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Job Search Land Mines

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I am an observer. People fascinate me and I enjoy listening to their stories, challenges and triumphs. As managing partner of Bell Oaks Executive Search, I have interviewed and spoken with thousands of individuals in career transition over the last 10 years. These interactions, along with my other experiences in executive search, have helped me develop a firm opinion about the obstacles that often deter people from landing a new job.

Let's call these obstacles *land mines*.

The image in your minds right now is probably of someone stepping on a hidden explosive device buried in the ground. In a job search, there are an endless series of land mines, often of our own making, which prevent well-intended candidates from reaching their goal of a new career opportunity.

In my opinion, these fall into three distinct categories: *Fear*, *Stuff Your Friends Should Tell You* and *Predictable & Avoidable*.

Fear

Fear can be paralyzing. Accompanied by desperation and financial pressures, it can be almost unbearable! I see countless candidates in transition who are dealing with some forms of fear and they are either unaware of the problem or don't know how to deal with it. Here are some examples:

- **Fear of conflict.** Conflict avoidance is rampant in every company and certainly among many job seekers. We want to avoid offending or bothering others who can help with a job search so opportunities for positive engagement are lost. Fear of conflict also prevents one or both parties from speaking with candor and transparency.
- **Fear of rejection.** A very common and universal fear to be sure. It is closely associated with fear of conflict. Candidates shy away from asking friends, former co-workers and others in their network for assistance because a negative response may result in embarrassment. They also fall short of diligently and aggressively pursuing job leads with potential employers for the same reason. Each rejection compounds the problem for the job seeker and grows in intensity over time.
- **Fear of the new or unknown.** Many job seekers find themselves woefully unprepared for a job search when they begin. Technology, new methods of networking, social media options, new interviewing techniques ... the list of changes seems endless and can be overwhelming. Many people don't even know where to start.

LAND MINES

- Fear
- Stuff Your Friends Should Tell You
- Predictable & Avoidable

Helpful Tip: Start by identifying what we are afraid of. Being self aware enough to list our strengths and weaknesses is critical. We must recognize and understand our fear if we hope to conquer it. Of the “land mine” categories I have listed, this is the most challenging. But, ask yourself these important questions: What will happen if I don’t overcome these fears? Is my fear of being unemployed stronger than my fear of conflict, rejection and the unknown?

John Reetz, president of JR Media Solutions Group, former general manager of COXNet and a recent job seeker himself, offers this insight: “Don’t let paralysis set in. Any job change is a challenge, and the best way to confront it is to immediately get back out there, offering your skills and expertise.”

Stuff Your Friends Should Tell You

There are likely people in your life who are helping and advising you to some degree on your job search. Call them friends, call them accountability partners ... the important thing is to have people with whom you can share ideas, frustrations and have candid conversations.

A recurring issue I have observed for years with candidates is a surprising lack of candid advice and insight they receive from their network of friends and fellow job seekers. It is likely related to the fear of conflict we already identified and is absolutely detrimental to many job seekers.

Here are a few examples of feedback your friends should share with you:



- **“Your resume needs work!”** I see countless resumes which need significant work to make them more appealing to prospective hiring managers. Often, the changes are simple: have a clear and unambiguous objective, list quantifiable accomplishments, don’t embellish, limit resume to two pages, etc.

Share your resume with others and ask them for honest feedback. They may not want to hurt your feelings, but they are actually hurting your job search more by withholding the truth.

- **“You are coming across as desperate and needy.”** Nobody wants to share or necessarily hear this feedback, but many would benefit from this coaching. Every week without a paycheck and every month of lowered self-esteem only fuels desperation. It is completely understandable! But, channeling that desperation to a networking contact or in an interview to a potential hiring manager will result in disaster.

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- **“Stop letting your pride and ego get in the way.”** Compromise is an ugly word for many people. In a job search, you may have to compromise on title, income, scope of the role and possibly geography in order to find a new position. Project and consulting work should also be up for consideration.

Many candidates need to hear this, especially at the beginning of a job search when they see no reason to accept a lesser title or income. Don't let your ego get in the way of a good opportunity—you never know where it could lead.



- **“Stop being reactive!”** I see countless candidates who send their resume out to a few companies, post it on Monster, build a profile on LinkedIn and then ... wait. In this economy, jobs will not come looking for you.

Brandon Smith, principal with Core Growth Partners, offers this advice: “I often meet individuals in transition who hold a reactive orientation toward both their search and how they approach their resume. It is as if they are saying, ‘here I am now you tell me what I should do for you.’ This orientation will almost always conjure up fear and anxiety because we are waiting for others to determine our fate. What if they don't pick me? What if they don't see what I can do? How long will it be?”

Rather, I would encourage those in transition to ask, ‘Why does the world need me today more than ever?’ Use the answer to that question to fuel you, give you a sense of purpose and mission and make your resume and job search more purposeful and proactive. The difference will be clear.”

Helpful Tip: Carefully select accountability partners, not just close friends, who will speak the truth to you about your job search. You need the truth and a heavy dose of reality while in career transition, not sugar-coated platitudes. Also, always analyze what you are doing and determine if you are being effective.

Be willing to switch gears and try new things and above all, don't blame the economy for everything. You play the most important role in your job search and a little self awareness coupled with straight talk from candid friends and partners will help you along.

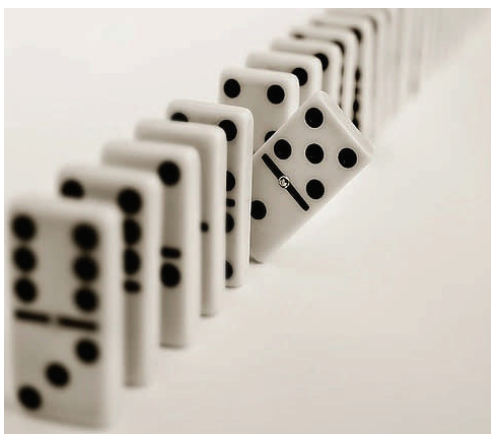
Predictable & Avoidable

I am constantly amazed by how job seekers are caught unawares when they lose a job. There is a surprising lack of preparedness and the reasons vary: ignoring bad economic news, discounting poor company performance leading to layoffs, or suffering from “it couldn't happen to me!” syndrome. This inattentiveness continues to manifest in a job search that is unsuccessful.

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Here are a few of the predictable and avoidable mistakes I have seen over the years:

- **Starting a job search without a viable network.** This is a significant issue for so many job seekers: leaving a job and having to build a network from scratch. We get comfortable in our jobs and ignore the necessity of staying connected to old classmates, former work colleagues, industry counterparts, etc. These networks are the best resource for landing a new position, yet many candidates spend the first 60-90 days of a job search simply building a new network. This is completely avoidable if we maintain strong networks whether we are employed or not.
- **Putting all of your eggs in one basket.** You hear about a great job opportunity that is a good fit and put all of your energy and time into pursuing this role. Weeks go by, you go through the interview process, are named a finalist and ... they offer the job to another candidate. Yikes! You just wasted weeks of time focusing on this one opportunity instead of aggressively pursuing multiple leads. Don't stop until you have a written offer in your hand. Common problem, easy to avoid.
- **Time, attitude and effort.** A job search may take longer than you likely anticipate. Magic rarely happens and you need to be emotionally, financially and mentally prepared. Your attitude is everything. Despair will definitely creep in if you are not careful—stay positive. A job search is actually a full time job and requires maximum effort for you to be successful. I have seen countless examples of one or all of these factors derailing a candidate. Adequate attention to time, attitude and effort is critical!



- **Being unable to “brand” yourself.** Knowing how to appropriately sell yourself and your skills is critical in a job search and yet, most people I encounter struggle with this challenge. What are you great at? What is your value proposition? What are you famous for? Figure out how to sell yourself and your brand early in your transition.

Mike Jones, a former Coca-Cola marketing executive who is in transition, recently shared this insight from his job search: “It took me some time to realize that I was

initially struggling with my search and transition. I was a senior executive from a Fortune 50 company who worked on branding and positioning multi-million dollar brands. And yet, I couldn't accurately describe myself in a concise manner for others to understand.”

Helpful Tip: In an age of predictable economic cycles, when company loyalty to employees can not always be counted on and downsizing is commonplace, we need to accept that nobody is immune to being laid off. We need to do the best we can in our careers, but be well prepared for the possibility of unexpected career transition.

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The key is to maintain strong networks, stay abreast of current trends and technology, continually work on building your personal brand and be prepared for the fateful pink slip I hope you never receive. Preparation, active listening and learning from mistakes will help you minimize these obstacles.

Looking for a new job can be a long, painful journey that may severely tax your financial, physical and emotional resources. My intent in writing this article is to help people in career transition overcome the self-created obstacles that only make landing a new role more difficult. This list doesn't encompass the totality of land mines you may encounter, but these are the ones I find to be recurring themes during years of interviews and conversations.

Consider this helpful perspective from **Nancy Vepraskas**, former VP of Human Resources with Genuine Parts, who has witnessed job transition from both a company and personal perspective: "A job search, like all major life changes is a marathon event. It's important to stay physically and mentally fit, and pace yourself for the long miles ahead."

The economy is a formidable problem for the job seeker today. The news is often bad and it is easy to feel deflated about your efforts. However, professionals are still getting new jobs every day in spite of that. I encourage you to think objectively about your actions, mindset and results, and determine if you are potentially creating the land mines I have described.



The goal is to find a great new role as quickly as possible, and it is my sincere

hope that by identifying these obstacles and removing them early in a job search, you will accomplish this goal in a shorter period of time.

Remember, the best way to avoid stepping on a land mine is to avoid planting one in the first place!

Employ a “pay it forward” strategy of helping others through referrals and recommendations.



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With a nearly 40-year legacy in executive search, Bell Oaks specializes in identifying, attracting and hiring professionals to critical positions with companies across the country. Founded in 1970, the national firm has particular expertise in the areas of sales and marketing, human resources, finance and accounting, information technology, and manufacturing/operations/engineering. Bell Oaks is consistently ranked as one of the leading search firms in the South and was named one of Atlanta's Best Places to Work by the Atlanta Business Chronicle for three consecutive years.