

## How to Conduct a Job Search

*By Tony Leng, Managing Director*

This article serves as a job search primer from the perspective of a “retained search executive.” It is a suggested list for candidates of “dos” and “don’ts” on how to conduct an effective job search.

I am frequently asked to talk with executives about their career, job search, or to conduct a courtesy interview. Over the course of these interviews and phone discussions, common themes have emerged.

### Develop a solid resume

- A good, “on spec,” resume will get you in the door.
- I do not recommend resume-writing services as no one knows your career better than you. A recruiter wants to see how you craft your resume and what you think is important. It is significant for a recruiter to see that you can write well, understand your own value proposition, and have thought through your career.
- You may need a few types of resumes. For head hunters, make sure that you can be categorized. Some candidates want to be considered for the widest range of jobs, but if we receive an “I can do anything” resume, it makes presenting you in a defined space particularly challenging.
- The resume needs to indicate what you are or are looking for, i.e., “public company software CEO,” “building materials distribution CEO,” “retail CIO,” and must demonstrate measurable accomplishments.
- The best way to show measurable accomplishments is via metrics, i.e., “grew sales/EBITDA 25% p.a. for three years,” “opened an office in China,” “led the acquisition and integration of ....,” “implemented SAP,” etc.
- Your resume does not have to be two pages or fewer. If you have more to say – say it, without being overly wordy.
- Always have a chronological resume that sets out what you did in each role. Avoid having a resume that gives all of your accomplishments in a list, with the job titles and years at the end. The impression this leaves is that you have not done anything recently, and want to obscure that fact.
- We assume (or it will come out in an interview) that you are honest, hardworking, proactive, entrepreneurial, and are a dynamic leader, etc. Stating this in a resume is not necessary.
- Highlighting particular skills (i.e., M&A, multi-unit) or market knowledge (retail, manufacturing, software, etc.) at the beginning of the resume is fine.
- Always have someone proof your resume.

## **You are what you were**

- If you have been in the printing business your whole career and now want to get into Biotech – great!!! However, it will be a significant challenge to do so utilizing a head hunter - unless you know him/her really well, and he or she is prepared to go out on a limb for you with a client. Here is why: For a head hunter “you are what you were.”
- Here is how our world works. Clients ask us to find candidates, and are very specific about what they want, defining the key competencies and background experiences necessary for success. We then find candidates who match the profile.
- If we introduce someone who is way off base – we lose our credibility. And if by some chance you make it through round one, put yourself in the hiring manager’s position. If you succeed, then the hiring manager will be justified in making what looked to be an off-the- wall decision, but if you fail, everyone says, “I told you so.” So they will go with someone who has the personality, culture fit and skill set, as well as the industry knowledge.
- Let me assure you, there are lots of dynamic leaders in every sector. So even though you may have incredible leadership skills, etc., there is nearly always someone who has what you have, plus the sector knowledge that a client is seeking. If your name is Lou Gerstner, an exception will be made, but if not, resist trying to be a round peg in a square hole.
- So, for head hunters: you are what you were!
- Why did I say for head hunters? Well, you can change career direction, many people have done it, but they do it by leveraging past relationships. If someone knows your capability and is prepared to back you in a new job or industry, good luck. We will pick you up again, after you have done a good job in that new industry and can demonstrate a track record of success.

## **Be systematic about how you conduct your job search**

- You need to cover as much ground as possible. No one has a lock on the market. We can not recruit from clients, so there is a self-limiting factor at play that will never allow one search firm to dominate. The logic inherent in this is one of the reasons boutique firms are successful. We call it “off limits.”
- Figure out who the top recruiters are in your space and make a plan to somehow get to them. Unfortunately, this is easier said than done, but your job search is a networking exercise and you need to work your network.
- Keep a log of who you speak to and follow up with the ones who are in your space.
- Develop a list of companies that are in your sweet spot and try to find your way in (hopefully via your network) with a focused resume indicating the type of job you are after.
- Determine if venture capital (VC) or private equity (PE) companies play in your space. If they do, find a way to get to the recruiting person or key player in that organization. Again– networking is crucial.

- In all of the above examples, always be respectful of the recruiter/hiring manager's time. I can only talk about my experiences, but I am sure that the job custodians in all categories above have the same perspective.

## **Understand how search consultants work**

This is how our business works.

- A candidate looking for a job does not constitute a job opportunity for us. Here is how to look at it. We are not agents for candidates, we are agents for clients; put another way, we do not find jobs for people, we find people for jobs.
- You can seriously shoot yourself in the foot if you approach a recruiter incorrectly. Offering to “work together” or have them “represent” you demonstrates that you have never been part of a search process, and are not sophisticated. The antennae go up with the thought “this is going to take a lot of my time.”
- Over my search career, there has never been an occasion where an out of work candidate has contacted me looking for a job, and I have an open search that is an exact match. So when you call an experienced recruiter and ask to chat with them about your job search, you are asking for a real favor.
- All we have is time, and if we accede to every request coming in to chat on the phone about a job search, we would have little time to get our actual work done – for which we are being paid.
- By far the best approach is to send an email (even if you know the search person well) and let them know what you are doing. Attach your resume (see above on what that needs to look like) and give a brief overview. If the search person has an exact match search s/he will call you, but if not, the best you can hope for is that they reply to your email and file your resume.
- Make it easy for a recruiter to work with you. Email and then follow up with a voicemail, and remember to add us to your list of approved recipients. Your voicemail should be crisp and precise. Develop a 10-second elevator pitch, and practice it.
- Always attach your resume to any email you send to a recruiter. Always.

## **Leveraging your relationship with a search person**

- You may have been a candidate or a source on a search. Keep in contact with that search person and be a resource.
- A resource is someone who offers candidate suggestions and offers to look in his or her network to help the search person. These people are golden. I always take their calls, and have developed some great relationships in the process.
- Always return calls from good search people. What goes around comes around and if one day you are out of work, a search person is far more likely to be helpful if you have been polite to him or her.

- Let the search person know when you change jobs so they can stay in touch. They may not have placed you this time, but when something good comes up you want to be sure that you are reachable.
- Be respectful of a recruiter's time, just as you would like others to be respectful of yours. Search professionals are some of the hardest working people around, and time is their most precious asset.

### Getting noticed

- Some recruiters will tell you to create a web presence so that your name comes up when you Google a topic (i.e., be a blogger). This is OK if you are a techie, but for the bulk of candidates at the more senior levels, this is not necessary.
- Google does get used by most search people, as well as hiring managers, so if there is something on Google that is unfavorable – bring it up and discuss it.
- You get noticed by doing a good job and having a career that makes sense. Remember, you are what you were, so if you are working in a sector and have a good position in a company, a researcher at a recruiting firm will find you. Zoom, LinkedIn, Hoovers, OneSource, Facebook, etc. all have pretty good lists of the relevant candidates. Get yourself on LinkedIn, articulate a clear career history, and you will get found.
- Keep up your network and stay in touch with people from your past. We make a lot of calls to people we know, and if you remain plugged in you will be found.
- Resume distribution services? I do not think much of them – that is one person's opinion, and I could be wrong.

### Job sites

- Most top candidates are found through referral, personal knowledge and research. That said, there are job sites that recruiters use.
- Only send your resume in response to a job posting if you are qualified for the position.
- I am very specific about the background metrics for which I am looking. As part of the overall search strategy, I may post what I term a "blind teaser" that does not give the company name, but is very specific about background. It normally includes industry, number of years in role, company minimum size, particular skills or experiences, and a few things that we do not want. We then ask that qualified candidates respond by email.
- I am amazed at the number of people who send in their resumes who are not even vaguely qualified. When I ask them why, they say they are great people and my client is stupid if s/he does not look at them (or something to that effect, but in more polite language), or that they just wanted to get their resume into my hands. What this tells me about the candidate is that they cannot follow instructions, are not knowledgeable about how the search business works, and do not respect my time.

## Doing well at interview time

- Your resume and outreach are designed to get you in front of a potential employer or search consultant. For both, you need to be on your game, as the head hunter is the gate keeper of the search process, and you will only make it through for a client interview if you impress the search consultant.
- Know your resume. Have a good handle on what you did when and where.
- Know the facts about your employer. Size of company, staff, growth, who you reported to, and who your key employees were. These are going to come out in the interview, so you should know the facts.
- Have some vignettes that address your key skills and competencies. Hopefully you are a match for the search and you will have an opportunity to demonstrate your capabilities.
- Be genuine. You are going to be asked this question in one way or another, “what are your strengths and weaknesses?” I am sure you can articulate your strengths, but can you be honest about your weaknesses and mistakes? I get irritated by people who say “impatience” and other such qualities, which are really strengths in disguise. If you do not know what some of your weak spots are then you have not done all that much introspection. I value a good appreciation of self; it makes you a better leader as you will hopefully put people around you who are strong in the areas where you are weak.
- You can talk about your mistakes and failures. I am very nervous about senior executives who have never made a mistake. This tells me they have not pushed themselves, and have not learned what they are made of. Everyone makes mistakes; it is how you recover that determines character and fortitude. I want to see blood, how you patched your wounds, and how you have come back stronger.

## During a search

- If you become part of a search, remember that it can take a while, and some clients like to see a slate, so be patient. Check in regularly with the recruiter.
- Do not give the head hunter surprises. I ask every candidate to let me know if they are close on another opportunity, and to give me time to consult my client if they are offered another job. We assume that you are in the game and available, and we can look really stupid if we tell our client that you are “hooked” and then suddenly you take something else. That behavior will always come back to bite you.
- Be very up front about relocation, compensation, titles, etc. Tell the head hunter everything they need to know. Do not be coy about what you make, as it can save everyone a lot of time and trouble. I always ask my associates to find out what a candidate makes, and always ask that question near the start of an interview. People are generally paid what they are worth.

## Give yourself time

- At senior levels, a job search can take up to one year. So cut yourself some slack and do not expect to get your next job immediately. Plan to touch base every four to six months so that you remain “top of mind.”

- The best time to conduct a job search is while you have a job. There is something psychological from the client perspective about recruiting someone out of a company. They tend to think that good people are in jobs, and there is some truth to that.
- If you do leave for a good reason, i.e., company take over, etc., then it is best to find a group to work with or start a consulting company. Again, it looks better on a resume than having nothing.



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