

Top Ten Tips for a Strategic Job Search

by Denise Bissonnette

1. Change your approach from “seeking work” to “hiring yourself the right employer”!

Deciding to take a job is a huge commitment because it requires an investment of your most precious resources – your time and your talent. The ways in which you might apply your skills and abilities are as varied as the contexts and environment in which you use them. There is no way you could comprehend at this point the possible number of scenarios or avenues in which you might put your gifts to work in the world. Obviously, those possibilities will be filtered by the way in which you approach looking for work. Some will limit themselves to what they find advertised in the newspaper or posted on the web, others will work to uncover the many opportunities that lie in wait in the “hidden job market”. Some will target specific employers for whom they have a keen interest, while others will do mass mailings and await response from whomever finds interest in them. Regardless of the way you go about looking for work, it is important to realize that as you open one door by accepting a job offer, you are closing the door on countless other potential opportunities. This is no small decision, and it shouldn't be treated as one.

In order to increase your chances of making a good employment decision, you need to have a solid grasp of what “good” means to you! Depending on your situation, the “right job” may be all about getting your foot in the door of the industry of your dreams, or it may be about getting income in your pocket in order to make next month's rent. For some, it is about the opportunity to learn certain skills or to be trained in a particular capacity, while for others it is about the social or cultural environment. Being within walking distance to where you live could be your top priority, but maybe it's more about being about to connect with people in your neighborhood.

Before you begin targeting and interviewing with employers, identify what you really need and want most in a position and in an employer. Ask questions which help you determine whether or not you would want to hire this company as your employer. Until you have identified your priorities and know your bottom lines, you are not in a good position to negotiate or to make good employment decisions. You're not a beggar on the street with cap in hand, ready to take any job that someone happens to toss your way. You are a person with a unique set of abilities, gifts, and attributes and it matters where you decide to invest your time and talent. From that perspective, you are not simply seeking work, you are out to hire yourself the right employer!

2. Change the questions informing your job search efforts!

Martin Luther King, Jr. suggested that one could totally change their world simply by changing the questions they ask on a daily basis. I believe that to be particularly true with regard to employment! The traditional questions informing the actions of most job seekers are:

- What is the world asking for and how do I make myself look like that?
- Where is the labor market demand and where would I find the best chances of becoming employed?
- Who is hiring, and how do I present myself in a way that will win me the job over my competition?"

There is nothing wrong with those questions, and I would not discourage a person from asking them, nor from following through with efforts based on the responses. However, I would discourage you from limiting your thinking based on those questions alone! Here are some alternative questions which would put a different spin on the way you see yourself, the way you approach businesses, and the way in which you present yourself to potential employers:

Buckminster Fuller asserted that “Everyone is a genius in the right context.” What is the context (environment, position, company) in which I can most readily imagine sharing my particular brand of genius? Where would I be most likely to totally shine?

- Given my natural talents, gifts and attributes, what are the kinds of problems I like to solve or the potential benefits I have to offer an employer? Who might have that kind of problem, or who might be able to benefit from what I have to offer who doesn't know it yet?
- Who can I approach with an “employment proposal” – creating a job that doesn't yet exist, but would bring certain profit or benefit that would/could enhance the business?
- How can I expand upon the positions I am currently applying for by proposing the ways in which I can bring added value to the job or to the company? (See #6 below.)

3. Take a negotiating stance from the get-go!

The predominant attitude of most job seekers is one in which the employers hold all the cards and the applicant is simply grateful to have a place at the table. In contrast, it may seem a bit presumptuous for an applicant to take a negotiating stance with a prospective employer, treating the interview more like a business meeting. But think about it from the interviewer's standpoint. Who would you be more interested in hiring, the applicant who communicates, “I'll do whatever you want, under any conditions, because I just really need a job!” or the one who expresses, “I really want to make sure that your needs and interests as an employer are a good match for my skills, abilities and interests as an employee. Yes, I really need a job, but I don't want to settle for just anything. I want to be selective so that I know I am investing in a worthwhile opportunity that will pay off for everyone involved.” Most employers want to be selected and feel “chosen” just as much as employees do!

(Notice that there is a difference between exuding confidence and self-assuredness with poise and humility, and coming across as arrogant and self-aggrandizing. Employers are going to take an instant dislike to the person who tries to come off as superior and egotistical. There is a way of remaining humble, modest and respectful, and still taking the initiative to assert your needs and interests in the situation.)

Many applicants believe that negotiating with an employer only begins once you have received a job offer, but it actually begins the minute you initiate contact! At every stage of the job search you are presenting what you have to offer the employer and making your case for your potential value to the company. Neither the exact way you will perform the work nor the position itself is etched in stone. The terms of the position, what you offer the employer, and what the employer offers you, often evolve over time. Jobs, just like clothing, are never one size fits all, despite what the tag or the job ad says!

There are numerous ways to sculpt a position to meet your ends, just as there are numerous ways to combine the use of your talent and time to suit the needs of the employer. This sculpting (or negotiating) begins with how you present yourself on the phone, in your resume, in your cover letter, on the application or in an employment proposal. It continues with each interview. This evolutionary sculpting of the position continues until the final terms of agreement have been reached between you and the employer!

4. Use the job interview as an opportunity to interview the employer.

The best interviews are two-way conversations, not employer-directed question and answer sessions in which the applicant treats the interview like an interrogation. Allow the employer's questions to engage you in a meaningful exchange in which you are prepared to ask questions of your own. It is said that you

know a lot more about a person by their questions than by their answers. Allow the questions you prepare to reflect the following:

- How well you understand what the job is about;
- What is important to you, what your values are, and what your expectations are;
- How much research you did about the company;
- How serious you are about landing the right position;
- Your degree of curiosity, openness, and ability to listen;
- Your level of energy, your initiative, and your communication skills; and,
- Your preparedness.

5. Choose questions that reflect your values, your gifts and your priorities.

These questions must be relevant and pertinent to the position in question and should reflect your enthusiasm for the job or the profession, your interest in the company, as well as your work-related values and priorities. Here are sample questions:

- How would you describe this company's culture and what are the salient qualities of people who work best in this environment?
- I realize that if offered this position I will be starting at the bottom and I have a lot to learn before being able to participate on higher levels of the business. I am, however, a fast learner and an ambitious worker. What opportunities do you foresee as potential "next steps" for someone with my background and career aspirations?
- If offered the position, how could I totally exceed your expectations on the job in the first 2-3 months?
- What tips could you give me to make an immediate contribution to this department (store, project)?
- I want us both to be assured that I have what you need to meet the challenges of this position. What are the most immediate concerns that will be faced by the person who takes this job?
- I am sure that it is different for everyone, but how do you think the reality of this position typically differs from people's perception of what it is going to be like?
- I have worked a lot behind the scenes in past jobs, and I am anxious to be working with customers face to face in my next position. To what extent do you think I would have that opportunity here?
- I am very excited about this opportunity! What do you recommend I do to move my application to the next step? Is there any additional information I could provide to strengthen what I have already submitted?

6. Offer the employer an expanded view of the position in light of your unique combination of skills and abilities!

Don't limit your thinking about how you could inhabit the position you are applying for. Contrary to popular belief, a position is never simply an official list of duties as summarized in an abstract job description – it is the sum total of actual results produced while performing the actual work! Job descriptions are simply created to organize people's thoughts about and efforts to solve the problem or fill the need which prompted the creation of the position in the first place.

The interview is not the place to downplay your strengths, or to hide your light under a bushel. This is the time and place to shine with calm and confidence! Interviewing for a job is like marketing an extremely rare and expensive commodity. You are offering the fruits of your labor in exchange for monetary or other compensations. Forget job hunting – now you are doing real business negotiations with the employer! As

you read the job description, or as you listen to the employer describe the work in the interview, ask yourself:

“Given my assets and strengths, how could I enhance or expand upon this job in a way that would benefit the employer and set me apart from other candidates?”

Based on the answer to this question, you may say to the employer:

- “I really believe I have the skills to do the job as you have described it. But let me suggest how I could expand the job by using my computer skills ...” or,
- “As I was reading the job description it occurred to me that I could do what is required on the job at an even lower cost to the company by ...” or,
- “Have you considered adding a customer service component to this job? I love repair work and I know that I can perform the duties you have outlined, but I also enjoy working with the public and I wonder if I could streamline the process by taking the orders as well.”

7. Rather than trying to appeal to the company overall, focus on meeting the needs of the person in front of you!

Most job seekers try to address the needs of the overall company and forget that they are interviewing with a person, not an organization. The truth is that we are always dealing with people, not corporations! When we speak of employers we tend to regard them as if they existed apart from the human relationships that compose them. Smart job seekers never forget that it is always the people who work in the business that actually produce the systems, the structure and the style that come to comprise the ultimate reputation of the business. Each person has their own opinions about the issues that are important, the things he or she likes about you, and the reasons why they think you should or should not be hired. These personal factors can carry extraordinary weight in the hiring decision! During an interview, speak directly to the needs of the person(s) who are actually doing the hiring. The following questions may help you discern their concerns:

- What aspirations do you hold for the person who will be hired for this position?
- What is the first problem or challenge that would need the attention of the person you hire?
- What would you like to be able to say six months from now about the person in this position? How about a year from now?

8. Use the employer’s possible concerns about hiring you as a springboard to highlight your best attributes!

Listen to the questions and respond to them fully with the employer’s needs and interests in mind. But don’t stop there. Use the employer’s questions or concerns as a springboard for presenting your best attributes. For example, if the employer asks, “Why did you leave your last job?” you might say,

“I really enjoyed my last job and gave everything I had while I worked there. I appreciated all that I learned and experienced on the job, but the truth is that I topped out. There was nowhere else to go in the company for someone with my skills.” Then you could use this response as a springboard to add, “That is what attracted me to this company. There seem to be many avenues for growth with this business and for the people who are work here. I like the idea of being challenged in new ways and growing with a team of people.”

Or, if the employer makes a comment like, “I see that you don’t have much experience in the restaurant industry,” use the remark as an opportunity to highlight your enthusiasm for entering a new field by saying something like,

“Thank you for bringing that up! You are right, while I have a lot customer service experience from a variety of other fields, this is the first time that I am looking to apply them to the restaurant industry! While I am sure that I have to learn, I am confident that I can quickly acquire the specific job skills and quickly apply my love and ability of working with people to great use. I have been told by friends and family who’ve worked in the restaurant industry that I would be natural in this environment and I have always had that sense about myself. I have really enjoyed working in retail, but I’m excited to work in the faster pace of a restaurant where I can have more sustained contact with customers and affect the actual quality of their dining experience. I really hope I have that chance at this restaurant!”

9. Be the one in ten who actually practices the power of Follow Up!

While every job search expert espouses the benefits of it, every job search book contains a chapter on it, and every job search workshop devotes time to cover it, research shows that less than 10% of job seekers actually put the practice of “employer follow up” into practice! This is good news, job seekers, because it remains one way in which you can set yourself apart from the other 90% who continue to ignore this important step in the job search process!

Perhaps few job seekers take this step seriously because they are in the dark as to the number of purposes that following up can serve. Many believe it is simply a polite gesture to thank the person for their time and consideration, and to be honest, that should be reason enough. But there are numerous strategic reasons for follow up as well, including the following:

Statistics demonstrate that the person who is interviewed last has the best chance of being hired. This is due in large part to the fact that this is the person who benefits from all the thinking that manager has done up to that point. Many employers don’t really know who or what they want at the beginning of the interviewing process, and as time passes and they considering the views of various applicants, their thinking is changing and evolving, often redefining the position they are hiring for. You want subsequent contact with the employer so as to contribute to this process and to remain in the forefront of their mind!

Most applicants use the interview to express their interest and enthusiasm in the job, but following up with a note on what specifically stuck with you from the interview that further enhanced your interest, demonstrates both initiative and motivation!

It is not uncommon to leave an interview with a list of things you wish you had said or not said! When that is true, use follow up as an opportunity to add what you forgot, or to resolve any employer. For example, if the person questioned your lack of experience in some area, you might follow up by providing an additional reference of some kind who can speak to your ability, or alternatively, you could provide an actual sample of your work.

How and when you choose to follow up is another way to express your creativity, your style, and your personality. Depending on whether it’s a handmade card, a written proposal, a packet of additional letters of reference, a quick email, a phone call or a revised resume, the employer is going to learn more about you and your personal and/or work style by the way in which you choose to follow up.

You may have made a great impression with the interviewer(s) on the day of the interview, but it sure can’t hurt to reinforce the good feelings they had about you by providing further grounds for their initial impression!

Let’s face it, it’s harder to turn the person down who has been persistent and determined than it is to turn down the person who fails to follow up!

10. Never turn down a job without attempting to negotiate the terms in which it would become acceptable to you!

You have absolutely nothing to lose and only to gain by attempting to sculpt the offer to meet your terms as they are already sold on you! Assume you want the job while looking to negotiate it, considering what would change your mind. You are in a strong bargaining position at this point so use it to your advantage. Here is a simple three step process to follow in developing your “conditional agreement” to accept the offer:

Communicate your enthusiasm about the job and stay positive by saying how flattered you are by their interest in you;

Express what impresses you about the position as well as your confidence to succeed in the job, if their initial offer could be improved;

Frame each of the changes you desire from the original offer in terms of the “value-added benefits” of hiring you.

For example, “Mr. Brown, I am excited about this job. I like what I would be doing, the people I would be working with, and I like the company overall. I am hesitating to say “yes’ though, because of the (compensation, hours, benefits, etc.) I was expecting an offer in a higher salary range (on weekends, with benefits), and if your offer was more within those expectations, I would jump at the chance to work for you and apply my photography skills to your enterprise!”

Some of the factors that may be negotiated in a position include:

Job responsibilities (If the job is too low level for your skills and experience, rather than asking about the salary, upgrade the job! Add value to the position so that would make it worth your while!)

Percentage of time you spend traveling, out of the office, working with people, working from home, etc.

Training opportunities, mentorship, and/or ongoing opportunities to develop new skills or to gain exposure to other aspects of the field or industry; and,

Benefits and compensation which include insurance, commission, employee discounts, moving or traveling expenses, use of company car, vacation time, etc.

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