



The Six-Week Career Makeover

Week 5: The Hunt Begins!

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Why Matchmaking Is So Hard

Finding work is—well—really, *really* hard work. Because I've been in HR roles for over 20 years and owned a business for over 12 years in my early career, I also know how hard it is to find the right hire. So, when three friends asked for help with their resumes, I wanted a way to explain to them why they needed to think about their resumes—and their job searches—differently than they did 10 or 15 years ago. I invited them all to dinner. They shared their career stories, and I discussed the importance of maximizing “return on career” by managing your career as an asset that requires maintenance and ongoing development.

Now we could talk about their resumes.

When I became newly single, one of the college recruiters in my office encouraged me to set up a profile on an online dating site. She had just become engaged to a man she met through online dating. Heather, a co-worker, concurred, talking about how she would sometimes have two or three first “pre-dates” in a day. “I’m a recruiter,” Heather explained. “I had a vacant position I wanted to fill. I knew the basic position requirements, so I was sourcing candidates.” I laughed, but she had a point. And I knew how warm, funny, and smart Heather was, so I knew she wasn’t brutally interrogating her “candidates” on those first short dates. Trevor was the lucky guy who got to fill the opening.

It occurred to me that there were many similarities between job matching and love matching, and I hoped the correlation would help my friends understand that simply updating or refining their resumes would not be the key to finding their next role. Both the online dating site and the applicant tracking system (ATS) are intended to facilitate matching. Still, from a user experience perspective, both feel more like falling into a black hole. Hopefully, this comparison below will help demystify that experience, so when you decide to start looking, you’ll understand why just asking for help updating your resume is not going to be enough.



Why a job search is just like online dating

If you're the company with a job to fill, you could compare your search for a good match to online dating. Let's compare:

The online dating site:

- You want to meet someone and fall in love—looking for a long-term relationship, not just a one-night stand, so you post your profile on a dating site.
- Basically, your profile says, “This is who I am and who I’m looking for” (if you’re being honest).
- If you have no filters set, you get 100 messages in the first week.
- Fifty of them are obviously scammers and fake profiles.
- Twenty of them are outside the age range you are comfortable dating.
- Ten are out of state, and your profile clearly says you don’t want a long-distance fling.

You finally get smart and set the filters to screen out all of the above, quitting the time-consuming task of sorting through them yourself.

You read the remaining 20 profiles:

- Ten just aren’t attractive to you, and you rule out vegans because you like steak, and anyone who doesn’t smile in their profile picture. After all, you like teeth. (I learned that lesson the hard way after my divorce!)
- You respond to the remaining 10 messages, hoping the photos are current.
- Five don’t reply to your message.
- You go on three first dates.
- You end up dating someone who was introduced to you by a mutual friend. (Unless you're Heather, because you knew how the system, in fact, worked).

Now, let’s look at how the applicant tracking system mirrors the same process:

- You are a recruiter for a company that has a job opening.



- Basically, the job posting says, “This is who we are and who we’re looking for.”
- You get 100 resumes in the first week.
- Fifty of them never read the job description and are applying to everything. Not one job title in their history is related to your posting.
- Twenty don’t meet enough of the basic job requirements even if they read the description.
- Ten are out of state, and the job clearly states no relocation provided.

But you have an ATS that has filtered all of these, so you didn't have to waste your time reading and sorting these resumes. Eighty resumes aren't even read by your human eyes. (Alan, my favorite and most trusted recruiter, disagrees with this. Note his perspective below.)

You look at the remaining 20 resumes:

- Ten meet the basic requirements, but you can’t see anything in their resumes that shows they did anything more than show up to work and do what was expected.
- You call the remaining 10 to set up a phone interview.
- Five don’t return your call.
- You interview three candidates.
- You end up hiring the candidate that another employee referred.

Heather's dating story is an excellent demonstration of how working with the system rather than against it can help your job search, but you can't just “put it out there” and expect results.

If you want a successful job search, there are four things you **MUST** do:

1. Read the job posting and know if you are a match for the job before you apply (see caveat below). Know what you are capable of, qualified for, and most importantly, what value you bring to the hiring company. (Go back to Assignment 2!)



2. Get through the filter. Unless you are a brilliant hacker who can decipher the unique keyword algorithm set up by each company, you need to find a human you can convince to read your resume. (We'll help you do that in the following assignments.)
3. Make sure your resume clearly describes Number 1 above: why you are qualified, the value you bring, why you'd be a fit for the job, and even more importantly, "What's in it for me?" (i.e., the hiring manager reading your resume). (Assignment 4 included the current standards for formatting, and what to include and leave off. The rules change regularly!)
4. Nail the interview(s) because you have the right balance of curiosity and mojo and can connect with your interviewer as a warm, competent human being who is going to solve their problems or at least alleviate the pain.

(Caveat: Sheryl Sandberg cited a statistic in her book *Lean In* that men will apply for jobs for which they only meet 60 percent of the criteria, while women rarely apply for jobs unless they meet 100 percent of the job requirements.¹ But regardless of your gender, apply if you think you meet 75–80 percent of the requirements. A sub-caveat for fellow fact-checker geeks—the “internal study by HP” cited by Sandberg can't be validated.² But if you are a woman reading that statistic, you still likely thought of multiple anecdotes where you or a female friend didn't pursue an opportunity, either because of a lack of confidence or fear of failure. Men don't do this nearly as much as women do—and there is lots of research on that.³)

Companies utilize various systems with distinct capabilities. Alan, a seasoned veteran recruiter (I told you before, we don't say “old” here), insists that the only way an ATS eliminates resumes is if the application includes some pre-screening questions, which makes sense. He also told me that only some systems will “rank” and score resumes, and that, by and large, recruiters actually do glance at them. “Glance,” of course, is the operative word here. In my opinion, this fact underscores



the importance of a targeted resume: Alan and his ilk have a few seconds to glance through your resume, along with the other 147 applicants, multiplied by the 20 or more positions they have to fill. If their ATS has a ranking or scoring function, they may still only review the top 20–30 applications.

Heather and Trevor had their second child a few years ago and are enjoying building a life together as their family grows. This success story alone should prove why Heather is a brilliant recruiter (when she decides to return to the workforce). Now let's see if her brilliance can help you approach your resume differently!

Explore

This next assignment is, unfortunately, often skipped, yet it is the absolute best way to ensure your resume captures the best keywords that will score your resume high enough to pass the ATS filters and be seen by a real human being.

Unless you have a very specific role or position in mind, you will likely want to explore job boards to determine your job search focus. Most people enter their area of expertise or experience as the primary keyword (e.g., structural engineer). Depending on your past experience, you may even assume future jobs will all look pretty much the same. What you will likely find, however, is that a core skill or function (structural engineering) will show up in a few ways and can then be categorized to narrow your search. For example, as a structural engineer, you might find positions as a consultant for a local government, a bridge designer, and a bridge inspector. Some jobs may be in a government agency, while others are in the private sector. Some might be local, or in another city. Suppose your primary background is more general (literature, art). In that case, you might find work in education, government, or business settings, doing everything from being an artist to writing grants or doing administrative work related to your field. Depending on the variety and scope of previous experience, now is a good time to explore related fields or other work environments.

For over 40 years, since 1970, author and career expert Richard Bolles has published updated versions of his timeless classic, *What Color is Your Parachute?*⁴



If you're reading this, chances are you may have even read *Parachute* at some point in your career. The *Parachute* approach is Bolles's process for identifying your strengths and aptitudes to pursue a career that you enjoy and are most likely to be successful in. The newest version is always worth a re-read, in my opinion, but you can also find a variety of free aptitude assessments online. If the last time you took an aptitude test was in college or high school, it certainly might be worth your time to search for a reputable assessment.⁵

Assignment 5a: Continue to Explore & Experiment

Looking at the possibilities for your area of functional expertise or experience, identify a geography, work environment, and work focus you might want to explore further. Identify three to four job titles or positions that interest you, then move on to Assignment 5b.

If you are looking to change fields completely, first re-read the introduction section, *Ch-ch-ch-changes*, then review the next section, "Experiment," that follows.

Experiment

Take the opportunity to "experiment" in these test environments by searching for professional groups or finding a chance to attend an event or presentation by a company doing something you haven't explored yet. Alternatively, identify two or three direct connections or second-degree connections working in a position you find interesting. If it's a second-degree connection, reach out to your mutual connection, explain that you're considering a change in career focus, and you'd like to learn more about the work of the second-degree connection. Ask for an introduction. You can also reach out to the second-degree connection directly (this can be done easily via InMail on LinkedIn if you have an upgraded account). A simple introduction message might look something like this:

Ms. Smith,

I am currently considering a career shift and would appreciate the opportunity to learn more about your current work at XYZ Corporation. I'm interested in the



[specific] aspect of your work and hope you would be willing to tell me about it. I reached out because I noticed we both have [name] as a mutual connection. Is there a time in the coming week we could schedule a 20–30 minute phone call?

This isn't about networking, although meeting people you find interesting and can learn from is a valuable objective here. This assignment is about exploring, experimenting, and discovering options you may not have considered. Your goal at this point is not to tell new people you are job hunting, but to learn about them, their work, and what they find rewarding and frustrating in their unique work context. Below are some questions to get you started.

Exploration Questions to Ask

- General: Why or how did you choose this field? What attracted you to the position?
- What's your favorite part of the job you have now? What's your least favorite? How does that compare to other jobs you've had?
- What are three or four assignments you tend to do the most in your role?
- What are the primary expectations of you in your job? What are your primary responsibilities?
- What qualifications did you need to have for this job?
- What kind of teams and departments do you interact with the most?
- What's the work environment and routine like at your company right now (for example, some people love open floorplan work environments while other people hate them; some jobs have a lot of time "in the field," while others are very routine and office-based).

Adrienne would make her job search clients keep a spreadsheet with all the priorities they sought in a new role. Each spreadsheet had a separate tab for different aspects of the job search. On the first tab, she worked with clients to identify their priorities and create a weighted decision matrix. That tab would look something like this:



Culture	Weight	Work Emphasis
Enterprising	40	Persuading & leading; making decisions, taking risks for money
Social	15	Teaching, being helpful to others
Realistic	5	Working on objects with your hands
Investigative	10	Searching for facts, figuring out problems
Artistic	20	Artistic creativity
Conventional	10	Following rules

From those priorities, she would have her clients list the most important aspects of the companies they are considering, including culture, geography, stage of growth, industry, and possible roles within the organization.

Priorities	Culture	Geography	Stage of Growth	Industries	Role:
-Culture -Product -Curiosity -B2B world	1- Growth culture 2 - Innovation 3 - Passion about excellence, promises, and commitments 4 - Work practices 5 - Creative/unrestricted casual 6 - Purposeful diversity and inclusion	1 - Boston, East Coast 2 - Global presence	1 - 25-500 employees 2 - Pre-IPO, B or C stage of financing	1 - Biotech 2 - Pharma 3 - Ed Tech 4 - Fintech	TBD

Additional tables tracked networking and recruiter information, a tracker for positions applied for, a weekly “to-do” and status list, and equally important to all of these, one tab to list and track “fun things I want to do before going back to work.” These could be a bucket list experience (“swim with dolphins”) or more practical, like a desired relocation to a new city. Samples of these trackers can be



downloaded from the Resources section of my website once you start your job search in earnest.

Consider Your “Wiring”

“There are basically two kinds of jobs,” my friend Mary Ann (“Mad”) proposed. At the time, we were talking about compensation strategies in the human resources world. “There are ‘eat well’ jobs that are high risk and have stressful demands with the potential for high reward, and there are ‘sleep well’ jobs that are lower risk, but also have lower potential for high reward.” Think business line executive versus support function department head. Think “working for the man” versus “entrepreneur,” if you aren’t in the corporate world.

I’ve used this “eat well or sleep well” dichotomy in career conversations with emerging executives and early career employees ever since. It’s a simple, brilliant way to help people think about how they are wired for risk, and what kind of career they really might want to pursue. Often, as people grow their careers, they don’t think much about this distinction and end up either frustrated by their limited reward potential or stressed because of the demands and risks of high-reward potential jobs. I’ve found this applies both inside and outside the traditional corporate environment.

Judy was a brilliant specialist in her technical field. She had advanced in supervisory and management roles and wanted to continue advancing into an executive-level position. However, the general management roles required a much broader skill set than her deep functional expertise offered. She would need to build the business, learn the market sector, engage with potential clients, and actually sell work. She would need to be able to take on the responsibility for profit and loss, knowing that not only her income, but also the bonuses and jobs of everyone in her business group would depend on whether or not she could perform as a leader. That’s a lot of stress and a lot of responsibility. She hadn’t considered the risk, demands, and expectations of a senior leadership role when we first spoke. She was uncertain about her ability actually to sell and grow a market sector, but decided



she wanted to try. She found approaching the business from a broader, higher perspective to be exhilarating. She spent two or three years broadening her business management and sales skills and flourished in them. Her career continues to grow, but she readily admits she's lost some of her technical expertise because she hasn't been able to keep up with advances in her original technical field. She's also prepared for the possibility that another recession or a large client loss will have a significant negative impact on her earnings.

Steve was advanced into an executive business line role as a “natural” career progression in his large company. After five years, the stress and demands of the job took their toll on his health, both physically and mentally. He struggled with the breadth of skills required and found himself trying to “micromanage” the technical aspects of his business group—the area where he felt most confident and comfortable. Eventually, he was made the head of an internal support department, relieving him of the P&L responsibility and capitalizing on his functional expertise. His blood pressure lowered within three months, and he looked 10 years younger—the weight of the world lifted off his shoulders.

Katie wanted to be an actress, not because she wanted the fame and fortune or fantasized about Hollywood, but because she genuinely loved the craft. But like thousands of actors, she slept on a friend's couch and waited tables to make ends meet. She became frustrated with her inability to make a living doing what she loved. Her story is retold across the country (and indeed, across the world) by writers, artists, and musicians. I've seen the same story play out among consultants and academics who have an idealized view of what their profession should provide. They want to be independent, autonomous, and drive their own work. But what they may not realize is that they have chosen “eat well” careers with little security and high risk of failure (even though the most successful in these careers probably have the highest reward potential). Like the others living this version of the story, Katie wants the security of a “sleep well” income.

As a slight aside, “sleep well” choices aren't always about security and risk. My dear friend John is wired for an “eat well” profession, and he's had a very



successful, high-profile “eat well” career as a radio producer to A-list celebrities and has had his own very successful radio show. He is naturally comfortable in the spotlight on a stage, speaking to thousands of people, the way the rest of us are comfortable in our sweatpants sitting on our couch. However, the industry has undergone significant changes, and he is no longer generating the “eat well” income he once had. His career is high-risk and high-potential, and he understands that. He is also a man of uncompromised integrity and deep self-awareness. During a conversation a few years ago, he told me he turned down a half-million-dollar contract to do political radio, and can’t bring himself to promote a sponsor’s brand to get the spotlight turned back on. Instead, he spent a year or two ghostwriting a book and making in three months what he made every two weeks producing a national radio show. He was sleeping well, but it was still not very secure. It took him a few years to adjust his radio career to the new downloadable and streamed “podcast” format, and he managed to create a new radio show broadcast in a different part of the country. Technology changes come with challenges and opportunities.

None of these stories is intended to promote that one way is better than another. Instead, it’s about self-awareness and a focus on self-reflection as you consider where you might want to see your own career grow. The key takeaways from an “eat well versus sleep well” conversation should be

- Know how you’re wired. Reflect on your level of comfort with risk and need for stability and security. It will help you consider career options.
- Don’t be afraid to go outside your comfort zone if you are wired to handle the stress of risk.

Choosing an “eat well” career does not mean you will, in fact, eat well. Choosing to sleep well does not, in fact, mean you are secure, especially in the United States, where “at will” employment is the rule. Finding your balance is a lifelong effort, and outside variables will influence whatever choice you make. Be flexible.



Raising the Odds to Get Seen

A resume *must* be written to target either a particular job or a typical job title/position. Applicant tracking systems will screen out up to 90 percent of applications if specific keywords are not present, giving the recruiter a reason not to provide your resume more than a three-second glance. If you haven't narrowed down your search to one specific title/position but you have a few in mind, be prepared to write several versions of your resume—one for each. If you don't even know the job titles or positions you want to focus on, do some “search jobs by skills” research (most of the major job boards have this feature) until you can identify at least two or three positions that you are qualified for and have most of the required skills and transferable experience needed.

Some applicant tracking systems “score” a resume based on the inclusion of both keywords and job titles. And the more recent the title, the higher the score. It is perfectly acceptable to list the “typical” or position-targeted title on your resume if that is what you did, if your company had a different, non-standard title for the role. For example, LuAnne was a “Customer Experience Specialist” at her small software firm, but “Customer Relations” might be what a job posting lists, which would widen her market beyond just IT roles. Your skills, qualifications, experience, and job title should closely align with the job posting as much as possible. If you have never held a position with the title you are seeking, you can add a line in your summary section stating you are seeking that title, so that the title is at least picked up by the ATS (you'll do that in the resume formatting assignment).

Some companies also filter by geography, looking to hire in their immediate region. If you are close to a major metropolitan area, you might want to list that in your contact area. For example, “Greater Washington DC area” would open the market outside of your mailing city, Takoma Park, MD, or Alexandria, VA.



Your LinkedIn Profile

Like resume writing, there are consultants and companies out there who promise to “optimize” your LinkedIn profile for a fee. Just like resume writers, unless they have done all the pre-work required to laser-focus and target your ideal job and truly understand the value you bring to an employer, the fee is probably not worth it. Guess what? AI can help with your LinkedIn profile, too!

Make sure your profile is complete. Under each job experience listing, copy and paste the best three to five STAR bullets from your resume. Make sure “open for opportunities” is checked in your profile if you are currently out of work. As Alan would warn, some employers do monitor their employees, and we wouldn’t want to trigger any bad workplace juju. I believe it’s worth the investment to upgrade to the premium membership, as it enables you to easily reach out to people outside your immediate network. Make sure your photo, cover image, and content are professional. Never use LinkedIn as a social media forum and make political comments or share details of your personal life (it’s very disheartening for me to see so much of that on the platform now). LinkedIn is a professional network. Behave appropriately in the forum. Engage with posts and groups in your field, congratulate your connections on recent accomplishments, and use the platform to reconnect with co-workers and professional peers you may have lost touch with. At least once a week, see who has looked at your profile, who else they’ve searched for, and reach out to anyone that may be good to connect (or re-connect) with.

Also, remember that LinkedIn is not the only job board out there. The “big three” (at least as of this writing), according to Alan, are LinkedIn, Indeed.com, and Zip Recruiter. There are also local and specialized job boards, as well as aggregate boards (like Indeed.com) that compile postings from all over. A basic search engine search will also yield good results if you are specific about title, industry, geography, and professional field. It’s always best to find the exact listing on a company’s website to submit directly, and it’s important to be early in the submission cycle because many job posters will stop accepting submissions after



they have received enough responses and have an adequate pipeline of candidates. Depending on the role you are targeting, you may want to limit your search to jobs posted only in the past one to three days. LinkedIn will only report how many applications were submitted through that site, so if you see that a position has “100 applications submitted,” you can probably estimate that the company has received double or triple that number through their career site and the other aggregate job boards. Timing is everything in the online job search.

My daughter-in-law is a top-notch, bona fide Disney devotee. Not because of mouse ears and magic, but because my granddaughter is a Make-A-Wish alumna, and the week the whole family (including three brothers) spent at Give Kids the World and Disney ignited a real passion for bringing joy and magic to others. “It was Disney's devotion to supporting causes especially the ones close to my heart is why I put on the ears, not my love for all things magical (that was the bonus!) my favorite experience working for The Mouse were the opportunities that allowed me to make a Make-A-Wish shopping spree extra magical, send-offs extra sweet, and the best was joining Mickey at the hospital that first cared for your grandbaby to pass out plushies to the families, play games, and do crafts. My heart could not be fuller. I knew Disney was for me when I saw the secret ways they serve.”

Cathy worked for four years as a sales lead and “cast member” in the local Disney store near their home (remember those?). When Disney closed almost all their retail operations, she was devastated. She absolutely *loved* that job. No, it wasn't a big executive-level gig with a hefty paycheck. Still, my four grandkids got to spend at least 6-7 days at either the Disney World parks in Orlando, Florida, or Disneyland in Anaheim, California, every year. She's been applying to jobs back at Disney for over four years, even though she took a job as a customer service agent for one of the airlines instead. Again, the paycheck ain't much but the perks get my grandkids to summer camps around the country, and to grandma's (chez moi!), and even a once-in-a-lifetime family adventure to Japan. Cathy *only* applies to Disney, and only for remote positions (my son works in biomed tech, and relocation isn't an option). For every position she applies to, she messages the



Disney recruiter directly through LinkedIn. She engages with them. She reads their blogs and comments on what she's learned. Even though she hasn't quite made her dreams come true, living happily ever after surrounded by mouse ears, I have not one doubt she will eventually land her job at Disney, or one of the other organizations she is passionate about (it's a VERY narrow job target!) How do I know she'll succeed? Her track record is absolutely astonishing: she has secured interviews for positions that received over 10,000 applicants. Her most recent cover letter exemplifies just how grounded and focused her career vision is:

Dear Disney Hiring Team,

Once upon a time, I put on a name tag, stepped into the Disney Store, and discovered a world where storytelling, business, and magic merged. As a Sales Lead and Ambassador, I didn't just move merchandise—I created moments, built relationships, and inspired a team of 16 Cast Members to deliver magic daily. That chapter may have closed when the store doors did, but my story with Disney is far from over. I am thrilled to apply for the [Position Title] role with Disney [Division], ready to bring my passion, precision, and people-first approach back to the company that shaped my professional heart.

[She goes on to detail how her airline job provides experience and skills that translate directly to the position she's applying for]

Disney taught me how to blend operational excellence with heart—and that's exactly what I offer. I'd be honored to once again bring the magic to life behind the scenes, supporting the Business Operations team in delivering smart, strategic solutions that help Disney stories reach the world.

Thank you for considering my application. I look forward to the opportunity to contribute to Disney's next great chapter.

With heart, strategy, and a touch of pixie dust,

Signature.

Cathy has also mastered the use of AI, which helps her overcome dyslexia and utilizes Teal to track applications, thereby compensating for her ADHD. She makes



sure everything she writes is checked for clarity, spelling, and grammar. Yes, AI helped her craft this cover letter, and for any other employer, I'd strongly advise ditching the cheese—but for Disney, it absolutely works.

Cover Letters

While cover letters are mostly optional for online applications, they don't hurt. They can give you a slight edge if your letter highlights why you are interested in working for that particular company, who referred you to the position, and three to five bullets from your resume that underscore why you'd be the ideal candidate for that specific role. It can also be used to highlight how your experience, skills, and expertise will transfer to a job title or position you may not have directly held in the past. Always refer to the specific job posting or requisition number, as well as the source from which you saw the job posted. Even if you saw the posting on a large job board, find the position on the company website and list that as your source—it could demonstrate your sincere interest in the company, and that you're not just copy/pasting a blast of applications to just anyone. A quick internet search will result in thousands of cover letter examples. If you feed a job posting and your resume to AI, it typically will give you a decent draft you can edit quickly. I suggest keeping it to no more than two to three paragraphs, about a half page, with three to five bulleted highlights directly addressing the top criteria you bring to the role.

Dear Mr. Garcia, [It's usually pretty easy to identify the recruiter on LinkedIn postings, but "Dear Hiring Manager," or "Dear Hiring Team," is also fine.]

I am submitting my application for the position of Senior Project Manager (job posting #12345) found on CompanyName's Career site. You are seeking someone with [list 2–3 specific skills/capabilities from posting], and I believe my attached resume reflects exceptional results in these areas.

For example:

[List 2-3 bullets directly mirroring the 2-3 skills/capabilities you listed.]



I look forward to learning more about this role and scheduling a time to discuss your needs further.

Sincerely,

Me

Reach Out

Do not count on any application submitted online to be found or read. Use your LinkedIn or other networks to make sure that somebody in the company's HR department is aware of your application and will review it. Better yet, see if your contact can identify the hiring manager and get your resume directly to them. Otherwise, it will likely be among the 85–90 percent of applications filtered by their ATS or glanced over by a recruiter. If you don't know someone who knows someone in the company's HR department, get to work on your LinkedIn profile to broaden your network. Once you find someone, it is pretty simple:

Hi Sue! I know you work in Procurement at Acme, and I have just applied to their Accounts Receivable department (Job #12345 on the company's career site). I'm hoping you'd be confident enough in my fit that you could let your HR department know and ask them to review my application.

Often, companies provide a referral bonus to employees, so your contacts may be more enthusiastic to recommend you than you might think—don't feel awkward about asking for their help! Ideally, in addition to the above—but at least instead of the above—follow up the application with a direct note to the hiring manager, outlining your key value proposition, noting that you've applied online and including the specific job number (or requisition number).

If someone in your network recommends a job they think you should apply for, they should be able to help identify how they heard about it, ensuring the HR recruiter and the hiring manager are both aware of your interest.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the vast majority of jobs are filled through referrals and connections. You may have even read about “the hidden job market,” where positions are not posted publicly and companies rely on internal referrals to



find candidates. One coach from recruiting firm Korn Ferry suggests up to 60 percent of positions never make it to the job boards.⁶ Your first- and second-degree networks are critical to helping you get past the black hole of the applicant tracking systems and discover jobs that aren't even posted online.

Don't be afraid to apply for positions where you meet the majority of the requirements but don't have a connection to the hiring manager or the company, as long as you have customized your master resume to include the keywords from the job posting. I consider these "blind shots": you are firing your ammunition at a hidden target because every job poster will decide which keywords they are allowing to filter through. It's a numbers game at this point. Expect only to hear back from one out of ten applications you submit this way—one in five if you have a specialized skill or have truly customized your resume to mirror the position to which you're applying. If only 15 percent of positions are filled by this method (85 percent filled through connections), then only let yourself spend 15 percent of your time applying to these "blind shot" job postings.

Learn how to ignore the rejection letters. "Thank you for your interest in our position, and while your skills and experience are impressive, we have decided to go with a candidate who more closely matches our requirements." Of course, according to their job description, you may have matched 100 percent, and you will never know what mysterious "requirement" you didn't meet. It's possible that an internal candidate had already been identified, or the hiring manager was seeking something not even listed on the requisition. If you're like me, you probably failed that telepathy class in college, so just let it go. You didn't "fit" for a reason you'll never know, and it's time to move forward. Never, ever wait until you get that rejection letter before applying to additional positions. Unless you have one or more actual offers in your hand, continue to use and interview until you're ready to accept an offer.



Working with Recruiters

Another question I've been asked is, "How can I get a 'headhunter' to help me find a job?" The simple, brutal answer to that question is "You can't." Companies pay recruiters to fill positions. If a recruiter does call you or reaches out to you on LinkedIn, talk to them, even if the position they are calling about isn't right for you. Send them your resume, thank them for their time, and let them know the type of position you are looking for. You may get a call back from them if they do have a position you'd be right for.

There are two types of recruiters in addition to internal company recruiters: retained search recruiters (these are the ones typically referred to as "headhunters" because they are hunting for "heads" for their clients). (Recruiters often talk about "getting butts in seats" but I suppose they prefer not to be thought of as butthunters!) Retained search recruiters are typically paid a percentage of the salary for the position. Hence, they are very eager to fill their clients' vacancies and offer their candidates the best opportunities. The other type of recruiter is the contingency search recruiter. When a company posts a position, the contingency recruiter may send several resumes to the company in the hope that the company will hire one of their candidates, earning the finder's fee. If a company pays for a retained search, it won't allow candidates from contingency recruiters. My own experience (nothing scientific here) is that contingency searches rarely work well for the candidate. When a recruiter does reach out, set up the call to discuss their client's needs, and ask if they are working a retained search for this position, which assures the recruiter will be putting forward the best possible candidates and working hard to make sure the candidate gets a good offer. Often, they will also work to "prep" you for interviews, sharing what they know about the hiring manager and the firm so you are well-prepared to present yourself in the most targeted way for the role. Always talk to a recruiter when they reach out. Keep their contact information and send them your updated resume regularly.

Most recruiters specialize in either a specific industry or field—HR, IT, manufacturing, and/or a specific geographic region. It's very easy to search online



for these recruiting firms (make sure they are retained search firms), and most have a way for you to submit your resume to their internal database online. But the best way to reach out to these recruiters is directly. Find them on LinkedIn or contact them through their website.

There is a third group of people who may reach out to you, in addition to retained search and contingency search recruiters. They may even present themselves as recruiters, but they are career coaching or career management firms. They will tell you they will put your resume in front of hiring companies (they usually do this on a contingent basis; they aren't retained search firms) and may even "guarantee" so many interviews or job offers—if you send them a very large check. These services can cost \$5,000 or more, so be cautious. I have spoken to clients who have been contacted by one (or more) of these companies, thinking *they* are the headhunters, and it will cost them thousands of dollars to get a job. I am not going to diss their work. Some of these companies provide good service and work with clients to understand their strengths, what type of positions they'd be suited for based on personality and aptitude assessments, and even provide a shiny, fancy embossed binder with resume and interviewing tips. I would strongly recommend researching the firm's reputation, especially with the Better Business Bureau, as some of these companies may come just short of being a scam. Or, you can start this book over again, this time with your Posse Career Coach who knows you better, even if they aren't experienced career coaches. Oh, and a quick Google search will result in dozens of free personality and aptitude assessments you can do on your own.

On the other side of the career management world are outplacement firms. Companies typically hire these firms as a benefit or service to employees who have recently been laid off as part of a reduction-in-force (RIF) or as part of a severance package. If your company has offered you this service, take it. Right Management and Lee Hecht Harrison are probably the largest and most reputable of these firms, and they do an outstanding job with their job search candidates. However, most outplacement firms are also very professional and competent.



Look Past the Job Boards

Your career is a valuable asset that must be managed to maintain or increase its value. Gaps in your resume are, unfortunately, perceived by recruiters and hiring managers as an indication that you don't care about taking care of this asset. (The truth is, gaps are legitimate and none of an employer's business, but as in most things, perceptions are hard to overcome.) Even if you don't have (or don't want) regular full-time employment, consider how you can maintain the value of this vital asset in your life. Likewise, if your goal is regular employment, consider how you might fill the gap until you land the perfect role by taking on freelance work or exploring alternative ways to create an income stream. In week 3, I discussed the statistics of employees with "side hustles." Still, even beyond that, approximately one-third of the current workforce overall is working exclusively in the freelance or gig economy. In 2021, there were 58 million independent workers in the United States, a 31 percent increase from 2016. By all accounts, gig work is on the rise. The number of gig workers in the US increased by 31 percent between 2016 and 2021, according to McKinsey's American Opportunity Survey.⁷

Some freelance, gig work, or side-hustles to consider might be:

- Consulting: Think of this as being hired for your mind to solve a specific client problem. This will also require developing entrepreneurial and business management skills.
- Contracting (or freelance work): Think of this as being hired for your hands to do a specific job. New freelance and "gig" sites are popping up every month because freelance or "gig-based" work is becoming so pervasive (think Uber, Care.com, etc.). Look for freelance work that will keep you at the top of your game in the field you want to work (or to gain experience in a new field).⁸
- Teaching: If you have meaningful professional experience and an advanced degree, consider looking at your local community college for teaching opportunities or even adjunct work through online universities. The pay will



likely be significantly lower than you're accustomed to. Still, it can provide opportunities to build your professional network and do meaningful work while you are searching for additional opportunities.

Assignment 5b: Start Applying for Jobs and Engaging Your Network

Job hunting is a full-time job. If you are still working, plan to spend at least a part-time job's worth of hours on your search, at least 10–15 hours/week. If you are not working, divide your time between the job search and developing or building an alternative income stream, depending on your ultimate objective. If you're hoping to go freelance full time, you may be only looking for a job that can sustain you while you build your business, so spend 25–30 hours per week on that and 15–20 on your job search. If you are ultimately looking for regular, full-time employment, spend at least 30 hours per week on your job search and 10–15 hours per week developing an alternative way to generate income (teaching, consulting, gig work, etc.).

Adrienne and I both recommend tracking your progress. During my own job search, I kept a log of every position applied for, follow-up, result, and the recruiter's name (especially if they were a retained search recruiter contracted by the company to fill a specific position).

Adrienne's tracker for networking:

Category	Industry	Company	Person	Title	Message Sent	Call Date	Upcoming To Do	Contact Via	Notes	Goal (Purpose in Reaching Out)
Peer										
Leader										
Connector										
Resource										
Hiring										
Contact										



Adrienne’s tracker for applications submitted (if you don’t want to use one of the job search apps):

Location	Industry	Company	Title	Salary	Link	Connections	Applied	Date Applied	Notes

Meet at least weekly with your Posse Career Coach to discuss progress, as having someone who will hold you accountable for doing the work is vital. It’s easy to get distracted without specific tasks and objectives to meet each week, and unless you have superhuman self-discipline, being accountable for completing these tasks is one of the only ways you will be able to maintain your focus and your aim, especially once the job hunt drags on into a month or two—or six—it won’t be easy to stay motivated and positive. Set realistic and measurable goals with your coach: reach out to 10 LinkedIn connections every week, apply to a minimum of five positions (or 10 if you aren’t working and are in a full-time job search), and send emails to the connections for those companies. Attend two professional association events this month. Schedule and have a phone conversation every week with two new connections to learn about their work (repeat Assignment 4). Read *Let Your Life Speak* and share your reflections with your coach and at least one other person on your posse. Follow up at least every other week with your whole posse and keep them informed of your job search progress. Make sure they have either your master resume or the custom resume, as they are most likely able to support you with it as an advocate.

The job hunt is a grind. But if you establish a routine schedule and accomplish the tasks you set for yourself, you *will* start to get interviews.



Interviewing 101

Of course, interviewing is also a big part of the job search process. Hopefully, writing all your STAR stories will remind you of the value you bring to a potential employer and will help you answer all sorts of questions about the value you provided in past positions. Review some common behavioral interview questions below and prepare your own questions for the interviewer, along with some ideas for follow-up questions (also provided below). It's a great idea to have a friend conduct a mock interview with you for practice if you haven't interviewed in a long time or tend to feel nervous in interviews.

Assignment 5c: Use your STAR stories to prepare for interviews.

Practice interviewing with your Posse Career Coach using some of the sample behavioral interview questions below. Ask AI to come up with likely interview questions based on the job posting and your resume. You can even ask AI to help you come up with responses, but only if your resume has covered these topics. Typically, your resume won't include the context or situation around the resume bullet, so if you still haven't *really* written out those STAR stories, now is the time to go back to that assignment and write more! The best advice for preparing for interviews is to have a handful of your STAR stories that can be adapted to focus on a specific topic.

Tell Me About Yourself: Almost every interview starts with a question similar to this. Work with your coach to develop a short (no more than 3-4 minutes) summary of your background and *how that experience will translate to the position for which you are interviewing.*

Decision Making and Problem Solving

Describe a situation in which you used good judgment and logic to solve a problem.

Give me an example of a time when you had to be quick in coming to a decision.



Leadership

Have you ever had trouble getting others to agree with your ideas? How did you deal with the situation, and were you successful?

Describe the most challenging group from which you've had to gain cooperation.

Motivation

Tell me about a time when you went above and beyond the call of duty.

Give me an example of a situation in which you positively influenced the actions of others.

Communication

Describe a situation in which you were able to communicate with another individual who did not personally like you (or vice versa).

Describe a time you had to use written communication to convey an important argument or idea.

Interpersonal Skills

Give me examples of what you've done in the past to nurture teamwork.

Give an example of an unpopular decision you've made, what the result was, and how you managed it.

Planning and Organization

When scheduling your time, what method do you use to decide which items are priorities?

Describe how you've handled a sudden interruption to your schedule.

Questions To Ask Interviewer(s)

For Recruiters

New position or vacancy? (If vacancy, why?) Any internal staff considered for position?

Your history/experience with the company/hiring manager? What is your understanding of your client's priorities for this position?

What are the most immediate challenges of the position that need to be addressed in the first three to six months?

Questions for Hiring Managers



The company

What do you see ahead for the company/industry in the next five years?

What are the biggest challenges you are facing in the next year?

Overall structure: traditional or matrix? Mixed?

How can new employees become familiar with, and begin to contribute to, the culture you've developed here?

What's the most important way that your company differentiates itself from competitors? (Focus the question on the particular industry you're in, showing that you're knowledgeable about the company and its sector.)

What are a few of the most critical challenges that the industry is facing, and how is your company going to approach them?

What might I do to add the greatest value to the business? Followed by: What kinds of things can I do to prepare myself for the job?

The position's history

New position or vacancy? (If there is a vacancy, why?) Are any internal staff being considered for the position?

Why was the position created, and what gap is it designed to fill?

The department

What is the overall structure of the company, and how does the position fit the structure?

How do you view your group/division/department?

Direct manager

What do you love most about working here? What makes you stay with this company?

What will I like best? What will I find challenging?

Leadership style preference. Directive? Supportive? Flexible?

What are your highest priorities for your work right now?

Non-negotiables (values, etc.)?

Receptivity to ideas, challenging feedback. Willingness to support the development of key relationships.



The expectations

What are the most immediate challenges of the position that need to be addressed in the first three months?

What traits does a person need to be successful here?

The next steps

If I could add or change anything about myself or my experience to make me a better fit, what would it be?

What are the next steps in the interview process?

Accepting the Offer

When Natalie called and said she had a job offer and asked if I'd review her counteroffer, I was proud of her for going in with the desire to negotiate. She was one of my favorite former high-potential managers, and I wanted to make sure she got what she was worth at the new company. I also knew that women often struggle and hesitate to negotiate even when they know it is expected (and at her management level, it was expected). I wanted her to understand her value, feel confident in her request, and still format it in a way that would help her appear strong and confident, yet also polite and respectful.

Negotiating is not a “natural” ability. It's learned. And women learn the skill far less frequently than men do. Everybody has heard about the research: Women don't ask. The most commonly cited study⁹ shows that male MBA students graduating from the program negotiated their starting salaries about half the time—women graduates only negotiated about one-eighth of the time. Several studies have replicated these results.

However, other research suggests that there may be more to this gap than a lack of confidence. Men are expected to ask for what they want, and there may be a “social cost” for women who do so.¹⁰ Being assertive can put women in a “double bind,” where women who are perceived as competent are not seen as being nice, and women who are perceived as nice are often perceived as not competent. Natalie needed to reinforce both her competence and her “niceness” in her counteroffer



request; however, given the odds and the research, I wanted her to prioritize competence and confidence.

Of course, women should be encouraged to negotiate for what they are worth, and women seem to intuitively know when the social risks of asking are present. However, since they are far less accustomed to negotiating, or have been taught to “be bold and firm” like men (which opens up potential social risks), they need to learn how to negotiate as women. How could Natalie do that in her counteroffer?

The same HBR article discusses additional research demonstrating that when women negotiate by pointing out what the other person (or entity) will gain by meeting the request, they are viewed favorably. Social risk for breaking these so-called prescribed gender roles is minimized or even eliminated. It’s called the “I/We approach.” I call it “The Girl Format,” not to be condescending to women, but as a tongue-in-cheek acknowledgment that there are still different rules for women in the workplace, forcing us to be “girls” instead of fully equal women. The point today was not to lament the injustice of how expectations for gendered behavior put women at a disadvantage; the point was to secure Natalie the job and ensure she received her full value in the compensation package.

I read the counteroffer she had drafted:

Dear Sue,

Thank you for your offer of the position of Manager for Acme Operations. I am impressed with the depth and knowledge of the team and Acme's strategic plans for growth and expansion, and I am confident that my experience and contributions will help the company meet its goals. The opportunity and the prospect of joining the organization are exciting.

I would like to discuss the salary and benefits you have offered before I make a final decision.

This sentence was followed by two full paragraphs explaining her justification for a very modest request of 4 percent above the offer, which she hadn’t even asked for yet. Then I read how she requested the higher salary:



With that being said, I would like to counter the offer and kindly ask that you consider a starting salary of \$X and a job title of Senior Manager. I believe this is commensurate with the responsibilities and results expected beyond management within my functional department. I believe that my skills and experience in the industry, combined with my ability to manage several functional areas, support my request. I do appreciate your consideration in the matter.

Who was this impostor I was reading? How could this be my lean, mean, tough, brilliant, competent, rock-star high-potential manager? I certainly didn't recognize her in that paragraph; the syrup I was reading almost gave me Type 2 diabetes. She was being a girl—which is safe—but at the risk of her value being compromised.

Knowing the research that women don't negotiate nearly as frequently as men, and the very real dilemma that it can be a risk to do so, I understood her language choice. We rewrote the counteroffer using The Girl Format: Ask with confidence, but explain why it will be beneficial to them. She had already done that in her first paragraph. She was asking for a modest amount that would be well within the salary range for the position. She didn't need another two paragraphs to justify the request. We raised the counteroffer to 6.5 percent. With 15 years of experience, I also chastised her for accepting the offered vacation pay, which was a week less than she had accrued at her current job. Likewise, her salary range and experience put her at the high end of most management-level roles, and upon learning more about the extended responsibilities and scope of the new position, we also requested a higher-level title. (Titles are a tricky thing: they vary dramatically from company to company. A manager in one company might be a VP in another. I told her not to worry too much about the title, but it certainly didn't hurt to ask.)

Dear Sue,

Thank you for your offer of the position of Finance Manager for Acme Operations. I am very impressed with the depth and knowledge of the team and Acme's strategic plans for growth and expansion, and I am confident that my experience and contributions will help the company meet its goals. The opportunity and the prospect of joining the organization are exciting.



I am enthusiastic about accepting the formal offer as soon as it arrives. Given the scope of responsibility for the position, my experience, and the salary range expectations we discussed last year when we first spoke about this opportunity, I would request a starting salary of \$X and a job title of Business Operations Director. It is my goal, from day one, to demonstrate my ability to effectively support multiple departments as I have successfully done before, rather than execute a limited finance role, to achieve your priority results.

It is imperative to me to retain my current level of paid time off at 4 weeks' vacation (160 hour or 20 days), and I do have a few questions about the comp and benefits package as well as a few on-boarding questions, which we can discuss during a short phone call at your convenience.

Thank you again for your offer. I can certainly see a future for myself at Acme, and I am confident that I can bring a lot of value. I'm sure we can come to a mutual agreement that's beneficial for both of us.

We eliminated the original two paragraphs building up to the request and replaced them with one sentence describing how she plans to make an immediate contribution and the value Acme would receive by hiring her. Girl Format accomplished.

As expected, the company negotiated the final salary back to the 4 percent she originally wanted to ask for (had she only asked for 4 percent, she likely would have only gotten 2 percent). They happily gave her the extra week of paid vacation as she requested. Once she was comfortable with the bonus package, had been informed about the history of bonus payouts (a question I made sure she asked), she was able to have her other benefits questions answered: tuition reimbursement and development opportunities, how vacation/PTO accrues, the expected start date, and other details.

When women know their value, they are far more likely to negotiate. But negotiating is still very different for men and women, and women are subject to unconscious biases if they break prescribed gender roles and appear too “demanding” or aggressive. It is OK for women—in fact, it is essential for



women—to negotiate differently than men. Asking too “nicely” may subject a candidate to unconscious perceptions around her competence. Asking “like a man” comes with social costs of being perceived as not kind or polite and forces a woman into an uncomfortable experience of “stereotype threat” by breaking gender prescriptions (whether these gender norms are “fair” or not).

The social discourse around breaking barriers and removing obstacles for women has never been so omnipresent. But gender barriers, hidden obstacles, and unconscious biases will remain for a long time. Helping women navigate the changing tides is work that continues to bring me joy and meaning.

Extra Credit Assignment: Do Something Fun for Yourself

You’ve done a lot! If you’re looking for a move outside your company or recovering from a layoff, you have started the long slog of the job hunt. This work requires focus and discipline. And because it’s not your routine, it takes a lot more mental energy. Taking care of yourself is critical to maintaining focus and recharging your batteries, so you have the energy and focus to keep it up. Take a day to do the equally important work of managing your emotional and physical well-being. Whatever it is that gives you joy, do that. Spend a day with your bestie, go to the spa, take a long hike in nature, sit on your couch in your sweatpants, and read a good novel. Whatever it is, take one day that is just about you and doing something that makes you happy.



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