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IT CAREER EXPERT
Picking the right recruiter
By Terry Sweeney
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Rating: --- (out of 5)

Listen to their feedback. Heed their instructions. Treat them as if they were your employer since in a large, if finite sense, they are.

They are professional recruitment firms and employment agencies. And they're not the WillWorkForFood.com resume mills -- they're more service-minded third parties that specialize in IT positions across lots of different technical and geographical areas. They make their money when a client -- potentially your future employer -- hires one of their prospects.

And while recruiters or agencies should not be the only means that Windows professionals use to find gainful employment or change jobs, they can be an effective channel alongside social networking, volunteering, education and even using one or more resume mill.

"Of course the market is tight, but it's a lot less tight for those people who are able to communicate their skills well," said Dan Swanson director, business development, Mindbank Consulting Group, a recruiter in Vienna, Va. And what today's applicants may not fully grasp is how intense the competition is just to get an interview, much less a job offer. "People don't differentiate themselves, and that's the same now or a few years ago when you

could get a job by walking up to the door. We joke, but it was almost that good."

Those were the days.

While Swanson's assessment won't surprise anyone, he and other employment professionals agree there are lots of things IT candidates can do to improve their chances and shorten the time it takes to get interviews and job offers.

Pick wisely

Poised at the starting line, job seekers need to do some due diligence to ensure the firm they're working with is the best fit. And the best way to ensure a fit is to ask peers about their experience, according to Katherine Spencer Lee, executive director of recruiting company Robert Half Technology, a division of RHI, Menlo Park, Calif. "Ask someone at the next NT Users Group how they got their last job, and what search firms they've worked with," she said. Lee also advises asking if the recruiter is specialized in technology, whether they work with people like you and are they going to place you well within this specialized realm.

Mindbank's Swanson said that recruiters are a good way of practicing for an interview and finding out about what's out there job-wise. The firm should offer feedback about interviewing, communication skills and enhancements for the resume. "A good search company will train you on these kinds of things before submitting your name to one of their clients," Swanson added. "If a recruiter calls and asks for a resume but doesn't want to get to know you, they're not adding any value to you or their client. Avoid those companies -- they're just resume shops."

All in the presentation

Recruiters and agencies can help with presentation skills. No, not the cool PowerPoint kind. What a good agency or search firm can do is assist with everything from the resume to personal comportment and selling the idea and tangible benefits of a product called "You."

Buzzwords are great if only to ensure that your resume gets flagged by the filters used by recruiters, according to Mindbank's Swanson. "Being a J2EE developer or having experience with an e-commerce application is nice, but what differentiates you from all the other resumes flagged for those key words?" Resumes today must go beyond the laundry list of skills and certifications. "Companies are looking for those who can contribute to the bottom line, manage costs, and make an ROI for the company's investment."

Another quality employers are looking for is tenure and stability, according to Chris Chisholm, director of technology for central region at Corestaff Services, a recruiting concern in Houston. So if applicants have been consulting on a variety of jobs in the last year or so, they should not list them individually, she advised.

"When candidates have worked at several different contract or consulting positions, it looks skimpy as far as tenure is concerned," Chisholm said. "Put all your consulting assignments together under a single heading so it doesn't look so choppy."

If you get an actual interview, take personal presentation seriously. "If you're going to an interview with a client, dress up. Let the client invite you to dress more casually. And you need to be clean and look like you're a professional," Swanson said. Does something so glaringly self-evident really need to be said? "You'd be amazed," he replied.

So if you've showered, shown up on time, talked intelligently, and asked probing questions, you've probably aced the interview. "If you're really interested, ask for the job," said Lee of Robert Hald. "It shows you have a high level of interest and are a personality that can get things done."

Find a specialty

Applicants should also consider emphasizing a specialty. Chisholm reports that there are lots of government IT jobs in the eastern U.S. So Windows professionals who have government contracting experience or any kind of security clearances should pay attention.

"When you swim in the ocean of engineering and administration of Windows 2000 or XP, you need to have a strong knowledge base of security -- emphasize what you have done with virtual private networks or security tools like Cisco PIX, and Watchguard and Checkpoint, or even in identity management," Robert Half Technology's Lee said. "When we talk to CIOs and our clients, security is of paramount importance."

Finally, if an offer comes, make sure you've done enough research to know what jobs are paying. Don't price yourself out of the market. "When I ask people what they're basing their salary expectations on, they'd better be able to answer it," Lee said.

Terry Sweeney is a freelance writer and editor based in Los Angeles.

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