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THE SEARCH

How a Good Candidate Clears the H.R. Hurdles

By PHYLLIS KORKKI

IT'S an employer's market right now, and that means employers can be fussy. They can include a long list of requirements in their job descriptions — demanding, perhaps, a certain number of years' experience in one corner of an industry, knowledge of an obscure programming language and fluency in, say, Latvian.

With an average of six job seekers for every job opening right now, chances are that they'll be able to find someone who fits their very specific bill. That's frustrating for those who may not fit the job description to a T as it appears on a posting, but who know that they could succeed at the job.

Other job seekers are facing a different kind of frustration. Accepting the realities of the marketplace, they are willing to take a step down from their previous work. But that immediately raises suspicions that they will be out the door as soon as the market improves.

So how do you persuade a company to hire you if you are underqualified — or overqualified — for the job, and the laws of supply and demand are against you?

If your only relationship with the company is electronic, via a job board or a posting, your chances are not good. H.R. people confronting hundreds of faceless online applications have one main goal: to weed out as many people as they can.

“The employer is not expected to be creative or flexible or see the opportunity in you that you think you might have” when the relationship is purely electronic, said Bernadette Kenny, chief career officer at Adecco North America, the staffing firm. She considers that to be an “unrealistic expectation on the part of the job seeker.”

But if you can establish personal contact with someone on the inside, you may be able to make your case. It's tiresome to have to repeat this, and a lot of people don't like to hear it, but it comes down to networking.

Job seekers who don't fit all the requirements "need to go around the gatekeeper; they need to find another door," said Barbara Safani, owner of Career Solvers, a career management firm in New York.

If you are introduced to a hiring manager by someone you know, there is more trust, and suddenly "things aren't as important as they appeared to be on that job spec," she said.

"The best guarantee of future success is past success," said Steve Miranda, chief H.R. and content integration officer at the Society for Human Resource Management.

When you get in front of a hiring manager, you can describe your professional successes and show how they are relevant and transferable to the job at hand, he said.

And you can indicate through your words and behavior what a witty, personable, flexible, cooperative and hard-working employee you will be — unlike that perfect match on paper who could turn out to be a humorless, lazy, antisocial prima donna.

Emphasizing your humble and cooperative side is especially important when it comes to applying for a job for which you are overqualified, said Erik Sorenson, chief executive of Vault, an online career service. That's because many employers fear that "along with overqualification comes arrogance," he said.

If you came from a high-powered managerial position and are applying for a job in the rank and file, you need to stress that you are a team player, and that you enjoy the camaraderie of being alongside co-workers, he said.

You can also emphasize that you appreciate the chance to escape the pressure of a high-powered job, he said. (And you really would, wouldn't you?)

If you were at a Fortune 500 company and are applying at a much smaller business, you might note your interest in coaching and mentoring younger people, and emphasize that you would welcome a more entrepreneurial environment, Mr. Miranda said.

All of these arguments also help tame the suspicion that you will leave as soon as the job market improves. And, after all, Mr. Miranda said, "it's always nice to be able to be able to get a Lexus for a Camry price."

If you are overqualified, be aware that you will not be able to command the salary you had in your last position. Let your interviewer know that you are prepared to accept this.

ALL too often, people do not "listen" to the wording of a job ad, said Ms. Kenny of Adecco. Asking for five years of experience means that the company is willing to pay for only five years even if you have 12, she said. Do not expect the company to pay a

premium for those extra seven.

Some overqualified and increasingly desperate applicants may ask themselves: Can I lop that extra seven years off the résumé?

The answer is no.

Never lie about your experience, although in some cases overqualified people can omit some of the jobs they have held, in the interest of a more streamlined résumé.

But a lie or misrepresentation can be grounds for dismissal after you are hired.

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