn. How has this affected your workload?

The huge increase [in jobless numbers] started around October 2008 and continued through August 2009. The good news is that the largest proportion of those who were laid off in the early round have since found employment. However, some individuals have been out of work for a year or more because their particular industry was especially hard hit. Yes, my workload has increased substantially over the past year and a half.

Last fall, you reinstated ACS’s Job Club. Could you explain what that’s about and how it helps job seekers?

Job Club is a support group for any job seeker in the valley (preferably those with a college degree)—not just University of Utah alumni, which make up the majority, but also alums from other Utah schools such as BYU and Utah State, and some from out of state. Job Club offers up-to-date, cutting-edge information about how to conduct a successful job search. Speakers are brought in to offer advice in their respective areas of expertise. Looking for a job can be a lonely, isolating process, and Job Club addresses that problem by connecting people to others in the same situation. Many within the group have generated strong supportive relationships that have helped them turn their situation around more quickly. Job Club meets every Friday afternoon in Career Services and is free.

What do you say to people who have been out of work for a while to help keep their spirits up?

Job seekers really should consider joining a support group—one such as Job Club. A supportive environment helps them understand that, in most cases, the situation is structural, not personal. It is imperative that job seekers remain positive and hold an “attitude of gratitude.” Negativity can undermine the job seeker’s efforts and state of mind, and recruiters sense that negativity in a heartbeat. Also, activity is critical to keeping those endorphins flowing, and one way of doing that is by volunteering. Donating your time to a cause that is heartfelt may bring a positive sense of self by knowing that you are giving back to the community. A side benefit is that the job seeker remains visible and has a presence in the public domain, as well as the opportunity to network.

What would you say are the most important things a job seeker can do to improve his or her chances of landing a job?

A job seeker must communicate, in stories and words, that he or she is a problem-solver. The message must be targeted, focused, and constructed for each interview. This means that job seekers must understand their unique ‘brand’—that is, where can they add value to a particular organization and how they can positively impact the employer’s
bottom line. They should be aware of what is unique about their skills, abilities, and performance. Too often people fail at this. These are the kinds of issues and concerns that Job Club addresses.

I should mention that, even if a person is not jobless, such skills are useful for anyone who wants to improve their employment situation.

For more information about the programs offered by Alumni Career Services, contact Julie Swaner at (801) 585-5036 or jswaner@sa.utah.edu or visit www.alumni.utah.edu/career.

"With Julie's great coaching, I landed on my feet (after closing down Snow Lion Expeditions, the company he founded and operated for 17+ years), and I give her total credit for supporting my unconventional path. Rather than responding to 'help wanted' ads, I targeted the solar industry and the largest companies in Colorado that might wish to expand their market footprint. Our plan paid off. On June 1st, I joined Bella Energy as their Utah business development director."

—Ron Barness BS’81