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In Person: Finding Opportunities in a Dysfunctional Job Market

Brooke Allen
United States
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Last time, [I wrote about](#) some innovative approaches I use in hiring. I can imagine the person I was 3 decades ago--a recent science graduate with an eye for symmetry--reading it and wondering, "That's nice, but how can I use these ideas to get a job?"

Let me show you how.

Take responsibility for finding hidden opportunities offered by companies and organizations that need your talents but aren't creative enough to find you.

You can experience a buyer's market (more sellers than buyers) or you can experience a seller's market (more buyers than sellers)--but a dysfunctional market (like the market for science jobs and most others) cuts both ways. Employers can't find good workers and the out-of-work (and underemployed) workers can't find good jobs.

Still, as I wrote in that earlier article, "An inefficient labor market isn't such a bad thing for those who are willing to dig a little deeper. Such a market can reward well-spent effort in ways that efficient markets don't." As a job seeker, your well-spent effort can lead to job opportunities you would have had no hope of landing if the markets were efficient.

Don't wait for me (or anyone else) to advertise the job you seek. Instead, read the rest of this article and get to work.

In 1982, I quit a job, driven by the vague desire to become an independent consultant, only to confront an economy in recession. The first thing I did was spend some of my meager savings to attend the national conference of the [Independent Computer Consultants Association](#). I asked everyone whose ear I could bend, "What should I do?" Then I listened to what they said.

After the conference, I followed up on one suggestion. I wrote to everyone I knew or knew of--friends, acquaintances, distant relatives, former employers, and former employees--about 200 people in all. I explained that I was

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now a freelancer (read: "unemployed") and was looking for work. I gave an outline of my credentials as a programmer, but I attached no résumé. I asked everyone to please let me know if they had work and to introduce me to anyone they knew who might.

I was immediately contacted by an investment bank offering 4 weeks of work that nobody else wanted: reading some programs and writing a user's manual. I knew nothing about investment banking or writing manuals, so I said "yes." (When someone offers you the chance to do something you're not yet competent at, you've got to jump at it. Such opportunities to explore new territory rarely present themselves.)

The experience was painful, but I'm so glad I did it. My first draft was run past their in-house editor, who returned it covered in red. It was reminiscent of my first COBOL program; how can a 28-line program generate 55 error messages? I discovered that I was no writer, but the experience made me want to become one.

At the end of the month, the company came to the same realization--that I was no writer--and offered me a full-time position: coding, not writing. By then, a friend had also helped me land an offer at a manufacturing company, while a consulting firm wanted me to work at an oil company as a subcontractor.

In the past, I always had to decide between two alternatives: take this job or remain unemployed; stay here or go there. This was the first time I had to choose among three alternatives--and it felt good.

I took the job as a subcontractor and referred friends to the other two jobs. My career as an independent consultant was established.

So as not to feel so disconnected, and to help each other market ourselves, some colleagues and I formed an umbrella corporation through which we billed our clients. We printed some snazzy letterhead using the fancy midtown address of a member of our group. But we had no permanent place of business; we met at a bar once a month.

Our company took 1% of the gross revenues to cover expenses, but because we had none, we spent the money each December on a holiday party. We invited all our clients and their friends. Hundreds attended, and it was great fun. The message to our clients was clear: "If I don't hold on to this guy, there are so many other places he could go." And all of us *did* have other places we could go.

That mass mailing was so effective that I'd do it again today if I had to look for a new job. But I wouldn't stop there; I'd open my house for a party and invite everyone to help brainstorm my next move. The only problem is that, realizing how valuable a contact can be, I have tried to keep track of nearly every person I've met since 1982. I now have more than 2500 people [in my contact list](#). That's a big party.

SOME TIPS FOR LANDING A JOB

-Cast a broad net. Tell everyone you know that you are looking for work and ask them to tell everyone they know. Describe your capabilities in general terms so that you seem appropriate for a wide range of jobs. Defining yourself--or your contact list--too narrowly runs the risk of foreclosing career paths due to your own lack of imagination.*

-Every so often you might run across an employer who is good at finding hidden

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talent, but don't count on it. So take full responsibility for getting found.

-Employers use résumés to eliminate candidates--not to select them. As an employer, I might respond to your résumé if I find no imperfections, but I'll always respond if you: 1) tell me a compelling story in two or three sentences that makes me want to know more, 2) ask a question that can't go unanswered, or 3) itemize in a letter a few of your qualifications that fit my needs perfectly--and the letter need not cover a résumé. If I absolutely must have a résumé, I'll ask you for one.

-Don't judge a job too early. First impressions are hard to overcome--and often wrong. You might develop a new competence out of a previous weak point. Often it isn't the fork in the road but the entirely new road that gets you there, so you might need to tramp in the brush for a while.

-Let your next employer observe you learning something. On the first interview, don't ask about salary or benefits, ask, "How do you do things around here?" then take notes. Ask, "What do you need me to learn?" then stop at the library on the way home.

-Show, don't tell. Don't talk about your prior work; bring a portfolio. Don't itemize what you know; teach what you know. Don't brag about what you've done; demonstrate something that makes you proud.

-Try to help those who don't hire you. There are two good reasons you won't work somewhere: 1) you're not a fit, 2) they're not a fit. In either case, refer others who might work out. You'll be remembered.

-In some cases, you won't land a job even though an objective person with full knowledge of the facts could only conclude that you are the best candidate. It happens. Forget about it.

-Treat employers like people, not companies. And don't anthropomorphize organizations. I recently met a young graduate student who was bitter about the job-hunting process. It took her 6 months to uncover an ad for "the perfect job" and send out her first résumé. She was interviewed by HR and told that a hiring manager would call her in a week. That was 2 weeks ago and now she was fuming: "I would never work for that company if they begged me." I asked her if she knew how overwhelming it can be to hire someone while keeping a business running. She said it didn't matter; it was "just rude. If it is their policy to treat people as they do me, I don't want to have anything to do with them." I don't know what she does now or how good she is at it, but there is no way I'd hire her to do anything until she grows up a little.

* I try to keep track of everyone I meet who hands me a business card, and then I try to e-mail something to them once a year. My last e-mail announced my prior article here in *Science Careers*. It is a testimony to work-force mobility that of 3700 e-mails about 1200 bounced. This is a good thing. By calling old numbers, I can usually find out where they've gone and who has replaced them--so one dead contact becomes two fresh ones. Even though I was clearly sending a form letter, exactly one person accused me of spamming, and he changed his mind when I reminded him that we met at a networking conference in London that he'd paid to attend.

Previously I wrote, "The world will be a better place when more people take a more innovative approach to discovering hidden value during the hiring process."

But employers rarely do, so don't wait. You're the hidden talent, so take responsibility for finding hidden opportunities offered by companies and organizations that need your talents but aren't creative enough to find you.

If you find these suggestions interesting, pass them around. If you are not looking for work, e-mail this article to someone who is or print it out and tape it to the wall.

And by all means, [send me](mailto:brooke.t.allen@gmail.com) your thoughts and experiences: brooke.t.allen@gmail.com

Oh, one more thing: Open your house for a party every so often and send me an invitation.

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