

Career Coaching International

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WHY CAPABLE PEOPLE CAN'T GET A JOB

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Almost everyone who has found themselves unemployed has experienced the terrible delays of finding and getting a new job. After dozens, if not hundreds, of job applications the candidate remains without any signs of interest by companies. Yet, these individuals know they have desirable skills and work habits. Most frustrating is the experience of applying for a job at which the person is totally qualified, yet not a peep – not a job, not an interview, not a short list indication, in fact, not even an acknowledgement of having applied. At this point, the individual starts to look inward: “What’s wrong with me? Am I too old? Am I disadvantaged being an immigrant to this country? Am I just unlucky?” The answer is that there is nothing wrong with you. It is a lack of understanding of the job-search dynamics that creates the difficulty. This paper describes three with a focus on one, the gatekeepers.

What is Normal?

What is normal is not having a job. What is abnormal is having a job, even for professionals, despite conventional thinking to the contrary. While most professionals are accustomed to being employed, little do they recognize their good fortune in having a job, especially one that is personally fulfilling. They only realize this when they become unemployed for a while.

That is because in order for a person to have a job there has to be an alignment of a whole host of parameters: the technical skills, personality, the amount of relevant experience the employer’s job needs, a healthy company that can afford to hire a professional, being in the right geographical area where such a requirement exists, knowing that such a position is open, the number of equally qualified applicants, etc. etc. Think of the enormous odds of aligning those two subsets of data to fit: that is, the employer’s need vs. the employee’s situation.

Because people think having a job is normal, they get down on themselves for being unemployed.

Instead, we at CCI try to change people’s thinking to a more positive bent. “Being unemployed has nothing to do with any weakness I have, but rather with my trying to align my situation with job opportunities. Therefore I have a lot of work to do to find and connect that alignment.”

Problem One: Where you look

When you buy a 649 lottery ticket you do so, not expecting to win, but nonetheless hoping that you do cash in. You can clearly see the goal of \$1 million dollars and you know that your ticket has as much chance as anyone else’s. Yet, you also know that your odds at 100,000 to one or higher leave you with little chance. Nevertheless you are assured that somebody has to win.

When you apply for an advertised job, you are engaging in a lottery. You can see the prize, you want it, you know that someone has to win it, and you know that you are as good a candidate for the position as anyone else (by analogy, your \$2 is as good as anyone else’s).

The first problem is that this is a lottery. There may be a dozen applicants. So aside from any other consideration if you are among a dozen applicants your odds are 1 in 12. Those are terrible odds. You would walk away from a poker game if you were confronted with such odds.

Solution: Avoid spending most of your time searching the public job domain. Instead, learn to focus on the unpublished job domain where (a) 60% to 80% of the jobs lie and (b) competition is reduced by a factor of 100 times. A later CCI paper will focus on how to do that. This paper will focus on understanding the difficulties within the traditional job market and therefore, why you should reject it as your primary source for a job.

Problem Two: Getting Past the Gatekeepers

Assuming that you do qualify perfectly for an advertised position, and because you will not be the only applicant, someone will take a cursory look at all the applicants before passing them onto the hiring manager. We call these people gatekeepers. Gatekeepers present you with a whole host of difficulties:

- They're in a hurry
- They may be lazy
- They may not know the technicalities
- Dynamics shifts from selection to rejection
- They introduce their own prejudices
- They may be covering up a job fix

Let's discuss each separately.

Gatekeepers in a Hurry

By the time the manager has formalized a job description, passed it to the Human Resources department (HR), got it published in the newspaper or online, the manager requiring the person is frantic. Probably this position has remained unfilled for 3 or 4 weeks. The manager has impossible production deadlines to meet and is trying to do so short-staffed. Other employees are complaining of being overworked and customers are complaining too. It seems to the manager that HR is taking forever to get the job posted.

Not only that, HR and the manager wasted four days arguing about how the job should be defined, not to mention that the Senior VP, who has to approve the job posting, was on a trip to Europe for a week. As a result, the manager issues the order to HR: "Come on. We don't have all month. We need an able body as soon as possible. Let's speed up all this bureaucracy." The manager is at war with HR.

And HR is not amused. They feel unappreciated by having to work against impossible deadlines. This is not the only job in their portfolio, even though that manager may think it is.

So, they accelerate the process, quickly dismissing anyone not perfectly qualified or perhaps accepting and interviewing the first 'qualified' applicant that comes in the door.

Laziness

While no one is saying that gatekeepers are lazy, there is a human truism that applies. The gatekeeper is a tenant in this selection job, not the owner. Owners take pride and care. In this case the manager for whom the person would work is the 'owner' whereas the gatekeeper is a less interested 'tenant'. This is not unlike a house ownership or rental situation. Who has more at stake: the owner or the tenant? And the pressure is on to get results quickly. So the gatekeepers will look for shortcuts especially when confronted with 95 resumes when only six or so were expected. First they make the clever decision that they will not allow applicants to contact HR by phone. Second they will not waste time responding to applicants who fail to make the cut. They may even mention these two 'carelessness's' in their ads!

Gatekeepers who don't understand the Job

If a job is begging for a particle physicist with accelerator experience which includes the statistical manipulation of large data sets, it is highly unlikely that a gatekeeper would understand enough subtle aspects of the job to filter out who qualifies and who does not. Thus good people who might fit the job could easily be rejected.

Once we were confronted with a position that demanded a senior management engineer with an MBA, but, understanding the technicalities of the position we were able to see and successfully place a PhD in agriculture with government experience at senior levels, into the post.

Dynamics of Rejection by Gatekeepers

If the manager, Fred, expects 4 or 5 applicants to his Purchasing Manager's job and instead is inundated with 95 candidates, what is he to do? "I don't have time to look at 95 applications: I can't even meet my present shipping deadlines!" So he passes the culling process to someone else. It could be an HR department, an administrative assistant, or a more junior manager. As stated before, it is highly unlikely that this gatekeeper would understand enough subtle aspects of the job to filter or screen out who qualifies and who does not. More important the culling process

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shifts from the dynamics of acceptance to the dynamics of rejection.

In the dynamics of selection, one examines the resumes to determine who is the most acceptable. The focus is on the relevant skill sets of the individuals.

However, in the dynamics of rejection, one examines the resumes to find reasons to get rid of the resume from an already-too-large stack. The focus is on minor and unimportant characteristics instead of on the relevant and key skill sets. These minor characteristics that make up perhaps 10% of the total importance of the resume become the all-consuming focus while the remaining 90% is bypassed. Rejection might come about because the person is not bilingual (assuming it is a desirable, but not mandatory requirement), lives too far away from the office, does not use the word “purchasing” anywhere in the resume, etc., etc. The point is that most applicants are being evaluated against less important characteristics rather than unimportant characteristics.

(The proper way to assess applicants is to read each and every one of the resumes with a focus on strengths, not weaknesses. See reference 1.)

Prejudices of Gatekeepers

Given the responsibility to reject applicants and to eliminate them as quickly as possible, it is easy for the gatekeepers to consciously or subconsciously inject personal prejudices into the rejection process. After all, their job is to find reasons to reject as many as possible as quickly as possible.

Stories abound of rejection taking place because of the foreign aspect of people’s names, location, race, sex, typos in the resume (does a voice over IP electronics engineer really have to type well?), format preferences of resumes, length of resumes, poor English usage, etc. The list is as long as the list of gatekeepers out there.

The Job-Fix by Gatekeepers

The most pernicious possibility is when a gatekeeper is given the responsibility to go through the hiring process to satisfy internal bureaucracy when the successful candidate has already been decided by the department. This injustice creates not only work for the gatekeeper but also work and emotional investment by the

applicants – all to satisfy a dysfunctional entity that creates one set of rules and operates by another. The lack of respect shown the candidates by a ‘fix’ is despicable.

Problem Three: Not Giving a Compelling Story

Last of the three reasons, of this paper, why one cannot find work lies in the resume itself. This will be the subject of another paper. Nevertheless, in point form, a resume should:

- Tell a compelling life story
- Grab the reader’s immediate attention
- Avoid any exaggerations or ambiguities
- Allow for an easy fit between the job need and applicant’s skills
- Allow for a positive rejection (a bad job fit serves no one’s interests)
- Reflect not only the skills of the individual but also make the personality of the applicant shine through
- Be easy to adjust to the specific job description

If that is done, hiring managers will be salivating when reading the resume. When the manager invites this person in for an interview it is because the manager has already decided that “this is the person we want.” The interview will only serve as a confirmation.

Summary

First, the focus on the right job market – the unpublished one – not only increases your odds by 100 to one, but also we find at CCI that such pursuits often results in your being the only applicant for the job.

Second, the unpublished job market avoids all the difficulties of gatekeepers, because employers:

- while they’re in a hurry, they are in a hurry to fill the job, not to reject people
- are ‘owners’ not ‘tenants and therefore have no incentive to be lazy
- know the technicalities of the job
- lean towards dynamics of selection, not rejection
- have no reasons for applying prejudices
- will not be engaged in a job fix

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Third, a well-conceived resume that digs under the surface to identify who you really are and then conveys that to the reader speeds up the hiring process for all.

Good luck and good hunting.

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References

(1) Caswell, W., *Feeding or Starving the Organization*, Caswell Press, Ottawa ON, 2004

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