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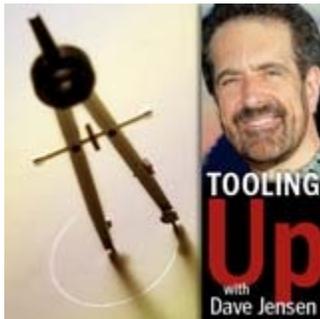
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Tooling Up: On Headhunters

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United States
18 April 2008

I know a lot about this month's topic, but I rarely write about it. I'm an executive recruiter, and I try to avoid leaving the impression that I encourage people to use a recruiting company. And in fact, I'm *not* trying to do that, because I've never seen anyone who is searching for an entry-level job get much value from headhunters.

But a couple of weeks ago, I gave a presentation at a topflight career symposium conducted by three major institutions in New York City. There, a presenter contradicted some advice I gave during my keynote presentation. He said at the meeting that he found his first position via a recruiter.

His experience persuaded me to take a fresh look at the topic, presenting the pros and cons of using a recruiter as I see them. I promise to be as objective as I can. Even if recruiters are not important for entry-level jobs, knowing how the executive-recruiting business works can only help.

Recruiters work in a Wild West atmosphere. Few laws govern their conduct and their relationships with candidates.

THE HIDDEN JOB MARKET

It used to be said that only about one in five open jobs is advertised. With the low cost of Internet ads, that ratio has changed, but it is still true that only a minority of jobs are visible in journals or on the Net. My guess is that about one-third of the pool of open jobs is advertised--at most.

This leaves a great big pile of open positions, in companies large and small, that aren't easy to find and apply for. One way experienced industry people access this hidden job market is via third-party recruiters, independent "headhunters" like me who help employers fill hard-to-fill positions. Although the recruiter's official client is always a company, a lot of industry scientists keep the names of a few recruiters in their Rolodex, and for good reason. Headhunters give them access to jobs they wouldn't learn about otherwise.

But headhunters focus on high-level, or at least mid-level, jobs. Can they be useful for entry-level job seekers, too? And is there a downside to working with a recruiter for more junior

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scientists? To understand the answers to these questions, you'll need to know more about the recruitment industry and how it works.

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THE VARIETIES OF RECRUITING COMPANIES

People employed as everything from contract résumé writers to low-level clerks in human resources departments are sometimes referred to as "recruiters."

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Of course, a few recruiters work directly for companies. To avoid confusion, let's call these human resources contacts. I'm not considering them in this article. I'm writing about third-party companies that are paid to approach job candidates on behalf of a potential employer. Although some people call them headhunters, most industry insiders use the term "executive recruiter."

There's one kind of company you should watch out for. I call them "résumé mailers" because that's basically what they do: They scoop up résumés and curricula vitae (CVs) from Web sites and circulate them to companies, hoping to collect a fee from an employer. At first glance, they may not appear that different from legitimate executive recruiters, but these folks are sending out your résumé without your consent.

Contingency recruiters can work in a variety of ways but always on a "pay after hire" basis. They are paid a fee equivalent to 20% to 25% of the hired person's first year's salary but only when the hire is completed.

Retained executive recruiters are paid for their work--typically 25% to 33% of a year's salary for each open position they take on--regardless of whether the position is filled. The word "executive" doesn't mean that they recruit only executives; they recruit scientists as well but--as I've already said--generally at the senior level. As an entry-level scientist, you're unlikely to encounter these folks.

Recruiters work in a Wild West atmosphere. Few laws govern their conduct and their relationships with candidates. "Résumé mailers" are the best example of this; they're just throwing stuff against the wall and hoping it sticks. Separating the legitimate and illegitimate is tricky for entry-level scientists.

A BOUNTY ON YOUR HEAD

Recruiting fees for contingency recruiters--the only kind you're likely to encounter--are substantial. In fact, these fees are sometimes high enough to impact your desirability with certain employers who are looking at candidates from many sources.

When a CV with a \$15,000 or \$20,000 bounty is compared with a comparable one with no fee, the no-fee candidate has a clear advantage.

That's why it's important to be certain that anyone you give permission to contact you about assignments will respect your wishes once they have your CV. When they approach an employer about an open position on your behalf, you get more expensive. Before you work with a recruiter, you want to make sure it's a respectable, and respectful, recruiter.

When approached by a recruiter about a job, listen carefully. How well do they know the client company? Does she sound as though she has a grasp of your science? A recruiter does *not* have to be a molecular biologist to recruit molecular biologists. In fact, that can even get in the way. What they *do* need is an understanding of the skills and abilities the employer is seeking, something more than simply reading off a list of techniques.

There's an important question you need to ask any recruiter who approaches you and a promise you need to extract from him or her that shows the recruiter's respect and professionalism. First the question:

"Are you the company's sole source for filling the position?" You'd like to know if there is a real connection, a real commitment, between recruiter and client. You don't want to work with a

rookie who spotted an ad in last Sunday's paper.

Now the promise:

"I'm interested. I'll send you my CV if I have your commitment that before it gets sent to any company, you will contact me and we can discuss the opportunity. That way, I can keep my job search focused and know where my credentials have been presented."

I can't think of any reason a legitimate recruiter wouldn't make you that promise. Although he may not want to divulge the employer's name during your first phone conversation, once he sees that you fit his specs, he can confirm the company name. That way, you can avoid sending more than one CV to the same employer.

Even if you go along, the company may decide not to present your credentials to the employer, or you may be one of six or seven candidates the recruiter presents. The recruiter does not work for you. Like the matchmaker in "Fiddler on the Roof," her job is to put together two parties with a mutual interest, but she gets paid only by one of these.

A MISSING PIECE OF YOUR CAREER-SKILLS TOOLBOX

My biggest concern about using recruiters in the early stages of your professional career is that by working with recruiters, you will miss out on valuable networking experience. Many recruiting companies tell their candidates, "Don't worry about your job search; we'll take it from here." That can sound very attractive to someone entering a new world, but you *should* worry about your job search. You can learn a lot, and it's *yours*.

Nobody cares about your career as much as you do. Everyone has an agenda. Every recruiter has his or her own business goals, and they are sometimes very different from the career goals of the candidates we work with. On balance, it just doesn't pay for you to put your career exclusively in the hands of someone else, in my opinion. The person holding the reins of your job search should be you.

I respect candidates who mount their own job searches. They develop people skills. This, along with their internal drive, gets them what they want out of the job market.

A writer and speaker on career issues worldwide, David Jensen is the founder and managing director of CareerTrax Inc., a biotechnology and pharmaceutical consulting firm located in Sedona, Arizona.

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