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Special Report #4

Job Search Strategy: Want Ads Answers to the 10 most common questions about using want ads in your job search

I have been gainfully employed for just about all my adult life – even while I was a student. And I have gotten just about every one of my jobs from answering ads, even my academic jobs. I got one job – just one! – through my college placement office. I got another job from a recruiter. But all the rest – even my academic jobs – came from answering ads.

Experts estimate that want ads display less than 20% of all available jobs. You'll hear estimates as low as 5%.

But I've never heard what happens to the other 80%. Some will be posted in-house and available only to current employees. Some will be available on campuses for entry-

level applicants. Others will be available only to applicants identified by recruiters.

I believe the want ads may represent a much higher percentage of jobs that are filled by applicants outside the company. There's always a story behind the numbers.

But...

Want Ads Aren't Always the Answer

√Answering ads can be a numbers game.

I've been rejected or ignored far more times than I've been called for interviews.

You'll generally have better luck when answering targeted ads (such as ads appearing in an industry publication) than more general ads (such as ads in the local paper or the Wall Street Journal).

√Nobody's infallible.

Take what I say with a bucket of salt. In fact, take everything from any career consultant with a bucket of salt. I see advice online, including articles reprinted from newspapers, that makes me shudder. Some advice will actually harm your job search.

Even with the best advice, you can go wrong. Your industry may operate under unique norms. Conditions may change, permanently or temporarily. No guarantees!

√Networking still offers access to better jobs, faster.

BUT

- ❖ Some people just don't click with networks: they're too maverick, too specialized or too new in town.
- ❖ Some industries (such as academia) operate through want ads and official postings. Big companies and universities often insist on jumping through bureaucratic hurdles.

Suppose you're friends with the chairperson of the chemistry department. By coincidence, you've got a PhD in chemistry and ten years of experience in the field they need the most. The chairperson says, "You're perfect for us! We want you."

Will you get hired?

Maybe – but probably not right away.

Chances are the university's HR department will insist on posting an ad (and maybe interviewing at least three candidates). You may still end up with the job. But you'll jump through the same hoops as the other applicants.

It could be worse. The others jump through hoops to nowhere.

So...do some ads never lead to jobs?

True. Companies post ads for many reasons. Sometimes, of course, they need to fill a position. But they may also want to:

- Test the waters before creating a "real" job
- Meet legal requirements before hiring someone who's already been chosen
- Keep an ad running after someone's hired – just in case

10 Most Frequently Asked Q's About Job Ads

Okay – want ads aren't perfect. But answering these 10 questions will help you make the best of what's available.

1. Which job ads should I answer?

Answer ads when you fit **at least some** of the qualifications. One rule of thumb is, "If you meet at least half the qualifications, you have a chance.

Sometimes "required" really means you absolutely, positively need a certain skill or experience. But many employers can be flexible about years of experience and specific industries.

Employers often add requirements to avoid getting inundated with resumes. They realize few applicants will be a perfect match.

And sometimes "**years** of experience" is a code for **level** of experience. For instance, "minimum 3 years experience" probably means, "Don't apply if this will be your first job out of college – but our salary won't appeal to anyone who's much farther along."

Conversely, "7 years" often means, "Significant experience dealing with senior level managers or major accounts, producing results and supervising at least one other employee." If you've had ten years of experience without getting promoted, you may not be considered for the position.

The exact code varies with industry and region, but there's almost always a code.

2. Should I answer ads from Monster.com, Career Builders and other Internet sources?

Before posting your resume on a Web site, ask how the site provides confidentiality. Typically, the site posts your resume anonymously. You can omit actual names of previous employers. When an employer sees your resume and asks for contact information, the site sends you an email. You make the next move.

If you're currently employed, and you're searching in secret, I would encourage you to avoid posting at all. I encourage everyone to refuse posting to a site where your real name will be displayed.

Don't expect too much from those Internet ads. Sure, millions of jobs are posted – but even more millions of applicants are searching. Many ads will be for straight-commission sales jobs. And many will be for jobs already filled or “testing the waters.”

Bottom Line: Make the Internet your lowest priority.

3. Should I post my resume to an online discussion board?

Ryze.com and other groups create lists where members can post questions and learn from others. It's free and (usually) fast.

BUT be cautious.

First, never, ever sign up for a discussion list with your employer's email! Get a free yahoo or hotmail account. Check your email at a nearby Kinko's or bring your laptop and plug in on your own time.

Second, if you're job-hunting in secret, do not post questions to a discussion list under your real name. Your boss or coworker can sign up for the same list just as easily as you did!

Finally, take every piece of advice with a grain of salt. I post to the discussion lists from time to time for two reasons. I want articles ideas for my ezine. And I hope to pick up subscribers and clients. So, although I think I offer terrific advice, my free stuff isn't as comprehensive or thorough as what you'd get if you hired me. And I think every other career consultant operates the same way.

Besides, some of the advice out there is pretty awful! You have no idea if the sender really is a career expert or an inexperienced wannabe.

Some people have found jobs through ryze.com through a combination of luck and persistence. Just don't count on it.

3. Should I answer ads for jobs below my education and experience levels?

Typically, if you're changing fields, you may be considered for a lower level position in a new field.

And if you're a recent college graduate, go ahead and apply for nonprofessional positions. Some industries promote from within, such as hotel, banking and car rental industries. Others will never promote you if you begin at too low a level, so you have to do your research.

In my experience, people who take a step back tend to get frustrated and stressed quickly. It's better to apply for jobs that are at your current level or slightly above. If you need money, take a job that will clearly be temporary or hang on to the job you have.

But no advice is infallible! Occasionally you'll apply for a job below your qualifications and your resume will be pulled for a higher position. The odds are greatly against you but it happened to me once – and can happen again.

4. Should I answer ads for part-time and temp openings?

Often, depending on your field, you'll find it easier to get a part-time or temporary job than a full-time job with benefits. Some of those jobs will lead to full-time employment; others just go away after awhile.

In a few industries (such as academia) accepting a part-time or "adjunct" job will bar you (formally or informally) from future positions within the organization. In these situations, avoid part-time options in the field and seek alternative employment while you job hunt.

5. Should I answer blind ads?

Yes – with caution.

Some totally reputable employers place blind ads to avoid dealing with hundreds (or thousands) of applications. I've landed good jobs by responding to blind ads.

But if you're currently employed, skip the blind ads. One of my friends actually applied to her own company, early in her career. She looked into her inbox and there was her own resume, forwarded without comment by her own boss. She left before the month was up.

And even if you're completely open about your search, be aware that your blind ad may have been placed by a recruiter seeking to add resumes to her database. The recruiter then sends your resume all over town.

Now if you're hired, the company has to pay a 20-30% fee – and they may decide to hire your competitor who's free and clear. Or your recruiter might have such a bad reputation that he actually destroys some opportunities.

Some experts encourage you to add to your cover letter: "If you are a recruiter, do not send my resume anywhere without calling me first."

But you have to wonder. A reputable recruiter will do this anyway. Will a less reputable recruiter pay attention to your request? I have no idea, but it can't hurt to add that clause.

6. How do I write a cover letter?

Open with a reference to the advertisement – and avoid the "I" word. For example, you could begin:

"This letter and resume respond to your September 10 advertisement in the *Wall Street Journal*."

Next, jump right into a low-key sales pitch – positive and confident.

"I believe my qualifications fit your requirements extremely well."

Now march down the requirements in the ad and show that you meet them, one by one.

The ad asks for a minimum of 3 years of sales experience, an MBA, good communication skills, experience in the pharmaceutical industry and a positive attitude.

You have 5 years of sales experience, part of an MBA, outstanding communication skills, experience in the medical supplies industry and a formerly-positive attitude that's been eroded by a long job hunt.

You write something like this:

My background includes over five years of sales experience, with a promotion from Sales Rep to Senior Sales Rep. I met or exceeded my quota every year. I earned the Sales Rep of the Year award twice, chosen from one hundred reps from the Northwest Region.

In this position, I sold to decision makers in the medical field from physicians to nurses to administrators. I am thoroughly familiar with hospital and individual physician purchasing processes.

I am enrolled in an MBA program at Big State University and expect to complete the degree by December 20xx.

My communication skills have been rated as very strong. I was asked to lead a seminar for my company last year. I created sales letters to customers that led to increased opportunities for presentations in several of my accounts.

Please let me know if I can provide additional information. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Note that our job hunter makes no reference to attitude. If you've been with a company for three or more years, and you've had at least one promotion or recognition, you're likely to be a team player. You don't have to say so.

Some consultants recommend a two-column format, where you explicitly match your qualifications to the requirements of the ad. It's a powerful strategy if you really do meet and/or exceed every requirement (or even most requirements).

Of course, if you exceed *all* requirements by a wide margin, the company will wonder why you are applying for the job. And if you appear to be pushing the envelope, your query heads straight for the trash.

Our example was short. Typically, out of a long list of requirements, you'll find a few that won't fit. Just omit them. I would never say, "Although I don't have X, I do have Y..."

You'll notice we avoided lots of sentences beginning with "I." And be tactful – never criticize your own company or anyone else's.

Read between the lines – but don't cross the line. For instance, a pharmaceutical company might (legitimately) wonder if you can manage the famous egos of medical staff.

You can't write, "I can deal with demanding doctors and nasty nurses – no problem!" But by showing you've worked effectively – with results -- in this market, you make your point effectively.

Finally, notice that we communicated simply, with direct sentences. I grit my teeth when I read online examples like, "Should you require any additional information..." or "If your organization is in need of someone with my qualifications..."

Sound confident and straightforward. You don't have to be "grateful" for an interview. This is business!

8. How do I address the salary question?

I have never, ever disclosed salary when answering ads, even when asked to do so. And I encourage my clients to do the same.

The only time you should indicate numbers is when you know the salary range for the position. Then you can ask for a salary in the upper part of the range.

Strategies vary. I simply leave off any mention of salary. Others recommend offering something like, "Salary negotiable."

9. Should I follow my query with a phone call?

Yes – IF the ad was placed by an employer, not a human resource department that's screening hundreds of resumes. If you can get to a name of a specific employer with power to hire, and you're really well-qualified, a call may help. I once got a job this way. I answered an ad but the hiring manager never saw my resume. When I called, he invited me to send another query directly to him.

To this day I have no idea what happened but I did get the job.

No – IF the resume went to a human resource department and you can't identify a specific hiring manager.

And call back *at most* once or twice. No stalking!

Some consultants say to err on the side of making a call because you demonstrate initiative. Others say to avoid making calls because you come across as a pest. If you're applying for a sales job, you'd think a company would look for persistence. But many prefer that you save your persistence for their customers – not them.

In the end, any call is a judgment call.

10. When should I expect a response?

These days? Never!

Increasingly employers don't bother with acknowledgment or rejection letters, even for senior positions.

And frankly, I don't believe you need a rejection letter. Treat ads the way the companies do --- as a numbers game. Have lots of irons in the fire. Don't depend on one job to be your salvation.

And do you really care why you were rejected? Maybe your letter got pulled out of the stack when the reviewer was having a bad day. Onward!

To improve your job hunting skills, hire a professional coach or consultant. Don't expect prospective employers to coach you. They're hardly objective and most aren't qualified.

Next steps

If you like this special report, how would you like specific mentoring and coaching to prepare for your own job search? Email cathy@cathygoodwin.com or call 206-285-2172.

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