

How to Find Work in a Tough Market

A 3 Part Series

Pam Johnson, M.Ed



Positioning Yourself for the Right Position

In the same way you wouldn't marry just anybody, you don't want to work for just anybody. You want to work for an employer you admire and respect, whose goals and values align with yours. Since you will be spending a tremendous amount of time with that employer (most people spend more time with their employer than anyone else), you want that relationship to work – to be productive and mutually beneficial. You therefore want to do direct, firsthand labour market research in advance of accepting a job, to determine which employers meet your needs *and* which employers value your skills and abilities.

The best position for any job seeker is to be perceived by targeted employers as a skilled and able worker, waiting in the wings ready to replace an 'indispensable' employee. If ABC company has a reputation as a fair and appreciative employer, chances are they have been able to attract good workers and therefore have relatively low turnover. If they know that you have everything they seek in a qualified employee and understand their needs as a business, then you can "save the day" by stepping in when an opening unexpectedly occurs. It is therefore worthwhile to target such employers and market yourself to them in an effective manner, in *advance* of any advertised or known openings.

People leave their jobs for various reasons. The employer doesn't know for if someone is leaving until they have actually given notice. If your approach is to call and ask if there are openings, you will be severely limiting your options. The employer often responds in the negative to this question, even if there is an opening (why would they tell you about a position if they know nothing about you?). You courteously respond by thanking them for their time and continue your campaign of looking for someone with "openings" or someone who is "accepting resumes". Think about this: you could hang up the phone, Jane Smith could walk in 5 minutes later and announce her resignation, and they don't even have your number. How can you "position" yourself so that you are ready for that next opening, assuming you are similarly qualified to Jane Smith?

You must speak to employers personally and directly. First, determine which employers have the kind of work you are interested in. Then contact these companies and ask to meet with the person in charge for the purpose of discussing such things as local labour market information, future prospects, industry directions - whatever terminology you're comfortable using. If you make your approach in a way that stimulates the desire to be helpful and inspires curiosity, there are employers who will offer you their time. Think about how you will word your request. Be sure to express your interest in them and their needs. When requesting a meeting, say something like, "I'm interested in your company because your mission is very similar to my own goals. I wonder if you'd have a few minutes to meet with me to discuss your perspective on the labour market with respect to someone with skills like mine." Then set up a business/research meeting of 15-20 minutes to explore their knowledge of the industry: its demands, expectations, and future. In that meeting, ask 'information' questions that stimulate conversation, primarily questions about their business and their perspective on the industry. Try such questions such as:

- What can you tell me about your /customers/market/products/purpose/philosophy/mandate/mission/vision? *Be sure to do your homework and start by indicating what you already know about them, having read their literature or explored their website*
- How many staff/departments do you have and what do they do?
- What are the most essential aspects of your particular position (*as manager /supervisor/ director*)? Persistent challenges?
- What do you see as the future of this industry?
- What is involved in _____ job (the one you are interested in)?

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Once the employer sees your interest in them and your sincere curiosity, their interest in you will naturally be piqued. Then you can ask 'advice' questions, such as:

- How often do openings occur, generally? How would someone find out about openings?
- When you read my resume, what types of positions come to mind? *This question assumes you have brought your resume and are ready to present it at an opportune time for the purpose of asking their advice.*
- What would be the general salary range for _____ (type of job)? *This question is optional, since some people are not comfortable asking it, however it forms an important part of many people's career research. Remember, you are only asking for an industry or occupation range.*
- What qualities/abilities/qualifications do you seek in your employees/staff?

You can choose any or all from the above sample questions or make up your own. Remember, it's your research. Therefore, you get to decide what information and advice is important to you. Finally, ask for leads to 2 or 3 other people who can broaden your knowledge of the industry. Many employers will be glad to accommodate such requests for networking referrals, having enjoyed their talk with you and the opportunity to share their knowledge in a professional meeting, with no strings attached and no expectation to hire you. This is a very useful rapport-building tool, which employers often enjoy and appreciate, as it focuses on *them*, and gives them a chance to meet a potential future employee in a relaxed and informal setting.

Be sure to keep your meeting brief, about 15-20 minutes, and be sure to drop off a 'thank you' note no later than the next day. If you follow a plan such as this, you can quickly establish a network of employers who know you and know how you can help them. You have made yourself easy to remember and very accessible when a suitable position becomes available. If you are well-qualified and you understand employers' recruitment challenges, you have done them a favour. Employers are bound to appreciate that.

Finally, using this method gives you the opportunity to shop around; to put your feelers out for a "good match". Remember, you are looking for an organization to work with that will meet *your* needs too!

