

I am a storyteller – so if you feel like hearing my full story – related to Oregon Unemployment- feel free to read this full letter. If you want the eagle eye view and most pressing of the moment information – follow the words in **bold Orange**.

I am at my absolute wit's end. I should be preparing for a big presentation I have on Thursday so that I can get this contract to get my business back on my feet; Isn't that where my focus should be? Instead I have been exasperated by the Oregon Unemployment Department mess and maze and instead am writing to you.

I started (very successfully) **my own** coaching and consulting **business in September of 2019, leaving behind a full-time position.** I greatly enjoyed my work with Head Start programs, schools, and agencies focusing on policy and work with young children and their families. Unfortunately, **the Pandemic threw that work** and those programs **into disarray and I was very grateful that programs, like unemployment, were adapted to lessen that negative impact.**

I knew that the Unemployment Department was overloaded – I couldn't imagine the volume and influx and understood that the system for self-employed folks wasn't ready.

In order to avoid duplicated efforts on their part and mine, **I waited** respectfully and patiently (checking back frequently) **to apply for my benefits until the PUA program was online.** Everything I read made it clear that as a sole-proprietor I would be part of that group.

I was surprised that after all that wait it was only a PDF you submitted, but I was grateful they were ready. I was there the first day getting forms, requesting secure links to upload, and asking questions. Asking questions that never got answered. I knew that the wrong answer could likely result in more delays and I didn't want to guess. **The form was confusing and the tutorials didn't dive deeper and explain the nuances.** Yes, I was supposed to write every penny I received (inaccurately) as salary (to count against that \$205 base) – but did they understand that the check I got on March 2nd might be for work done in January? Was this the most accurate way to collect information? Did they want my billable hours or the many hours I was still putting into my business? Would writing 40 hours kick me out for a full week worked? How were they balancing billable hours and when I was paid? I realized I wouldn't be getting a response to my questions (I did get one response- it just gave a link and never answered the other questions and the following email was never answered).

I decided to use my best guesses and was thrilled to see that by then they had an electronic system so the PDF form was no longer the only option (an electronic form had to be faster right?) – however, the electronic form only let you go back one week-which was no help, since by this time I was needing to file for many weeks prior. **I also needed to submit my Schedule C** to show my higher wages. I also realized that this would allow me to provide both the “billable hours” and hours worked; **so I prepared a packet and mailed it all in.**

Then I waited. Patiently, full of hope, I waited.

I was very excited when I learned of the magic phone number that linked to PUA. A phone number directly to folks who knew how to answer my questions and that would be handling my claim was amazing! Especially since I mailed it in- I had no way of checking anything online and a call was my only option.

My first attempt at calling resulted in the recording (which thankfully I could find comical) that “due to unforeseen circumstances” the number was unavailable. I double checked the number and wrote it off as being after hours and a glitch. **Fortunately, after redialing 21 times this afternoon I finally got through. I was placed on hold** for a reasonable amount of time **before speaking to Brenda, who was delightful.**

Unfortunately, what Brenda had to tell me was NOT delightful.

I am ineligible for PUA.

Why? Because 9 months ago (as has been the case for most of my career) **I had a full-time job.** So, all this waiting – all of the documents I filled out – **everything I sent in is null and void and I HAVE TO START ALL OVER AGAIN. This is asinine.** I have a contract I need to be focused on securing so that I have income for the next four months; I need to be past all of this and working on moving forward. I am owed thousands of dollars at this point – it has literally been months – I already jumped through all the hoops and now – NOW I go back to square one??

She did answer my questions about hours and clarified that I only report payment when I receive payments -so at least I learned that much. I do also want to reiterate that Brenda was delightful and efficient and unfortunately could not help me as I was not in her system (but I was grateful she could at least tell me that much and why).

I logged back on to the State of Oregon unemployment system and started through the LONG tedious process of re-entering everything. It was non-sensical when applied to my situation. As I answered questions, I was having to think of the correct answer... I am NOT looking for a full-time job – I have a successful consulting business that I am trying to take care of- I have a huge contract on the horizon- these questions don't make sense. What date did I leave my job? I haven't.

Which ones of my answers are going to get me kicked out and sent into a ridiculous appeal process because this unemployment process doesn't apply? What will my old employer say when they come knocking on their door – I quit NINE months ago – they have nothing to do with my claim. I went through the gauntlet and filled out the info for working for myself answering questions about how much it would cost if I stopped working for myself- putting my current hourly billing rates... Then (I blame it on fatigue) when it asked if I had another job in the last 18 months I accidentally hit "no" – I tried the back button – multiple times – I knew the other job was the only reason I was on this other system. It wouldn't let me go back. When I tried to refresh – it kicked me all the way out.

So, I am stepping away. My head hurts and I am infuriated over how much energy this has taken over the multiple times I have dealt with it. I almost envy my partner who was simply temporarily laid off. He had time to fill it out, he had to wait a bit; but he got his checks months before I did. I have been scrambling, pivoting, rebuilding, networking, keeping my business alive; and repeatedly trying to work with this system. I know others have been far more frustrated and put far more energy into getting results than I have, but I am quickly joining their ranks.

How I am supposed to be in the "standard" system when it doesn't apply to me? I am self-employed – I run a business. I can list 5 activities a week I do to build my business, five ways I am pivoting and networking and figuring things out, but I am not applying for five jobs a week. Even when I tried to write that I worked 3 (billable) hours last week and got paid \$0 – it wouldn't let me go to the next screen because that doesn't make sense in normal unemployment speak.

I was also encouraged to share this information with you – encouraged that YOU care about this and that by giving you this information perhaps this system will eventually start to work better. I sincerely hope that is the case.

Thank you for listening.

Sincerely,

Shawna Rodrigues