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10 Reality Checks of Job-Hunting: Overcoming Common Job-Search Mistakes

by Katharine Hansen and Randall S. Hansen, Ph.D.

If you've been searching unsuccessfully for a new job for some time now -- or if you're about to start a job-search -- you'll want to review the 10 job-hunting concepts we discuss in this article. We refer to these job-search concepts as reality checks because we so frequently hear from job-seekers who have been struggling to find a new job but are approaching one or more aspects of their search unrealistically. If you're having difficulty finding a new job, you too may need a reality check.

You need a reality check if...

You're only spending a small portion of your time on job-hunting activities.

Many experts believe job-hunting should in itself be a full-time job. If you're in school or employed while seeking a better job, your time may be somewhat limited. But you should put as much time as you can into it. Try to contact people in your network every day with the goal of setting up interviews with your contacts or people they've referred you to.

If you have other time commitments (such as a current job), carve out time, such as very early in the morning or during the evening, to work on job-hunting tasks (such as polishing your resume) that don't need to be done during business hours. Try to schedule interviews for lunch hours, early mornings, or late afternoons so you take little or no time away from your job.

If you're unemployed, treat job-hunting as though it is a job. Invest time in your search just as you would a typical workweek.

You need a reality check if...

You are conducting a "scattershot" approach to your job-search.

Some job-seekers think the best way to find a new job is to apply for as many jobs with as many employers as possible. Some job-seekers even apply to multiple positions within the same company and jobs they are not totally qualified for. The faulty thinking behind this strategy is that the more jobs you apply for, the more likely at least one of these efforts will result in a job interview. Beyond the flawed logic here, the other problem with this strategy is giving yourself a false sense that you are actively seeking a new job.

The reality is that the best job-search efforts are ones that are focused on specific jobs with specific employers. Employers want candidates



with specialized qualifications and accomplishments. And the glut of resumes from unqualified and marginally qualified candidates is a major factor in the growing ineffectiveness of Internet job hunting.

So use your time more wisely conducting research on jobs and employers and target a select group with a detailed job-search strategy rather wasting your time and energy on a scattershot approach.

You need a reality check if...

You rely on advertised job openings for job leads.

While job ads (in newspapers or online job boards) are useful research tools, you as the job-seeker should not count on these job openings as your sole -- or even a major -- job-search method. Very few job-seekers ever get a job through this method; however, job ads do serve a useful purpose in researching the qualifications employers seek. You can then develop a tailored resume and cover letter full of keywords, even using some of the employer's own buzzwords.

A better way to conduct this type of research -- and a better way of discovering employers who might have job openings -- is to go directly to each company's Website and search its career or human-resources section. Some employers have an amazing amount of information published on their sites, including job openings, job application procedures, career paths/tracks, corporate culture, and much more.

If you're struggling with a better way to find job openings, read, [10 Ways to Develop Job Leads](#).

You need a reality check if...

You're really not all that comfortable "using" people through networking.

If you're squeamish about networking because it feels like using people, you've got the wrong idea about networking. But you're not alone in this feeling. Many individuals are uncomfortable with the notion of networking because of the creepy -- and untrue -- idea that networking means using people. Successful networking doesn't mean milking your contacts for all they're worth; it means a give and take. Networking is at its most effective when both the networker and the contact reciprocally benefit from the relationship. Even if your contact does not benefit immediately from knowing you, he or she should gain something from the relationship eventually.

Networking doesn't mean asking everyone you run into if they know where the job openings are. It means establishing relationships so that you can enlist support and comfortably ask for ideas, advice, and referrals to those with hiring power. Networking is the process through which you get connected and build relationships with people who can help advance your career.

Don't you have to know a lot of people already to be able to network effectively? Absolutely not. All you have to do is want to know more people than you do now, people who can assist you in your quest for your ideal job. And you should also be willing to do as much as you can to encourage others to want to get to know you and help you. It takes only one person to start your network because that person can refer you to others, and your network will expand exponentially. Your goal should be forming relationships that are so powerful that your contacts feel invested in your success - and you in theirs. When one of your contacts has some promising career information to impart, the first person he or

she will want to tell is a friend -- you, if you've successfully built the relationship.

For more about networking see our [Critical Career Networking Resources for Job-Seekers](#).

You need a reality check if...

You only have one "one-size-fits-all" version of your resume.

In a recent study by CareerBuilder.com, 71 percent of hiring managers said they preferred a resume customized for the open position. And in an age when we can all easily manipulate our own computer files, there's little excuse not to tailor your resume -- at least somewhat -- to each job you apply for. Maybe you simply adjust your Objective statement. Maybe you tweak your Professional Profile or Qualifications Summary to suit each job. Perhaps you emphasize different skills and accomplishments for each job you apply to.

For some job-seekers, the idea of tweaking your resume for each job you apply for is unrealistic. But even if you are unwilling to change your resume to increase its chances of prompting an interview, you will likely need more than one version of your resume to accommodate the preferred delivery methods of multiple employers.

More than 80 percent of employers are now placing resumes directly into searchable databases and an equal percentage of employers prefer to receive resumes by e-mail. To meet the delivery requirements of most employers, it's an absolute must these days to have:

- A formatted, "print" resume in document form that you can send as an attachment to an e-mail message to the employer.
- A text-based (ASCII text) e-resume stripped of most formatting and pasted directly into the same e-mail message sent to the employer (can also be pasted into application/resume submission forms on online job boards). Read more in our article [Top 10 Things You Need to Know about E-Resumes](#).

Beyond those two types, you might need a Portable Document Format (PDF) resume, a Rich Text Format (RTF) resume, and a Web-based (HTML) resume. Read more about these delivery methods in our article, [Your E-resume's File Format Aligns with its Delivery Method](#).

And, if you you're a career-changer, or have minimal experience, highly diverse experience, or gaps in your work history, you may want to consider multiple organizational formats for arranging your information on your resume. Such variations include the traditional chronological resume, the functional resume, and the hybrid or chrono-functional resume. Read more in our article [What Resume Format is Best for You?](#)

You need a reality check if...

Your resume is not a marketing document loaded with keywords and accomplishments.

Too many job-seekers confuse resumes with job applications. They think a resume should be a dry recitation of *every* aspect of their job history, including duties and responsibilities of each job. In fact, resumes should be marketing documents that entice employers to invite you for an interview. That means that resumes should focus on the highlights of what will sell you to an employer -- information that tells the employer what you can contribute to the organization. In today's world of job-

hunting, accomplishments and keywords are two of the critical elements your resume needs to prompt employers to interview you.

Job-hunting today increasingly revolves around the mysterious world of keywords. Employers' increasing dependence on keywords to find the job candidates they want to interview has come about in recent years because of technology. Inundated by resumes from job-seekers, employers have increasingly relied on digitizing job-seeker resumes, placing those resumes in keyword-searchable databases, and using software to search those databases for specific keywords that relate to job vacancies. Most *Fortune* 1000 companies, in fact, and many smaller companies now use these technologies. In addition, many employers search the databases of third-party job-posting and resume-posting boards on the Internet.

The bottom line is that if you apply for a job with a company that searches databases for keywords, and your resume doesn't have the keywords the company seeks for the person who fills that job, you are pretty much out of luck. Read more about the importance of keywords in our article [Tapping the Power of Keywords to Enhance Your Resume's Effectiveness](#) and how you can identify the best keywords in [Resources for Identifying Keywords](#) and [Researching Keywords in Employment Ads](#).

Accomplishments are the points that really help sell you to an employer -- much more so than everyday job duties. In fact, there's a direct relationship between keywords and accomplishments in that keywords can be tied to accomplishments rather than job duties, so a good way to make the leap from keyword to a nice, contextual bullet point is to take each keyword you've identified as critical to the job and list an accomplishment that tells how you've used the skill represented by that keyword. For more about maximizing your accomplishments in an e-resume, see our article, [For Job-Hunting Success: Track and Leverage Your Accomplishments](#).

Professional resume writers specialize in transforming mundane resumes into sparkling, enticing marketing pieces; consider hiring one of these experts if you can't get your resume to sing. Our sister site, [Quintessential Resumes and Cover Letters](#), offers such a service.

You need a reality check if...

You've posted your resume on a few job boards and are waiting for employers to contact you.

The key to any successful job search is mixing up your job-search techniques so you do not rely on any one method, whether it is posting resumes on the Internet, answering ads, networking, making targeted contacts, or cold-calling. Statistics vary on the percentage of job-seekers who find jobs through the Internet, but most studies suggest figures in the single digits. The largest percentage of job-seekers succeed in landing jobs through networking. Therefore, job-hunting time should be invested in proportion to the methods that are likely to be most fruitful. You will likely find it more effective, for example, to spend four hours networking with colleagues at the meeting of a professional organization in your field than to use those same four hours posting your resume on Internet job boards.

But beyond mixing up job-search methods in general, the wise job-seeker also mixes things up within individual methods. Take posting resumes on job boards, for instance. An increasing number of

employers are using their own Websites to seek job candidates rather than through the major boards, such as Monster.com. So it makes sense to check out company Web sites, using, for example, [The Quintessential Directory of Company Career Centers](#) or [DirectEmployers](#), a site that enables job-seekers to apply directly to company Web sites instead of third-party sites. Job-seekers may also find success in posting resumes on smaller, niche job boards that are [industry-specific](#) or [geography-specific](#). Sites that cover [classified ads](#) for multiple newspapers may also be useful.

Finally, virtually every job-search method requires follow-up. Experts are now suggesting that submitting frequent -- even daily -- updates of your resume to the major job boards will keep your resume near the top of the virtual stack. If you've taken a step beyond merely posting your resume on job boards and are submitting your resume and cover letter in response to Internet job postings, follow-up, though difficult, is also advisable. See more about follow-up below.

You need a reality check if...

You don't follow up with each employer after sending your resume and cover letter.

Some job-seekers think their task is complete once they send their cover letter and resume to an employer, but the reality is that their work has just begun. Job-seekers should state in the cover letter that they will follow-up with the employer (ideally the hiring manager) at some specified time, usually a week to ten days. That's the easy part; the hard part for most job-seekers is actually following-up.

Some job-seekers see this type of follow-up as too aggressive; it is not. Following-up with a prospective employer to check on the status of your application conveys interest and enthusiasm on your part -- as long as the follow-up is conducted professionally.

Other job-seekers find it too hard to actually obtain a phone number or email address of the hiring manager. This situation is a reality in today's job market, but here's where having a network of contacts can pay off, because if you have a network contact who works at the employer, he or she should be able to get the information you need to follow-up. You can also try our old technique of calling each prospective employer's receptionist and asking to speak with the hiring manager.

In any job market, it's the job-seeker who continues to show interest in the job opening who gets the edge over other job-seekers.

You need a reality check if...

You don't prepare for job interviews by anticipating questions and researching the company.

One of the worst ways job-seekers can sabotage their job searches is by not preparing enough for the job interview. When you get invited to an interview it means that on paper you meet or exceed the employer's expectations, but it's at the interview where you can close the deal and beat out the other job-seekers who are also interviewing for the position.

The best way to prepare for job interviews is by anticipating the type of interview and interview questions and by researching the company thoroughly. There are several types of interview styles, from traditional interviews to behavioral interviews to panel interviews. Each type of interviewing format presents its own challenges and opportunities. Whenever possible, it best to uncover the type of interview you can

expect -- and then plan for it by preparing (but not memorizing) answers to those questions. And if you haven't had an interview in a while, it might be best to conduct a mock interview with a career professional or trusted colleague.

By researching the employer and showcasing that information in an interview, you are demonstrating your interest and commitment to the company. One of the most common interview questions is "tell me what you know about our company." One job-seeker we know actually creates a small binder for each employer, filled mostly with pages printed directly from the employer's Web site; and in every interview where he has used this method, pulling the binder out to showcase his research, he has impressed the interviewers. Learn more in our [Step-by-Step Guide to Researching Companies](#).

And to discover more about types of job interviews, interviewing strategies, and interview preparation, go to our [Guide to Job Interviewing Resources](#).

You need a reality check if...

You don't follow up regularly with employers you've interviewed with to keep your name at the top of the list.

No question about it -- once you've had an interview with an employer, you *must* not only thank the employer for the time spent interviewing you, but continue to follow up, treading that fine line between showing your persistence and enthusiasm for the job and making a complete pest of yourself. Be sure to discern a timeframe for the employer's hiring decision before even leaving the interview. Tailoring your follow-up schedule to that timeframe, plan on regular phone or e-mail contacts to keep your name in front of the employer.

Read more: [The Art of the Follow-Up After Job Interviews](#) and [FAQs About Thank You Letters](#)

Other useful articles/resources:

- [15 Myths and Misconceptions About Job-Hunting](#).
- [Ten Questions to Ask Yourself if You Still Don't Have a Job](#).
- [Job Search Checklist](#).
- [Job Search 101 Tutorial](#).
- [Job-Hunting Do's and Don'ts Articles](#).
- [The Career Doctor's Cures & Remedies to Quintessentially Perplexing Career and Job-Hunting Ailments: Part I](#)
- [The Career Doctor's Cures & Remedies to Quintessentially Perplexing Career and Job-Hunting Ailments: Part II](#)

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](#).

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.

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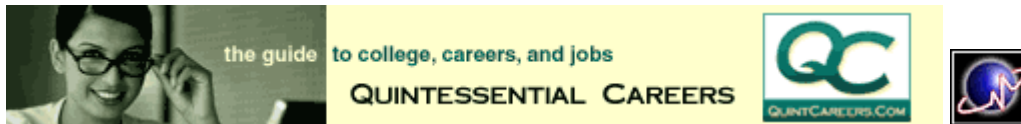
The Hansens are authors of numerous books, including: Dynamic Cover Letters; Dynamic Cover Letters for New Graduates; A Foot in the Door: Networking Your Way into the Hidden Job Market; and Write Your Way to a Higher GPA, all published by Ten Speed Press.

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