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## Step-by-Step Guide to Researching Companies

by *Randall S. Hansen, Ph.D.*

One of the most important skills a job-seeker can learn during a job-search is research skills. The quality of your research skills may make or break your job search. So, make the commitment to improve your research skills. You'll find that that research skills will not only help you in searching for a new job, but will come in handy in many other situations in the future.

Information is a critical commodity in job-hunting; the more you know and the easier it is for you to find information, the better your chances of success. Employers value job-seekers who know key information about the company because that knowledge demonstrates your interest and enthusiasm for the company and for the job. This article will take you on a short journey through the basic steps in conducting company research.

### Step 1: When to Do Research

For most job-seekers, there are three critical times to conduct research. The first is when you are just starting your job-search and looking to identify key companies in your profession or industry, or even in a specific geographic location. The second possibility is when you are applying to an employer; it's always best to relate yourself to the company and tailor your cover letter and resume to each employer. The third -- and when most job-seekers finally do some research -- is when you have been invited to a job interview; you'll want to showcase your knowledge of the company.

The sooner you get started, the better off you'll be.

### Step 2: Determine What Information You Want

You are usually seeking two sets of information.

The first set of information deals with general company information. The types of information you might gather here include: products and services, history and corporate culture, organizational mission and goals, key financial statistics, organizational structure (divisions, subsidiaries, etc.), and locations (main and branch).

The second set of information deals with employment issues, and includes such things as career paths and advancement opportunities, benefits, diversity initiatives, and other human resources functions.

Of course, you may also research the industry, key competitors, and

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countries where the company has offices.

### Step 3: Short Cuts/Starting Points

If you really have no idea of what companies might be best for you, there are some good places to start. A number of media have already done the research for you - and have produced various "best" lists. . . best companies for women, best private companies, best employee-owned companies, etc.

Go to our [The Best Companies for Job-Seekers](#) section to take advantage of these short cuts.

### Step 4: Where to Find Company Information

Probably the single best resource of company information is the company's Website. You can find the company site by trying to type the company name in your browser. For example, if you were trying to find information on Aetna, all you need to do is enter [www.aetna.com](http://www.aetna.com) and you're at the company's Website. However, not all companies have such obvious Web addresses, so the next easiest thing to do is go to your favorite search engine, such as [Google.com](http://Google.com), and type the company's name in the search box. Then simply follow the link to the company's Website.

Sometimes the information you'll find on a company's Website is limited. While the trend is certainly for companies to place more and more information on their sites, private companies (not traded on any stock exchange) tend to have less need to provide sensitive information. What can you do in these situations? The next best solution is to read outside reviews and profiles of companies.

Among the two best sources for gathering information on public companies are [BusinessWeek Online: Company Research](#) and [Hoovers Online](#).

Finding information about private companies -- and the vast majority of all companies in the U.S. are private -- is a bit trickier. Two good sources are the [Forbes Largest Private Companies](#) list and [The Inc. 500](#) list of America's fastest growing privately-held companies.

If you are interested in working for a non-profit organization or association, the best research tools to use include the resources we provide in our [Volunteering and Non-Profit Career Resources](#) and [General Professional Organizations and Associations](#).

Another great source of company information comes from articles and stories published in various media outlets. There are literally thousands of media outlets, from national news and business publications to specialized industry-specific publications. A good source for finding media that cover your industry is [NewsLink](#).

One other tool we've developed here at Quintessential Careers is the [Quintessential Directory of Company Career Centers](#). You'll find several hundred companies, organized alphabetically, as well as by rankings.

Find more resources in our [Guide to Researching Companies, Industries, and Countries](#).

**Step 5: Getting Industry Information**

The next level of sophistication in conducting research is getting a handle on the competitive nature of the industry (or industries) that your list of companies operate within. It is within the competitive environment that you might be able to spot trends that are either opportunities or threats for your prospective employers.

The best Web-based source for industry information is [Hoover's Industry Snapshots](#), where you'll find profiles, resources, headlines and more for major industry and service sectors. Another good source is [Industry Portals](#), a listing of links to many different industries.

The best print source is a U.S. government publication: *U.S. Industrial Outlook*, from the Bureau of Industrial Economics.

Find more resources in our [Guide to Researching Companies, Industries, and Countries](#).

**Step 6: Gathering Country and Place-of-Living Information**

The final step in your research process may be to gather information about specific parts of the U.S. or other countries -- to help you decide if you want to relocate to where a prospective employer is located.

For conducting research within the U.S., we recommend [Sperling's BestPlaces.net](#), where you'll find a wealth of data, statistics, and comparisons about U.S. cities and counties.

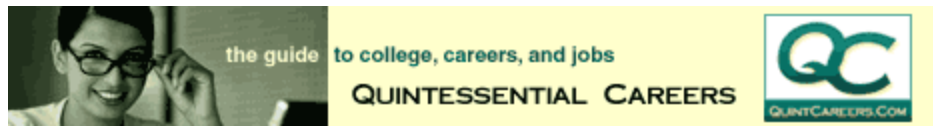
For developing a better understanding of locations outside the U.S, we recommend the [CIA World Factbook](#), which contains detailed snapshots, compiled by the U.S. government, of just about every country in the world.

Find more resources in our [Guide to Researching Companies, Industries, and Countries](#).

Questions about some of the terminology used in this article? Get more information (definitions and links) on key college, career, and job-search terms by going to our [Job-Seeker's Glossary of Job-Hunting Terms](#).

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*Dr. Randall Hansen is currently Webmaster of Quintessential Careers, as well as publisher of its electronic newsletter, [QuintZine](#). He writes a biweekly career advice column under the name, [The Career Doctor](#). He is also a tenured, associate professor of marketing in the School of Business Administration at Stetson University in DeLand, Florida. He is a published career expert -- and has been for the last ten years. He is co-author, with Katharine Hansen, of Dynamic Cover Letters. And he has been an employer and consultant dealing with hiring and firing decisions for the past fifteen years. He can be reached at [randall@quintcareers.com](mailto:randall@quintcareers.com).*



Quintessential Careers -- DeLand, FL 32720

Home Page: <http://www.quintcareers.com/>

Email: [randall@quintcareers.com](mailto:randall@quintcareers.com)

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