

Secrets to Finding a Job in a Tough Market

Ignore those who say to keep your resume short. Don't state your individual goals. Job search specialists Challenger, Gray & Christmas have found that following "the conventional wisdom" may not yield the best results.

By John Challenger, CEO, Challenger, Gray and Christmas

There are several elements to finding a job during a "jobless recovery." These include the resume, building and using contacts, obtaining interviews, how you conduct yourself during an interview, and follow-up.

The Resume

Most job seekers put too much emphasis on the resume, believing that a good resume will, by itself, be enough to land a job. However, a resume alone will not get you a job. It may not even open any doors. In fact, most employers use resumes to eliminate candidates for a job.

The resume should provide enough information to interest the employer in interviewing you. While it is no substitute for an interview, your resume should be prepared in such a manner that it will stand on its own and provide enough information about you to enable an employer to make an intelligent evaluation.

- *Remember, all candidates being considered look alike.* Your resume needs to present your accomplishments and capabilities in a way that makes you stand out over the competition and catches the employer's attention.
- *Ignore those who say a resume should be no more than a page.* It is true that employers are busy people and are bombarded with hundreds of resumes. Because of this, your resume should be prepared with ease of reading in mind and should provide details that can be easily perceived by the reader.

However, that does not mean keeping your resume to one page if you have a lot more to tell the employer about yourself. You want to communicate all of your accomplishments and why you are qualified for a job. Neither your interests nor the employer's are served by the typically short resume, because it does not provide enough information for the employer to make a fair hiring decision.

- *Do not state individual goals or career objectives.* If you do, the prospective employer is likely to get the impression that you are more interested in yourself than you are in the company. That can be reason enough to remove you from consideration for the job, even before a full evaluation of your credentials takes place.

- *Be specific, avoid vague statements.* Include a description of your accomplishments for each employer, setting them out in statements easily read. Include as many facts and figures as necessary to substantiate achievements. It is important that everything included is factual.

- *Do not send your resume to employers.* Most people assume the way to get a job is to comb through the help wanted ads and online job sites and send resumes to companies. However, the most successful strategy is to talk face-to-face with employers to learn about job opportunities.

Talking to the employer first is always more advantageous than sending your resume blindly. You do not know what the employer is looking for and most times your resume will screen you out of the process. You have a much better chance of screening yourself in by talking to the employer and crafting your verbal “resume” to highlight accomplishments that are most relevant to the particular interviewer’s needs.

Building and Using Contacts

- *It is not what you know, it is who you know.* This adage is true to some extent. In the case of finding a job, the more appropriate wording would be, First, it is who you know, then it is what you know. Very few people find employment solely by knowing the right people. The right people can help you get in the door, but it is still proving to the employer that your skills, experience, intelligence, etc. match the company’s needs.

- *Advertise your job loss.* If knowing the right people helps to get your foot in the door, then it is essential that the right people know you are seeking a job.

- *An unfortunate obstacle to job search success is pride.* Too often people are embarrassed to tell anyone about their job loss, but this secrecy will not provide any job leads.

The minute you lose your job or decide you want to change jobs, start telling everyone you know that you are looking. Begin with friends, family and neighbors. Talk to former co-workers and even casual business acquaintances you may have dealt with in your position. Share your plight with people at your house of worship. You can also join new social groups, professional associations and volunteer organizations to expand your circle of potential contacts.

More Ways to Generate Contacts

- *Create your own personal job fair.* By creating a social event such as a cookout and inviting people you do not usually see socially and who you know hold managerial positions, you can develop leads and opportunities. You learn about jobs by talking to people. In a relaxed social atmosphere, you can meet the most important job search requirement, making yourself liked, and gain valuable rapport with prospective employers.

- *Pursue leads through your working spouse.* The benefits of a working spouse in providing job leads through professional and social contacts have been well documented. If your spouse has a job where couples are invited to social events, you should always attend. New vistas may open up as a result.
- *Accept plenty of invitations.* Go to as many weddings, dinners, and parties as you can. These get-togethers offer you a marvelous chance to set up appointments later in the week where you can really sit down and talk.
- *Check your local chamber of commerce.* Here, files of contacts in a wide range of industries exist. Industry directories and service clubs also are good sources.
- *Check the business section of your newspaper.* The newspaper carries announcements of plant expansions, management changes, sales campaigns, product introductions, and other facts that can suggest where to inquire about jobs in your area of expertise.

Obtaining Interviews

Once you have created a list of contacts and job leads, the next step is to begin making phone calls to arrange interviews. In each call, your goal is to contact an “action person,” someone who can see you and then offer you a job.

- *Contact the hiring authority, not HR.* The Human Resources department rarely makes the final hiring decision, unless the job opening is in that department. The heads of the various departments determine when new people are needed, so it is critical to get their names. If you want to work in sales, then get the name of the head of sales.

The best way to obtain a manager’s name is simply by calling the company. (Avoid telling the switchboard the call is about a job or else face transfer to Human Resources).

- *Seek interviews when others are not.* Oftentimes, the key to obtaining an interview is having the flexibility to fit into the interviewer’s busy schedule. Since you are meeting with a manager, not human resources, chances are the person is very busy with several projects in addition to hiring someone. Let the interviewer know that you are willing to meet before or after hours, on the weekends or at a location other than the office.
- *Do not take a holiday from interviewing.* With the Thanksgiving-Christmas-New Year’s holiday period approaching, many job seekers take a vacation from the job search, figuring that no one is hiring. This is a mistake on their part, but one that can be used to the diligent job seeker’s advantage.

The fact is, employers are hiring all the time. If there is a need for workers, then it does not matter if it is the week of Christmas. And, while it is true that some of those you wish to interview with may be on vacation, there are going to be many others who are working throughout the holidays.

Job seekers who keep up their interviewing schedule during the holidays, or even try to increase their activity, will likely be rewarded with several interviews.

- *Be aggressive and unconventional.* Some job seekers are afraid to employ more aggressive or unconventional techniques to obtain interviews. However, these are often the methods that stand out in an interviewer's mind and can lead to the appointment.
- *E-mail your way into an interview.* Check the company web site or call the main switchboard to find the e-mail address of the person managing the area in which you want to work. Send a brief but persuasive e-mail on why he or she should meet you face-to-face. Do not send a resume. Rather, explain in the message what you have to offer and why you are qualified for a position with the company.
- *Waiting it out.* Arrive at the company you would like to work for as the office is opening. Ask to see the person you want to work for without an appointment, after confirming that he or she will be in. Tell the secretary that you are willing to wait until the manager has a few free minutes. Even if it takes all day, it will be worth it if that is where you want to work and the manager reasons, "If you waited this long, I will give you ten minutes."
- *The "dawn patrol."* In today's competitive global economy, executives often arrive at work early and stay late. Call the company switchboard operator for the night number of the person you want to meet. Try to reach the executive early, before a secretary is there to screen your call. You may find a receptive executive willing to meet with you early the next day or after office hours.
- *The pen is mightier...* Write a "personal and confidential" letter to the person you want to work for, praising his/her secretary for the outstanding job he or she was doing screening calls so the executive could concentrate on work. Close the letter with a request for a job interview. Do not be surprised if the next time you call, you find a friendlier tone to the secretary's voice and the news that you have an appointment the next day.
- *Score one for Alexander G. Bell.* Use your cell phone — a tool that every job seeker should have — to call from outside the building where your prime prospect is located. Call the person you want to see and explain that you are downstairs and would really appreciate a few minutes of his or her time. Often times, executives are willing to take a few minutes after hours to meet. In one example, this approach won the candidate a "few minutes," which then turned into a long conversation and, very unexpectedly, an offer of a job!

Interviewing

A job seeker has to be qualified in order to get the job but there will always be several other people who are equally qualified as far as the interviewer is concerned. In the end, you will be hired because the interviewer personally likes you the best, not necessarily because you are the most qualified in the field of candidates. Many interviewers will

know if they like you the best within the first five minutes! As a result, that first impression is vital.

- *Do not ask questions.* Contrary to what many people were told by college career counselors, it is not wise to spend a lot of time researching a company and then demonstrating this acquired knowledge through strategic questioning of the interviewer. The fact is, you will never know as much as the interviewer, so your efforts will come across as contrived and, if the wrong question is asked, could offend the interviewer.

The primary goal of any job candidate is to sell himself or herself to the interviewer, proving that his or her skills and past experience are ideal for the job opening. Questions should be limited to what the job responsibilities will entail and then responding, citing examples as to how you can fulfill those responsibilities better than the other candidates.

- *Be a follower, not a leader.* Yes, companies want leaders, but in the interview, it is more important that you follow the lead of the interviewer. Many job seekers try to direct the interview so as to get across the points he or she wants the interviewer to know.

Instead, the job seeker should listen for clues as to what the interviewer wants and try to be the person he or she wants you to be, within the scope of his or her own skills, desires and talents. Anticipate the interviewer's questions as much as possible and be ready with all of your homework done. Then let the interviewer pick and choose what is to be discussed in the interview.

- *Dress appropriately.* While this point seems obvious, you would be surprised how many job seekers arrive at interviews in casual attire, with unkempt hair and body piercings, reasoning, "If the employer cannot accept me for who I am, then I do not want to work for them." This attitude will only lead to long-term unemployment.

Casual wear became the trend during the dot.com era and many companies today continue to be relaxed about office dress codes. However, regardless of a company's dress code, job seekers should always show up to an interview dressed conservatively -- business suits, shirts and ties for men; suits or conservative dresses for women. Avoid any excesses such as long hair, heavy jewelry or earrings for men, flashy dresses or excessive makeup for women.

Follow-up

Follow-up is essential in the job search process.

Job seekers often complain about employers who do not acknowledge their calls, letters, even their interviews. How often have you heard: "I sent out hundreds of resumes and have yet to hear back from any of them. They at least owe me a letter or call."

That notion could not be further from reality and will get the job seeker nowhere. The interviewer's only mission is to find the right person as soon as possible. The job seeker is

owed nothing. Interviewers have no moral or business courtesy obligation to acknowledge anything.

Keep in mind that the manager with whom you interviewed has at least a dozen other responsibilities on his or her plate. A follow-up call and/or letter should not only remind that person that you spoke but also what separates you from other candidates. Follow-up also demonstrates your interest and enthusiasm about working for that employer. Such a small percentage of people actually follow up these days, that the candidates who do really distinguish themselves from the rest of the pool.

Rejection hurts, but can be rewarding. Part of the reason many job seekers neglect to follow-up is out of fear of rejection. However, rejection is an unfortunate part of the job search process and hearing it from the interviewer accomplishes two things. First, if the answer is no, it brings to a close a job possibility you were hoping would come to fruition and which may have held you back from going full force in your job search.

Secondly, if you were not right for one position that does not mean you may not be a candidate for another position at the same company. The follow-up gives you the opportunity to ask the person with whom you interviewed or to whom you sent your resume if there are other positions where someone with your energy and commitment and skills would fit.

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