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Enjoy life a little while you look for a job

By Niall McKay

WIRED ON FRIDAY: Recession Club is a sort of post-dotcom social club cum support group, which organises activities for Silicon Valley's newly unemployed

An hour from Silicon Valley a group of strangers gather in a parking lot in Half Moon Bay. There you can see through a tunnel of cypress trees to the Pacific Ocean where the sun twinkles on the waves. It's a perfect day for a picnic.

"Are you with Recession Camp?" someone asked. They went through the introductions - stating their names and jokingly referring to the companies from which they had been fired. I had to own up to being a journalist.

To me the gathering felt like some kind of weird AA meeting, which is not too far from the truth. I was attending the fourth gathering of Recession Club - a sort of post-dotcom social club cum support group for Silicon Valley's newly unemployed. The group organises picnics, hikes, trips to baseball games, afternoon movies and golfing as a way of relieving the stress of unemployment.

I first heard of the group the night before, when a little man pushed a card into my hand and disappeared into the crowd. "Recession Camp," it read, "will keep you healthy, happy and social while you look for your next job."

We slowly hiked up the hill to a vista point. Somebody spread out a couple of rugs, another poured coffee, another offered sandwiches, and yet another set up the

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ghetto blaster. Their choice of music was U2's *It's a Beautiful Day*.

Silicon Valley's unemployed are, as one would expect, more organised about being unemployed than their counterparts elsewhere. For example, Recession Club's website, www.recessionclub.com, is a relatively complex affair offering video clips, a place to post a curriculum vitae and an online chat group. In short, it would have cost tens of thousands of dollars to create during the height of the dotcom revolution.

Everyone sat down to a good picnic. They exchanged horror stories about their former companies. One girl, who was still working, had taken the afternoon off because her firm had told everybody, except the management team, that they had to either leave the firm or be paid the minimum wage, which is just \$5.15 (€5.76) per hour. "Ah!" chimed in a recently laid off lawyer. "That's because if you leave you are not entitled to a severance package."

It's the dirty little tricks like these that made the high-tech meltdown here all the more hurtful to these people. Many of them had put their hearts and souls into their jobs, working between 50 and 80 hours per week. Many left established jobs to be part of what, at the time, seemed like the most important event since the Industrial Revolution. Of course, everybody also thought they were going to get rich.

"That's why our motto is 'work on the other part of your life'," said Recession Club's camp counsellor Mr Andrew Brenner, a lawyer and co-founder of a wireless software company that went to the wall last summer. He got the idea for Recession Club one afternoon during the summer when he met his friend Mr Michael Feldman, the former chief executive of a software company, for a matinee.

"There's only so much time each day that you can look for a job," he said. "So the rest of the time you should have some fun."

Some people were so passionate about their work that many of them forgot how to have fun, he said.

But not all the picnic talk was negative. There was also some reminiscing about the heady days of high-tech spending. One guy recounted the time when a company decided to find a new name and, rather than hiring a naming company as was the convention at that time, they held an online competition.

"They threw a huge party on Treasure Island [in San Francisco bay]," he said. "There were about 600 people

and the winner got to drive a Porsche Boxter home."

Indeed, many of the campers are enjoying their new-found freedom. Those with a little cash stashed away, like Mr Feldman, took time to write a movie script or travelled around the world for a while.

"I can't say that I am that upset about being laid off," admits Maria Starke, a former business manager with Urban Box Office. "We were spending about \$1 million a week and we were making nothing, so it didn't take a genius to work out that it was not going to last forever," she says.

"But what was a surprise was how quickly the economy turned. I thought getting another job would be a great deal easier. In fact, I have never been unemployed before."

So is she worried? "Not really. I can last about a year on my savings."

In the meantime, what's the harm in enjoying life a little?

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