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## *Job Search 101: A Tool Kit for Job Seekers*

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### HAVE YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW LOST A JOB?



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EXECUTIVE SEARCH

In my role as managing partner of a respected 39-year-old executive search firm in Atlanta, I have interviewed well over a thousand candidates in my years with the firm and my team has interviewed thousands more.

Many of the candidates we meet are specifically recruited for searches we are running for our clients, many are referred from our large network and others seek us out because of our reputation for treating candidates professionally and offering candid and helpful advice.

As you can imagine in these tough economic times, we are dealing with a very large population of good people affected by corporate layoffs. Our company has observed common threads which link the vast majority of these candidates together.

For example:

- Their personal networks have been neglected while they pursued their career and are often starting job searches without a sizable or accessible source of friends and business colleagues to ask for help
- They don't have resumes or what they have is not presentable
- They are inexperienced at interviewing
- They are inexperienced at negotiating a compensation package
- They have not kept up with current hiring trends or growth industries
- Social networking web sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook are unfamiliar
- Networking is awkward and difficult
- Asking for job search assistance is often uncomfortable
- They believe that search firms help candidates find jobs when in fact, most search firms are hired by companies to fill open positions
- There is a strong sense of urgency to find a new job quickly for financial reasons

#### THE FOUR PHASES OF A JOB SEARCH:

- **Phase I: Losing Your Job & Starting Your Search**
- **Phase II: Building A Network**
- **Phase III: Interviewing**
- **Phase IV: Negotiating an Offer & Landing a New Job**

Although outplacement assistance is available to help some candidates, it is not a perk that all enjoy. Some times the outplacement assistance received by downsized employees is of questionable value and results in little more than an upgraded resume. Many candidates seek out professional coaches or pay companies to market their resumes in order to find them jobs. There are a few good career coaches around, but they are not always accessible or affordable for many candidates.

Be leery of firms who promise to market your resume for a fee—I have never heard of anyone getting a new job this way. These firms charge high fees and I am very skeptical of the value provided for such a high cost. I think we can agree that being out of work means you have finite financial resources, so *spend your money wisely*.

So, where does that leave a candidate in need of a job?

Quite simply, you need a game plan.

I would like to share with you the collective wisdom and experience of the partners and consultants in my firm on how to effectively manage your job search. There is no guarantee that a new job will result from these suggestions, but we do have the unique perspective of interviewing thousands of candidates and interacting with hundreds of clients to gain insight into best practices and “what works.”

The following information is a collection of the on-target strategies we have observed, but you should always feel comfortable experimenting and thinking creatively when developing your own strategy for finding a new career.



## **PHASE I: LOSING YOUR JOB & STARTING YOUR SEARCH**

Okay, you recently lost your job (or you know you are going to lose it) and need to get moving on your search. Don't panic! Also, don't take two months off to consider your next move. You need to get started right away, the competition is tough and the economy is challenging. In Phase 1 of the search, here are the most effective *Best Practices*.

- Remain positive!
- Make sure you collect the contact information of co-workers, clients, friends and anyone else who can help you with your search. Record all this information in a usable spreadsheet for future use.
- Ask for letters of recommendation from key leaders and co-workers in your company as soon as possible after you hear the news. You may get a refusal because of company policy, but we have observed that most of the time you can obtain these with little trouble. These letters can be helpful later during interviews.

**Tip:**  
**Effective job searches are completely dependent on your ability to build great relationships. These relationships need to be mutually beneficial, so remember to focus on the needs of others and not just your own.**

- Reach out to your network with a clear, positive e-mail message about your departure. Be sure to include your new contact information.
- Inquire about any contract or consulting work you can do for the company. Companies often lay off people, but still need their skills and expertise. Offering to work on special projects in a contractor/consultant role during your transition is appealing because it saves the company money (no benefits and reduced salary are likely) and it allows you to show continuous employment on your resume. Ask the question before you leave!
- Consider becoming a consultant on your own if there is legitimate work for you in the marketplace—it bridges the potential gaps in your resume.
- Have you applied for other jobs within the company? There may be roles for which you are well suited. Don't ignore this option.
- Develop a resume as soon as you hear the news. There are companies charging \$200 up to \$1,000 for this service and some of them are good, but many are not. You can research resume samples on Google and develop a good resume by yourself. If you are still not pleased with it, seek out a reputable firm. I suggest only working with resume experts who meet you in person and have a quantifiable track record of success.
- Leave on the very best of terms. You will need future references, referrals and other assistance from your former company. Don't burn a bridge!
- Develop a marketing plan which will target industries and specific companies that fit your background. The information you need is readily available through Google, LinkedIn, public libraries, online business magazines, Zoom Info and Dun and Bradstreet (there is a cost to buy certain reports from Zoom Info and D&B). This marketing strategy will be necessary to not waste time as you launch the networking phase of your search.
- Be realistic about the length of your search—it will likely take months, not weeks.
- Have professional business cards made. They're inexpensive and very important when networking.



## PHASE II: BUILDING A NETWORK

You have exited your former company on excellent terms and you are ready to join a new company ... fast! It is very important to recognize that traditional methods of searching for a new job rarely work any more.

Typically, you will find most jobs you apply for online fail to get a response, most positions you are interested in are rarely made public and I assure you it is highly unusual for someone to call you out of

the blue with a great opportunity. There has been a significant paradigm shift in job search that favors skilled networkers and relationship developers. Here are the *Best Practices* for networking from our experience and the feedback from our candidates:

- Be intentional! You should be networking with people who can give you valuable job search assistance. Don't waste time.
- Thank everyone and remember every kindness! Be professional and follow up every meeting with a handwritten note or at least a "thank you" e-mail.
- Find an accountability partner to push you. Ask a friend, your spouse or someone else you trust to hold you accountable in your search. Check in with them frequently and ask them for candid feedback on how you are doing. This process is difficult to do by yourself.
- Remember the importance of metrics. A very effective way to measure the effectiveness of your search is through meetings. I suggest having at least four meetings a week with people who can provide assistance with your job search. This is more effective than email blasts and mailing your resume.
- Contact the Alumni Office of the schools you attended and ask for access to the alumni directory. This is often found online and can be a fantastic resource.
- Join LinkedIn ([www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)), build your profile and pay for the upgrade to have full access to the tools and features on the site. For a useful article on this site, visit [www.belloaks.com](http://www.belloaks.com) and read *Practical LinkedIn* in the "Insights" section. The key is to use LinkedIn to connect directly and efficiently with hiring managers and useful contacts. There is some benefit to MySpace and Facebook depending on your generation (age!), but LinkedIn is specifically designed for business use and is the most widely used by professionals.
- Ask the senior executives of your former company(s) for referrals and active introductions to potential hiring managers in their network.
- Give your network a very clear request when asking for help: "I would be grateful for an active introduction to senior executives in your network. Would you please introduce me via email and send them my resume?" This is so much more effective than the more common: "Keep me in mind if you hear of anything." This is the *wrong* thing to say and will not yield good results.
- NEVER begin a conversation with a new networking contact like this: "I am in a job search. Can you help me?" ALWAYS offer assistance first! Make it about them and their needs, not just what you want. You can say, "I would like to explore ways we can help each other." Or "I would be glad to make my rolodex available to you and would be grateful for any networking help you can provide me." Starting with, "I am in a job search..." initiates defensive behaviors and up goes the proverbial wall.



- Become more active in the community. Aside from being the right thing to do, volunteering your time to non-profits and charities will gain you important exposure to other like-minded business people. Fair warning ... be sincere and remember the importance of giving back to others. Real stewardship can't be faked!
- Consider joining networking groups, but be selective. There are useful groups, but unfortunately many are a waste of time. Make sure the ones you select are relevant for you, have interesting speakers and utilize a plan for effectively sharing job leads.
- Get connected to reputable search firms. Remember, search firms work for client companies to find candidates for their open positions. There is a common misconception that search firms find people jobs. It is always good to be referred to key players in a firm, which enhances your profile and credibility. Do your homework on the Internet and ask around ... you will quickly see which firms are ethical and relationship focused. Key point: search firms want to help you, but outside of job search coaching they are often limited in the help they can provide by the types of searches they are working on.
- Develop an "elevator pitch" about your background and what you are seeking. You should be able to share in less than 60 seconds your measurable accomplishments and what you are looking for in a new opportunity.
- Attend seminars, workshops or conferences relevant to your industry to stay current and visible.
- Connect through content. Share relevant, informative articles with your network and potential hiring managers to demonstrate an interest in their business. It shows you are staying current. Even better, consider making a gift to a potential hiring manager of a book that has made an impact on you and accompany that with a handwritten note.



**TIP:**  
**When networking and asking for assistance, be very specific about the kind of help you need. For instance, "Bob, can you introduce me via email to the vice president of HR at your company and share my resume?"**

### PHASE III: INTERVIEWING

You have worked hard, followed the tips above and you are getting invited to interviews. Great job, but don't put your feet up yet! You made it through the mine fields to have an opportunity to interview, but the competition is fierce and you must stay focused.

Here are *Best Practices* for interviewing:

- Do your homework. Carefully research the company and the hiring manager(s) on the Internet. LinkedIn and Google are excellent resources for obtaining background information on people. Also, have questions ready for the person interviewing you. Never go to an interview unprepared.

- Be nice to the Receptionist. This person is the company's emissary to the world and is quick to size people up. Be courteous, professional and friendly ... much can be learned from a warm conversation. Expect their impressions of you to be conveyed to the hiring manager or HR department.
- A few basics: dress professionally, bring copies of your resume on quality paper, don't wear distracting cologne or perfume, don't chew gum (you wouldn't believe how many people do this!), arrive 15 minutes early, give quantifiable answers to questions, do not ramble, follow up with a thank-you note by dropping it off the next day if possible.
- Make a personal connection. You are looking to win an advocate for your candidacy as well as eventually get the job. Every person you meet in the interview process should tell the others involved: "Great candidate and good culture fit. I really like him/her." Remember that asking questions, commenting on pictures and diplomas in the office and highlighting shared interests changes an interview from *hiring authority and candidate* into *two people having a friendly conversation*. This is desirable and will serve you well throughout the process.
- Ask questions about culture in the interview. What are the values and vision of the company? Research will tell you much, but I suggest that hearing the answers directly from an employer will be more revealing. Make sure you share not only your skills and background in the interview, but how you would fit the culture. Many candidates forget to do this.
- Be clear and concise about why you are the right fit for the job. If you have done your homework, you will be able to relate specific parts of your background to the open position, emphasizing why you are the right person. Also, do NOT forget to express your interest in the job! I frequently hear from clients about their concern that a candidate didn't seem excited enough or interested in the position. Excitement is good, but be careful to not appear desperate!
- It is a good idea to offer references in the interview. If you followed the tips in Phase I, you will have gathered letters of recommendation and secured good references. Telling a hiring manager that you strongly suggest they "speak to someone who can describe my leadership of the sales team" will gain you an advantage and make you look more credible.
- Stay calm! Nervousness leads to over-talking which will negatively affect your chances.

**TIP:**  
**You have one opportunity to make a great first impression. Do your homework, dress professionally, follow up with a thank-you note in timely manner and think of creative ways to differentiate yourself.**

## PHASE IV: NEGOTIATING AN OFFER & LANDING A JOB

The interview or interviews have gone well and you have a realistic shot at landing a new job. You are in the last portion of your search journey and in many ways, it is the most crucial.

Negotiating the right offer can be difficult, but these *Best Practices* will help:

- Negotiating an offer can be a tricky thing if you are not prepared. You will always be asked, usually early in the process, what you are earning. Share your past compensation openly and candidly. This will be on the application anyway, so don't hide it.
- The REALLY difficult question is, "What sort of compensation package are you seeking?" It throws many people off! Answer this way: "I am very interested in this opportunity and have thoroughly enjoyed our conversation. I would like to move forward in the process and learn more about your organization and the team. I will commit to you that I am open to a fair and compelling offer." If pushed further, perhaps say "You know what I was earning before. I am open to the way the total package is structured, but certainly would prefer to avoid taking a step backward." It can be uncomfortable for many, but remember this: when you give a firm number, you're tied to that number. You may be underselling or eliminating yourself from further consideration by sharing firm numbers.
- Always address benefits early. An HR representative or the company web site will likely be the source of this information. Don't bring this up in your first meeting with a Hiring Manager, but try to determine if the healthcare and vacation coverage are adequate for your needs. Also, remember that benefits can be part of the bargaining process as well.
- Always get an offer in writing. Verbal offers are okay, but it must be followed by a written offer. There is often a strong desire from some employers to have an immediate answer, but you should always ask for some time to consider the offer ... even 24 hours is helpful. Evaluate it very carefully and consider the overall offer, your negotiable points and where you will not be able to budge.
- If you think there is an opportunity to negotiate, explore the subject carefully and professionally with the decision maker. For example, "I am very excited about the offer and look forward to a great career in your company. We are very close on the terms, but was wondering if you could consider increasing the base in order to keep me whole from my last position and also add a week of vacation, again to match what I had before. Your health benefits kick in after 90 days, which means I will be on COBRA during that time. Can you pick up that cost or help me offset it in some way? Everything else looks fantastic and I am hoping we can come to terms soon on these other points as I am eager to start."
- When you are ready to accept, do it both verbally and in writing. You will most likely sign an offer letter as well.
- Immediately let your network know that you have landed and share your new contact information. Absolutely take this opportunity to thank everyone for their kindness and willingness to help you.
- Remember, you will need this network again one day, so don't ignore or neglect what you have carefully built. Stay connected, pay it forward by helping others and continue meeting with key connectors after you start your new job. Avoid a common mistake: don't assume your network is unnecessary after you find a new job!



**TIP:**  
**You have landed a new job—congratulations! Now, be willing to pay it forward and help others who are still looking. Pass along the lessons you have learned and give them access to your network.**

To conclude, this is a comprehensive look at a solid and proven job search strategy. My firm gives this advice every day based on our experience and feedback we get from candidates and we are confident it will make you more effective. I view this list as ever evolving and you should always experiment and see what works best for you.

But, if you are stuck in your job search or see a friend struggling with theirs, follow the plan I have outlined here. I wish you the best of luck and hope my firm will be able to work with you in the future.

~ end ~

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*With a nearly 40-year legacy in executive search, Bell Oaks specializes in identifying, attracting and hiring professionals to critical positions with companies across the country. Founded in 1970, the national firm has particular expertise in the areas of sales and marketing, human resources, finance and accounting, information technology, and manufacturing/operations/engineering. Bell Oaks is consistently ranked as one of the leading search firms in the South and was recently named one of Atlanta's Best Places to Work by the Atlanta Business Chronicle for the third consecutive year.*

