

How to Land the Job You Want

By Doug Arms

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hat I'm about to tell you isn't going to sound fair. But as a recruitment strategies expert with almost 20 years of experience, I don't apologize for it because it's true. And it's often the game changer between a successful financial career and an unfulfilled job search.

Got your attention? Good. First, let's start with a brainteaser you'll be retelling at your next dinner party:

Q: Who was twice rejected by the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts and had to start his film career as an unpaid intern at Universal Studios?

(Not sure? Here's a hint. In May 2014, *Forbes* valued his net worth at \$3 billion.)

A: The intrepid director and businessman is none other than Steven Spielberg.

Now ask a roomful of people, "What's the moral to this true Hollywood saga?" And if you've got the time, listen while they get nice and philosophical over the quickest path to a successful multibillion-dollar career. Then ask them if they think an unpaid internship is in their own best career interest.

Once you've let Spielberg's story sink in for a moment, consider this: More often than not, specialized professional positions don't go to the most qualified candidate. Instead, they go to the one who's the most prepared. And these days, a large part of that preparation process is defined in your search strategy.

The irony is that from the newly certified accountant looking for full-time work to the most seasoned financial professional considering consulting in semi-retirement, the lessons of a successful job search apply equally.

In today's job market, having the skills to be a successful accountant or financial professional is advantageous, but it doesn't in itself guarantee a fruitful job search. Take the needs of any highly skilled job, and if you aren't prepared to define your strengths in a manner that matches what potential employers are specifically looking for, then you may be in for a long and ultimately frustrating process. Therefore, the question I can help you answer is "How can I best prepare for a successful job search?"

Positioning Is Key

One popularly suggested moral to Spielberg's story is that determination pays off. And let's be clear: I'd pose no arguments whatsoever to that point. But I would add that smart positioning had plenty to do with the director's name eventually becoming a recognized household brand.

Now, go back and recall that unpaid intern's position at Universal Studios. How coincidental do you think it is in the entertainment industry—where the odds of getting killed bicycling down the road are seemingly greater than selling a screenplay—that seven years after his internship, Spielberg was offered the chance to direct the movie adaptation of Peter Benchley's novel about a killer shark?

And I'll bet you don't need more than one guess to correctly answer which studio gave Spielberg the chance to direct *Jaws*. That's right; it was Universal! Now that's positioning (or at least part of it anyway). And remember, without *Jaws* we would never have had *Sharknado*. Or *Sharknado 2*, but I digress.

Of course, I'm not suggesting you have to wait years and/or volunteer to put yourself in a position to land a great job. What I *am* recommending is to have an overview of where you stand, what's around you, and where you want to go at all times during your career, especially when you're in the market for a new position.

For anyone even considering a job in the finance and accounting fields, my advice is to put yourself in the realistic position of clinching a face-to-face interview as soon

as you know the company and position are a potential good fit for you. As a caveat, let's assume you have the technical skills to do the job you're after. Regardless of whether you think you're the most qualified or least qualified candidate, you *are* qualified. That stated, here are three steps that will benefit you throughout the job search process.

1. Learn everything possible about a potential employer and the requirements of the position you want.

I can't tell you how many people complain about not getting an interview yet at the same time admit they don't even carefully read the job postings they answer. For those who want to position themselves the best they can, this insight is actually good news. Use everything from the Internet to good old-fashioned phone calls to learn as much as possible about a company's history, mission, and culture. LinkedIn is a great source for learning about a company, the types of people it hires, and anything you might have in common with any of the company's employees. Think of the résumés listed there as profiles, and if you connect with someone who's an alumnus from your university, perhaps he or she will give you the inside scoop on the job, culture, or hiring manager. They may even put in a good word for you. The knowledge you acquire will make your candidacy all the more appealing to the employer.

From the moment you make your first formal contact inquiring about a position you can successfully fill at a company you'd very much like to work for (and, if questioned, you can articulate why), you have an opportunity to stand out from the pack. But don't wait for an interview to carefully do your homework, or you could be waiting a long, long time!

2. Know your worth. Even some experienced interview coaches get this one wrong. I always think you should be ready and prepared to talk money as soon as the topic comes up. And, yes, it can come up at a first interview, especially if the employer asks you directly about your salary expectations. If you blush and draw a blank, then you might as well draw a red line through your job candidacy. Even if it's a ballpark figure, you should know your industry's benchmarks. If you honestly have no idea, a good place to start is with the career and salary articles in *Strategic Finance's* June issue. Another good source is the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, which publishes hourly median pay levels for accountants and auditors (www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes132011.htm).

3. Have a strategy that passes the Applicant

Tracking System. You need to speak the same language as the company's Applicant Tracking System (ATS)—computer software used to match and “prequalify” applicants—and that means using keywords. In fact, a normal ATS doing its job correctly can make the decision on how qualified you are for a role simply by matching keywords in your résumé to the job description. If the description says “GAAP” but your résumé says “generally accepted accounting principles,” the system might not recognize you as a match. If you don't have a strategy that aims to get your résumé past the robot test, you could be investing a lot of time and energy for nothing. The good news is that there are several strategies that can help your chances of actually speaking with a hiring manager, from “upskilling” to working with a recruiter. As I discuss these options in more detail, remember to keep asking yourself, “What do I stand to gain by staying smarter than the robot?”

Beef Up Your Skills

Learning everything about a company, researching the precise requirements of the position you're applying for, and knowing a realistic salary estimate are the basic starting points for any serious accountant or financial professional who wants to be recognized as *the one for the job*. But here's the great democratizer: Whether you're fresh out of school and willing to relocate or looking to work remotely in semi-retirement, your job search will *always* be more successful if you're actively beefing up the skills a potential employer deems integral to the running of his or her business.

Whether it's taking part in on-the-job computer training or an online tax course from a respected educational institution, demonstrating ongoing and self-motivated learning to remain relevant in your industry goes a long way to convincing employers you have the requisite talent and desire it takes to be successful in your work.

If you're early in your career and looking for a new job, find out when and where the next professional conference and/or networking event in your field will take place. Sign up, attend, and listen to what business leaders say their needs are. For instance, you might hear that an overwhelming problem among companies is high turnover and difficulty finding young graduates who can successfully manage the demands of a full-time position. In that case, be sure to include, say, your position as road manager for your college basketball team, while never dropping off the honor roll, on all appropriate communications going forward. You'd be surprised how far something like that can go toward helping your cause.

In my opinion, by constantly beefing up the skills potential employers are looking for, you don't lose sight of what you want to do. Instead, I believe the opposite happens—you gain greater focus on where you want to go. Once you have this focus, the next step is making your expertise stand out on all of your job search materials. In many ways, it's the portfolio of the experience, talents, and skills you have to invest.

Tailor Made

Years ago, I advised Darrell, a friend of a colleague, about his job search. And I've never forgotten the fortuitous lesson a simple wallet photo taught us both. (I know, I know. I've hopelessly dated myself here. If you don't know what a wallet photo is, think of your phone frozen on a single screen, wrapped in a plastic sleeve, and void of all ability to zoom, stretch, or edit out the pimples and red eyes. Makes some of us weep for the past.)

Besides being a great CPA (Certified Public Accountant), Darrell was also a devoted father to his two daughters. During our first conversation, he did what any proud dad would do and showed me a photo of two beautiful girls with a man who, quite honestly, barely resembled the man before me. He must have been expecting the look of surprise that appeared on my face since he quickly went on to explain how he'd gone on an exercise and diet regimen shortly after that photo was taken. Darrell confided that he'd lost nearly 40% of his body weight and that he was now more determined than ever to stay fit and healthy for his wife and daughters. As I listened to him, I realized the photo was far more than just a family snapshot. It was a memento of his incentive to get healthy for his wife, his daughters, and himself.

Though deeply touched by his clear devotion to his family and his pride in telling me his story, I was still curious. And I had to ask him: Wasn't there one thing you did just for yourself after losing all that weight? He smiled and, without hesitation, admitted to getting a tailor-made suit he still wears with pride every year on his birthday. He said it represented a promise to his girls.

Well, that promise is exactly what I told Darrell to communicate in his job search whenever possible. Likewise, *you* need to know what your promise is to yourself—be it to maintain a quality standard of living for your family or to make partner in a respected firm within five years—and know how to communicate that promise to potential employers in all you submit and say. For Darrell, it eventually meant being able to share his story with a hiring manager who was very proud of her company's newly

installed gym facility. From there, it was a series of good matches, and he was hired shortly after!

First, of course, Darrell had to get his résumé noticed and picked out of the general pile. Back in the day, we would sweat over the proper weight, color, and texture of the paper we chose to print our résumés on. To fold or not to fold? But times have changed, and *your* résumé may never make it to hard copy. And as I've already mentioned, today's candidate needs to pass the ATS robot test, which can eliminate as many as three-quarters of all job applicants. So to be sure your résumé tactfully exudes tailor-made instead of screaming one-size-fits-all, practice customizing your profile using the following four steps:

1. Be sure to send documents only in the requested format. If none is specified, Microsoft Word documents are usually preferable. PDFs and other formats can be troublesome or impossible for some software programs to import. To pass the ATS test, don't submit any graphic elements, such as tables and/or graphs. Text is all you should submit at that point.

2. Communicate accurately what you intend to say. Give clear labels to each section of your résumé so that the ATS imports the right information into the applicable field. This is positively *crucial* for recruiters searching for the best-matched candidates for any specialized position. Remember: Now isn't the time to get imaginative. Title your employment history "employment history" or "work experience," not "my superhero daytime gigs."

3. Extend the clarity and precision of your résumé. This would include everything from your headings and subheadings to your listed job titles, roles filled, and the names of previous employers. Always present information as clearly, consistently, and concisely as possible. Many recruiters state that wordiness and/or lack of consistency is a perennial concern on many résumés. Avoid furrowed brows and get your lists in order!

4. Let the precise wording of the job posting be your guide. Robot selection processes are based on keywords, so take note of those used in the job description and mirror those words in your online application, supporting materials, and, of course, your résumé. For example, if the job posting lists "CPA" as a requirement, make sure your résumé states that you're a CPA and not a "Certified Public Accountant." Also, if the job posting states that the company is looking for someone who is detail-oriented, is able to work with large data, can follow specific instructions, and is self-motivated, include those keywords in your résumé.

If you look at this from what I believe is the right perspective, giving a tailored fit to your job application materials should make you feel somewhat like Darrell in his sharp-fitting suit. It states that you have arrived and intend to stay in fighting shape!

The Probability Game

Whatever your education and experience level, there comes a time when you need to translate what you have to offer into a skill set that a potential employer is specifically looking for. At that point, you've entered into a matching or, perhaps more appropriately phrased, a probability game.

Even the most literal-minded job seekers usually get it when I describe this portion of the job search as akin to bridge building. Since you have a desire to land a job and the company needs someone to fill a position, the rest is simply about building a bridge that successfully traverses what lies between you and your signature on an employment contract. We've already looked at robots designed to toss you onto the reject heap. Now let's consider what resources there are to help increase your chances of rising to the top of the interview pile.

This is when the advantage of working with an experienced recruiter—one capable of helping you present the best "match" of your skills to an employer as possible—can't be underestimated. A good recruiter is an expert bridge builder. More importantly, a good recruiter knows where and when many other "bridge projects" are going up in the future.

Consider for a moment how it would feel to have a professional on your side whose job it is to find the best match for a client's needs while simultaneously helping you position yourself as a viable candidate for the position under consideration. And don't get dissuaded by the fact that most of a recruiter's clients are big companies. With recruiters' assistance, many of those companies find great matches for open positions. As a matter of fact, a large number remain clients with the same workforce management firms for years. For example, Kelly Services is closing in on 70 years of supplying talent to companies large and small because finding the best employer-employee matches simply means good business for everyone involved.

The funniest misconception I hear is the notion that workforce agencies have this exclusive group of candidates they keep hidden away to only let loose on certain jobs. First of all, good luck telling people to wait around when they need to work. And second, isn't it much more likely that top recruiting agencies attract top clients by

effectively proceeding to position their best job candidates with hand-tailored care and focus?

Remember: The same pool of candidates exists no matter what. It's how you increase your chances of a face-to-face interview by playing the probability game that matters most. And if you choose to work with a recruiter, be committed to working hard to ensure that your bridge will span all the way to the employment situation you desire.

Find Yourself

Ultimately, understanding both what you're really all about and what a successful company is looking for means you've reached a professional-grade level of probability matching, not some wishful rolling of the job search dice. But before you think you've got it all sewn up, take a closer look at the typical job search processes of entry-level, mid-career, and near-retirement candidates for accounting and financial positions. Try to focus not only on those points that apply to you now, but keep in mind that good positioning is an ongoing responsibility for all financial professionals.

Entry-level accountants and financial professionals with smart plans for the future often don't make compensation their primary objective. Instead, they look at how much experience and professional development they can acquire. One great example would be considering a position not primarily for the money but because the potential employer supports and enables candidates to graduate from the CMA® (Certified Management Accountant) program offered by IMA® (Institute of Management Accountants). By keeping their opportunities and interests broad, entry-level candidates can often make specialization part of on-the-job training and development. But a word of warning: When you're new to the business, don't expect the phone to ring. Be proactive!

Mid-career candidates are often looking for new positions while they are currently employed. Since they already have a longer-term career plan, they can afford to look around and test the waters with more focus. But when the crucial moment does arrive, mid-career candidates must learn to further specialize and stay in demand or risk losing relevancy in the workforce. The great thing is that mid-career candidates are some of the best at "upskilling" (taking steps to raise their game), since they know very well what skills and experience they need to remain sharp on the job.

Near-retirement candidates, especially those willing to

think flexibly, possess exciting opportunities to work as consultants and even to work remotely. If this is your situation, don't make the damaging mistake of thinking you already have the knowledge, skills, and experience necessary to be a consultant and, therefore, don't have to learn anything new. Be

advised: There's never been a more important moment in your career to prove you're a team player, a problem solver, and a flexible thinker than when you're trying to convince an employer you're capable of working reliably and efficiently from home. If you've got a technical skills gap, be sure to fill it right away.

Finding yourself on the short list of candidates will take time, but you'll end up there. And by the time you do, you'll already be armed with a better job search plan for the future.

Finding Your Hollywood Ending

A recent survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (www.naceweb.org) reports that recent college grads who completed an internship as part of their undergraduate studies earn an average of 31% more in starting salaries than those who didn't. Although this bit of information may not help you at this stage of your career, please pass it on!

"Finding a Hollywood Ending to Your Next Job Search" sounds a little too hopeful a title for me to use for this article when considering all of those aspiring screenwriters out there. But, I'll admit, the moral is a good one. And now, before you have any close encounters with potential employers, it's good to take a moment to consider the fact that possibly the greatest film director of our time was rejected from film school not once, but twice. And although he started his career as an unpaid intern, he's now worth \$3 billion. The moral of Spielberg's story? When you increase your chances of getting the job you want through positioning, tailoring, and matching, you wind up in the director's chair of your job search! And you're ultimately very well prepared for the employment success you seek. **SF**

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