Focused jobseeking:
A measured approach to looking for work

For many people, the only thing harder than being out of a job is searching for one. The difficulties associated with finding employment can wear down even the most resilient jobseekers. Applying for dozens of jobs each week and getting few or no replies can slowly erode jobseekers' self-esteem. And this loss of confidence can prove detrimental to those trying to market their skills to would-be employers.

Jobseekers can avoid many of the mistakes that keep them from winning a job. They can learn how to choose the best channels for applying, why they shouldn't rely on online resources exclusively, and how to use their contacts effectively. By demystifying the job search process, informed jobseekers improve their chances for success—provided they're willing to put in the hard work, time, and patience required.

This article gives jobseekers guidelines for taking control of their employment search. The first section talks about the importance of research and preparation. The next section explains some details of the application process in depth, such as pitfalls and informational interviews. The third section describes how candidates can use the job interview as an opportunity to impress the hiring manager. The final section provides sources of additional information.

For more experienced jobseekers, the box on page 10 describes some strategies for a successful search.

Research for job readiness

The Internet has transformed the job search process, changing the way jobseekers find job openings and research potential employers. Few organizations advertise job openings exclusively in printed classified ads, and some may not use print media at all. Today, information about employers, including job openings, is most often found on the Internet.

Research takes more effort than just surfing the Web, however. "Any candidate who relies on mass-marketed job listings to get in the door is almost certainly doomed to failure," says Nick Corcodilos, an executive recruiter and consultant in Lebanon, New Jersey. To make the most of research, jobseekers must focus their search, use online resources wisely, and develop their network of contacts.

Focus the job search

Before beginning their quest for work, jobseekers should complete a personal evaluation of their goals. In particular, they should determine the type of work they want to do, where they want to do it, and for whom. Only after they have that information can they start a focused search for work.

Although many people know the type of work they want to do, others need help matching their interests and skills with a specific career. Skills self-assessment guides are particularly useful to jobseekers who are still exploring career options. One source for self-assessment tools is O*NET, a resource for career exploration and job analysis sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor. More information about O*NET appears at the end of this article.

Likewise, some people know where they'd like to work; for others, the availability of particular jobs can determine where they will live. For example, most political scientists work in large metropolitan areas. (For a detailed analysis of occupations and their geographic availability, see "Mapping out a career: An analysis of geographic concentration of occupations" in the fall 2009 issue of

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the *OOQ*, available online at **www.bls.gov/ooq/2010/fall/art02.pdf**.)

Deciding whom to work for also takes research. Jobseekers should avoid what career experts call the "shotgun approach" to finding a job. Coy Renick, a human resources director in Roanoke, Virginia, describes the shotgun approach as "applying to 100 jobs, getting 3 interviews, and landing 1 job."

Instead, say Renick and other experts, jobseekers should concentrate on a handful of organizations they have researched—in a business they want to be involved in for a long time. "Focus selectively on companies you admire and wish to work for," advises Corcodilos. "Pursue companies—not jobs."

By focusing their search, jobseekers also help themselves avoid disappointment later. A more targeted approach produces applications that express a better understanding of the organization and its business, reducing the likelihood that an application goes unanswered.

Using online resources

Ideally, jobseekers learn about the industries and organizations that interest them before looking for work. Employers expect a jobseeker to know who they are, what they do,

where they operate, and how they compare with others in the industry—especially since such information is readily available online. "You can easily find annual reports, press releases, and the company's mission and value statements online," says Tina Garrett-Ragland, a director of human resources in Roanoke, Virginia. "It is inexcusable for jobseekers not to know the basics about a company."

Useful resources include newspaper articles, industry publications, employee blogs, and online discussions. Jobseekers can use forums, also known as discussion boards, to communicate with people who work in their desired industry or organization.

Specialized job boards are another useful resource. These boards cater to a particular group, such as a university's student body or alumni or members of a specific trade or professional association. Specialized job boards feature openings for jobseekers who are already part of a wider network. By scouring these boards, jobseekers can determine which organizations are actively hiring and can gather information on work duties, minimum requirements, and compensation for specific job openings.

For example, a company might decide to target a particular membership association for prospective job candidates. The company could advertise in the association's newsletter or on its Web site, confident that prospective candidates already possess specific skills or experience, fit the corporate culture, or meet certain work requirements. The more specialized an online job board, the more targeted the specific group or location. Jobseekers belonging to these targeted groups enjoy a greater chance of success.

By narrowing the scope of the search, specialized online job boards attract fewer jobseekers than national ones. Looking for openings posted to large, national job boards that are broad and untargeted is unlikely to yield results. Some career experts caution against relying on this type of job search. "It's difficult to differentiate yourself online," says Cheri Butler, associate director of Career Services at the University of Texas at

Arlington and president of the National Career Development Association.

Despite lackluster results for jobseekers themselves, online job boards offer organizations an inexpensive way to reach a large and diverse group of jobseekers. Those same advantages, however, also mean that too many people see the same job openings. A better approach is to pursue leads through careful research and contacts, which sets the savvy jobseeker apart from the pack.

Developing a network

Research helps jobseekers in another important way: developing a network. Organizations tend to hire people they know or who are referred to them by someone they trust. Career experts say that organizations fill many openings through this "hidden," or unadvertised, job market. In other words, employers often fill new positions before those openings are ever publicized.

For this reason, Renick recommends developing a targeted network along with the focused job search. "You should network in the field you want to work in," he says, "and inside the companies you want to work for." Jobseekers who apply to organizations they know well and with which they have established a network increase their chances of getting a job there. Sylvia Francis, president of the Colorado Human Resource Association

in Denver, agrees. "There are so many people applying to each job that having a personal contact inside can help you get a toe in the door," she says.

But a network should comprise more than just industry insiders. Unfortunately, many jobseekers ignore their network—often because they don't believe they have one.

Everyone has a network. A network includes family, friends, past and present employers and coworkers, association members, teachers, classmates, and others. In short, a network is everyone the candidate can communicate with. These contacts need not be close friends; they can be acquaintances, or even friends of friends.

A professional network is built from these personal contacts, and the best time to start building is now. Experts suggest attending industry events, training classes, and seminars; joining a social, trade, or professional organization; and pursuing volunteer and internship positions. Even something as casual as a meeting over coffee can help a jobseeker develop connections.

Focused networking gives jobseekers the opportunity to establish contacts among prospective employers to learn about work life in the organization. Corcodilos advises jobseekers to get the advice and insight of established professionals in the organizations of their interest to learn about the work environment,

Meeting for coffee is one way to start developing a network.

job duties, employee morale, and more. Along with their other research, jobseekers can use this information to help them decide whether they would like to work there.

Experts caution, however, that the process of developing a network should be separate from the search for job openings. In fact, they say, talking about specific job openings too soon can alienate even the friendliest contacts. "Building a network is like dating," says Corcodilos. "You do not dive right into talk of jobs—as you don't of love—when meeting strangers. Find common interests first, and 'talk shop' instead."

When "talking shop" with a contact, the jobseeker should ask about the person's work, the most rewarding and hardest part of the job, and what it's like working for the employer. Jobseekers who show a genuine interest in contacts' work are more likely to start healthy professional relationships and establish a strong network—one that could lead to referrals later.

Good professional networks are built on solid relationships. These relationships, in turn, are built on trust, something that takes time to develop. When network contacts recommend a jobseeker, their reputation is on the line. Consequently, most contacts refer or recommend only a serious and trusted jobseeker, which is the reason such recommendations carry weight.

Applying for jobs

The more effort jobseekers put into research, the easier the application process becomes. Through focused searching and networking, jobseekers can figure out what type of work they would like to do and for whom. They can also meet people who might enhance their job applications with a recommendation.

Most applications today are submitted online, but there are right and wrong ways to navigate the online application process. An important rule to keep in mind: Humans still do the hiring. Applicants who contact a person instead of relying solely on the computer enhance their chances of being hired.

Precautions to take online

The ease with which jobseekers can apply online means that organizations are often swamped with applications. Human resources departments increasingly rely on computer software that automates the applicant selection process, rejecting applicants based on keywords or minimum qualifications. Corcodilos notes that these culling techniques result in many applicants being rejected without explanation.

Consequently, experts advise jobseekers to tailor their cover letter and resume or application to fit each job opening's position description. Jobseekers who have researched and networked properly should have a short list of companies they know well and wish to work for; this preparation eases the customization of resumes and cover letters for each position. Using the language of the position description helps jobseekers to avoid being eliminated by automatic culling software. It also helps to highlight the connection between their skills and duties required for the position.

Applicants should also remember to exercise care when providing or posting identifying information online, especially on social media Web sites. Employers have little difficulty finding information online about applicants; some even incorporate an online information check as part of the selection process.

Younger applicants in particular tend to share too much on community and social networking Web sites, overlooking their often-loose privacy settings. "Guard your online persona," Butler warns. "You must manage your digital dirt."

Job applicants should search their name online to discover what information about them is available to the public. This search also helps applicants determine which Web sites are freely sharing their information without their knowledge or permission.

Applicants should set strict privacy controls to protect their identity and data, limit what others share about them, and eliminate information that might compromise their job candidacy. All personal information must

remain private; only professional information, such as an academic award or a published essay, should be public.

Speak to the hiring manager

The two parties who stand to gain most from filling a position are the hiring manager and the job applicant. The hiring manager, or the person in charge of selecting candidates to fill job openings, needs a reliable worker who can help the team meet its goals. The applicant needs employment, preferably in a position he or she finds rewarding. Therefore, job applicants should try to speak directly to the hiring manager whenever possible.

Applicants who are able to tap into their network might be able to meet directly with the hiring manager and avoid delays. "Managers are more apt to set aside the 'filtering criteria' if the applicant presents compelling evidence that he or she can do the job," Corcodilos says.

If possible, applicants should ask contacts inside an organization to arrange an informational interview with the hiring manager. The informational interview allows the applicant to learn more about the job and the organization, while also providing an opportunity to impress the hiring manager—and, hopefully, make the short list of applicants.

During an informational interview, applicants should show initiative but remain polite and not attempt to bypass usual hiring channels. "You should not circumvent the human resources department," says Garrett-Ragland, "but talking to the hiring manager directly can help if you make a good impression, because he or she can then put pressure on human resources to act more quickly."

The job interview

The interview is a candidate's best chance to impress a hiring manager and secure the job. Some career experts say that job candidates should treat the interview as if it were the first day of work. "Those who are not ready to do the job at the interview will not return for a second day of work," says Corcodilos.

The job-ready candidate is not only qualified but also has studied the company and knows its business, culture, product or service, and mission.

But studying the organization isn't the only way that candidates prepare for a job interview. Candidates should think of the interview as a conversation, not a defense of their resume. To ready themselves for this conversation, candidates must plan their answers to questions a hiring manager might ask—and prepare their own questions for the hiring manager. They should also know what the hiring manager expects of them before, during, and after an interview.

Interviews as conversations

The best interviews flow smoothly, like good conversation. Because the interview helps to determine how a candidate might perform and fit in at an organization, hiring managers' questions test the candidate's knowledge, skills, and interests. Common interview questions include the following:

- Where do you see yourself in 5 years?
- What is your biggest weakness? Strength?
- Why do you want to work here?
- How do you handle a disagreement with another member of your team?
- What was your biggest accomplishment at your previous position?
- Why did you leave your last job?

To prepare for these questions, candidates should recall past challenges and experiences that demonstrate specific qualities, such as teamwork, leadership, and adaptability. "Most interviews are behavioral, such as 'Talk about a time when…,'" Garrett-Ragland says. "Your answers must be specific and detailed. You must give the problem's outcome, explain its challenges and how you met them, and describe what you learned from the experience."

Candidates should use the interview as an opportunity to show how their skills match the organization's needs. Those who have researched the job and organization thoroughly will be able to answer questions by describing how they'll use their skills to get the work done.

A candidate's knowledge and initiative help hiring managers answer their most important interview question: Is this the right person to get this job done well?

An additional benefit for candidates who have researched the company well is that they will show they want the job and will be excited to do the work. "If you have researched the company and determined you want to work there, you will show genuine enthusiasm in your application and interviews," says Francis. Candidates who show enthusiasm for the position and the work culture are less likely to be unhappy and leave. Because hiring managers want employees who will stay for a considerable amount of time, they notice enthusiastic candidates.

Job candidates also have an obligation to hold up their end of the conversation. They should always ask questions that they could not answer through their own research or that arose during the interview. Through their questions, candidates show how well they know the organization, what their priorities are, and how much interest and enthusiasm they have. Important questions to ask include the following:

- What are your team's goals?
- What are this position's most difficult challenges?

- What do you expect of me in the first 90 days? 6 months? A year?
- How soon do you expect to fill this position?

A key function of interviews is to help candidates decide whether a job and an organization are a good fit for them. For example, although the hiring manager might worry about how long a candidate will stay with the organization, the candidate may be equally worried about the organization's future. The candidate can research an organization's stability and confirm it during the interview through questions about profits and employee turnover.

Conduct before, during, and after

Although any interview is good practice, career experts warn candidates not to arrive at an interview without being adequately prepared. Corcodilos even suggests that candidates who are unable to answer the hiring manager's questions excuse themselves from an interview, apologize, and request more time to prepare. That particular hiring manager might not offer another interview, says Corcodilos, but the candidate displays professionalism and integrity by admitting fault, taking responsibility, and respecting the manager's time.

Candidates should exercise common sense and professionalism in all their interactions with potential employers. At a minimum, candidates should be punctual, clean, professionally dressed, and courteous to all staff, regardless of the staff member's position. And they should be honest and positive about everything they say, especially about past employers and coworkers.

In answering questions, candidates should be respectful and assertive without being presumptuous or aggressive. This includes responding to questions about negative information from a candidate's resume: Experts say that when asked about potentially damaging information, such as gaps in work history or a prior violation of the law, candidates should briefly acknowledge the circumstances and then redirect the conversation toward the positive—perhaps to discuss lessons learned or constructive steps taken to qualify for the position. When in doubt about any interview question, candidates should politely ask for guidance from the hiring manager.

After an interview, job candidates should thank the interviewer twice: in person, before leaving; and in writing, with a thank-you note. The thank-you note is most effective when hand-written, but an email thank-you note is also acceptable. The thank-you note should briefly reassert the candidate's interest in the position and summarize relevant skills and qualifications.

Career experts say that the hiring process should take about 2 weeks for an entry-level position, and up to 2 months for mid- to

Behave professionally in all interactions with potential employers: Be punctual, courteous, honest, and positive.

The overqualified candidate

Some job candidates have more skill, education, or experience than a position requires. These "overqualified" candidates often face particular challenges in finding a job. To succeed in the job market, overqualified candidates need to understand an employer's concerns, highlight their experience, and communicate effectively.

Employer concerns. An organization with high employee turnover can make future job candidates wary. Reluctance to hire overqualified candidates sometimes stems from these turnover fears: Employers believe that an overqualified worker will continue to seek a job more closely aligned with his or her credentials—and leave when one turns up.

Cheri Butler, associate director of Career Services at the University of Texas at Arlington, says prospective employers have reservations about hiring overqualified candidates: "If I hire him, will he stay? Will he be unhappy with the wage we offer? Does she only want a paycheck? Why would she apply to a job that is below her skill and experience level?" As a result, employers may prefer the "just right" candidate, someone with the correct level of qualifications, who seems a safer choice.

Highlighting experience. Overqualified candidates mindful of this employer hesitation may worry about calling attention to their experience. Many choose to prepare a functional, rather than chronological, resume to emphasize their skills without underscoring years of work. Some experts advise overqualified candidates to downplay their experience on a resume to avoid rejection during the initial culling of applicants. This strategy is similar to choosing keywords from the job description to avoid automatic rejection.

But downplaying experience doesn't mean disregarding it. In fact, Tina Garrett-Ragland, director of human resources for an automotive supply company in Roanoke, Virginia, suggests that overqualified candidates highlight their skills in the cover letter. "Downplaying your experience might get you an initial interview, but writing a good cover letter can produce better results," she says. "Use the cover letter to explain why you want the job and how you will use your transferable skills to do the job well."

A forthright cover letter marks overqualified candidates as thoughtful and honest early in the process—and may help to eliminate a prospective employer's doubts about their early departure.

Effective communication. Effective communication helps an overqualified candidate reassure prospective employers about concerns they may have. The overqualified candidate has motivations, intentions, and reasons for wanting a particular job, and it's up to him or her to explain what those are. An overqualified candidate may have many incentives in mind—such as change of pace, relocation, less stress, and more stability—when pursuing some jobs.

Overqualified candidates should emphasize how the organization benefits from their abundant skills. For example, an employer might value overqualified candidates because of their high level of expertise and experience, sometimes across various fields. "These candidates are attractive because they possess professional maturity and can fill many roles inside an organization," says Garrett-Ragland.

It is vital that overqualified candidates communicate to prospective employers their intention to stay long term, why they want the job, and how they plan to do the job well. Those who demonstrate motivation and an ability to pick up new skills are less likely to be known as overqualified candidates—and more likely to be called employees.

senior-level ones. Sometimes, however, the process can take even longer. As a result, candidates must be persistent and follow up by phone or email to confirm their interest in the job. "You should follow up every 2 weeks," Renick advises. "Those who don't are currently unemployed."

Finally, say experts, candidates should focus on their long-term goals and not give up. "Stay positive and don't just take the first job you're offered out of desperation, because in the long run, you will not be happy," says Francis. "It's tough, but there's a job for you out there."

For more information

The U.S. Department of Labor offers many services to jobseekers and the unemployed, such as one-stop employment and career services. These resources are listed online at **www.dol.gov/dol/audience/ aud-unemployed.htm**. O*NET, sponsored by the Labor Department, hosts self-assessment tools and a database of occupational information at **www.online.onetcenter.org**.

For more information about jobseeking and occupations, see the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. It is available in many career centers and public libraries and online at **www.bls.gov/ooh**.

BLS provides other resources for jobseekers who want to explore careers or find a job. To link to BLS data on benefits, workplace safety, and more, see **www.bls.gov/audience/jobseekers.htm.**

Other articles in the *Occupational Outlook Quarterly* break down the jobseeking process further. For example, to find out more about informational interviewing, see "Informational interviewing: Get the inside scoop on careers" in the summer 2010 issue, available online at **www.bls.gov/ooq/2010/ summer/art03.pdf**. And for more information on writing a resume, see "Resumes, applications, and cover letters" in the summer 2009 issue, online at **www.bls.gov/ooq/2009/ summer/art03.pdf**.

To learn more about human resources work, contact the Society for Human Resource Management. This professional organization provides resources about opportunities, news, and events in the field of human resources. The organization also does economic research and provides data on hiring.

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