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Employment: Happy Hunting

Bob Zahra



There are four fundamental components of a new job search: position, geography, compensation and timing.

First things first: In terms of position, if you're thinking about a step up in your career, what is it you enjoy? Where are your strengths? Where do you bring value? Where can you contribute? It sounds ridiculously elementary, but having a general idea of the direction you need to go makes more sense than wandering among possible, but inappropriate, opportunities.

Secondly, no matter how wonderful the opportunity, if the geography doesn't work, then the position doesn't work. If you don't believe me, ask your spouse. Therefore, before you begin to consider a new position, know where you want to live, where it's acceptable to live, and where you simply can't live. When climbing the career ladder, geographical flexibility is only slightly less significant than talent.

Before considering a new position, have a rough idea of your compensation requirements. Yes, the position's location will have a major impact on the necessary compensation, but it's wise to establish a range at your present location, then adjust based on projected relocation. If you're primarily motivated by compensation and have as your goal the accumulation in this lifetime of as much money as possible, perhaps it would be wiser to reconsider a career path in horticulture. There's more money to be made elsewhere, of course, but not necessarily as much fun or as many nice people to work with.

When can you actually begin that new opportunity of a lifetime? A responsible member of our industry doesn't quit in the middle of the "season." Other family members may have commitments that prevent you from reporting immediately. Proper notice needs to be provided to your current employer. A house may need to be sold, and new housing needs to be secured. Graduations, holidays, professional and personal commitments all have a bearing on the timing of career advancement. But remember this caution: It's always easier (although not necessarily smarter) to stay where you are ("a body at rest tends to remain at rest"). It's important to be fair to others, but it's equally important to be fair to yourself.

Finding a position

The primary job opportunity dissemination mechanism for key employees in our industry is still the help-wanted advertisement. It has a buzzy new name, “Internet Job Posting,” but it’s nothing more than a help-wanted ad dressed up in new clothes, advertised on a company website, on Career Builder or Monster, or maybe in one of the magazines or newspapers.

The good news for the job seeker is the apparent overwhelming abundance of available positions. The bad news is that it’s difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff. For instance, some companies allow their help-wanted postings to run well after the position has been closed or filled. Some companies post help-wanted ads just to kick a few tires, to see who is available, to gather competitive intelligence—a help-wanted ad is always running somewhere with the company’s logo. Frequently the hiring authority has been inundated with mountains of cyber-blasted resumes from all over the world that have very little bearing on the open position, and it becomes difficult for the legitimate candidate to stand out.

But by far the worst news in help-wanted postings is the loss of confidentiality. It’s a small town, worldwide, this horticulture industry. It’s generally not a good idea for your employer to catch you looking for another job. A key industry employee with an Internet-posted resume is sending a clear, direct message to his current employer. Unless you’re unemployed, your job search as water cooler conversation is very risky.

Avoid blind ads, no matter how good it sounds, even if you think you know the company. Do some background work and respond only to those companies you can trust. Better yet, approach those companies directly before they post a help-wanted. Another option is to work with a licensed, certified, trained, reputable executive recruiter. The true executive recruiter will guarantee your confidentiality and present career options unavailable to the typical job seeker within the parameters of the four personal search components mentioned above.

Resume and interviews

It’s important for your resume to be accurate. Do not claim a degree you do not have. Not only because it’s wrong but because a responsible hiring authority is likely to verify your educational background. If you’re 10 hours short of a degree, capture the timeline of your college attendance, but don’t get caught with a fraudulent resume.

The purpose of the resume is to encourage the hiring authority to invite you to interview. No matter what you have heard to the contrary, it’s perfectly acceptable to have more than one page. Remember, we’re talking about focus here, not cyber-blasted resume spam. If it takes two or three pages to make your case, relax, take your time, and be yourself. If the company you are targeting is worthy of your working life, the hiring authority will appreciate your thoroughness. Conversely, if you can nail it in one page, do so.

If your current employer is unaware that you’re assessing your options, write “confidential” on the resume and reemphasize the need for confidentiality each time the resume is presented to a hiring authority. The legitimate, professional executive recruiter already knows that every communication is confidential.

Be accurate regarding dates of service with former employers, breadth of responsibilities, internal position progression and specific accomplishments; and be sure to include the company where you did not exactly distinguish yourself, where you fell flat on your face and wish you could do it all over. Again, falsifying dates or

withholding material employment history will likely terminate your candidacy with a responsible potential employer.

How should I dress?

The short answer is: dress how you feel most comfortable. But be absolutely certain to mention your reasoning process to the hiring authority. Historically, people would interview in their nicest clothes, in order to demonstrate the seriousness of their candidacy and to convey respect to the potential employer. It then became popular to dress one or two steps better than their everyday work attire. Now, many people are interviewing in exactly the clothes to be worn daily at work.

There is no correct answer, but there is a caution. Some of our finest industry companies hire based on first impression and gut instinct rather than proven historical performance. Theirs is a conscious effort to identify and hire those who fit in. Unfortunately for the industry, true leaders and topnotch performers do not always fit in, which is why they ultimately break out to lead the pack. It's certainly okay to research the employer to determine company dress culture, but do not become a chameleon to secure what may be the wrong job. This is not a fraternity rush party. Lead with your accomplishments and your historical contributions, and project clearly how those accomplishments can be brought to bear for your potential new employer.

Prevailing in your job

The late, great management consultant Philip Crosby said it's no trick being successful at work. Just be "useful and reliable." In other words, focus on delivering on-time value. In a world that's often not as good as its word, be as good as yours. Don't compete with your colleagues, but focus instead on making a significant contribution to your company and to your fellow employees. Don't compete, contribute.

Communicate. Return phone calls. Engage your direct reports and not your iPod. Focus on performing your current job well, even if you've decided to look for another. In fact, work especially hard if you have decided to resign, not only because it's the right thing to do, but because your work history, your reputation, your proven success, are all valuable to you. Your references will follow you. Work so hard and so smart that your current employer will regret your resignation.

A caution: The time for negotiations with your current employer is before you decide to leave. Once you've made the prayerful, settled decision that your future is elsewhere, looked hard throughout the industry and been offered and accepted a wonderful new position, don't make the career-ruining decision to accept a counter-offer from your current employer. The counter-offer is delivered at the barrel of a loaded gun, and often it's merely a delaying tactic to facilitate a more comprehensive search for a suitable replacement. Once a loaded gun is pointed, the employer-employee relationship will never be the same again. The legendary Paul Hawkinson of the Fordyce Letter writes in Counter Offer Acceptance: Road to Career Ruin: "Decent and well-managed companies don't make counteroffers … EVER! Their policies are fair and equitable."

It's a wonderful industry, this small town we call the international horticulture industry. We are neighbors, and we will see each other and work with each other throughout our careers. By focusing our efforts on being good, useful, reliable neighbors, we bolster an industry that brings not only value but profound pleasure to an appreciative worldwide community.

Bob Zahra is a long-time executive recruiter for Florasearch, Inc.—key employee search firm for the greenhouse, nursery, landscape, floral industries and allied trades. He's a Certified Personnel Consultant and active member and board chair emeritus of the National Association of Executive Recruiters. Online: www.florasearch.com; Tel: (407) 320-8177; e-mail: search@florasearch.com.