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## Pop Culture References & Job Search

By Matt Tovrog, associate partner of Bell Oaks

OK, I'll admit it. If I have a choice between reading a book on business leadership and watching a rerun of "Seinfeld" that I've seen a dozen times, I often opt for "Seinfeld." I'm a self-admitted entertainment fanatic and enjoy it all – movies, TV, books, sports, etc.

As an executive recruiter, I engage with candidates who are looking to advance their careers and clients who seek my help to attract and hire top talent for their organization. Professionals need advice on achieving a better position, and I do my best to provide that. Clients look for guidance on how to attract "A players" who aren't necessarily looking at job boards. I often draw on real life success stories including other candidates and clients I have worked with, and even my own career to prove a point.

Recently, I was watching the movie, "Swingers." It was the scene where Jon Favreau's character, Mike, calls a woman 11 times in a row. He gets her answering machine and [leaves a message every time](#) (warning: foul language at 2:19 mark). It is painful to watch, but there is a nugget of wisdom in that scene. I immediately thought this would be a great example of how candidates should *not* follow up with prospective employers. Instead, they should send an email expressing their interest in a position and wait three business days. Calling and leaving multiple messages only displays desperation and can jeopardize the chances of another interview. In Mike's case in "Swingers," the woman picked up the 12<sup>th</sup> phone call and chewed him out.

It dawned on me that there had to be other examples via the entertainment world relevant to the job search. Here are eight pop culture examples that provide lessons that can be applied to job search and hiring, after which are real life takeaways and action items. I realize some of these are greatly exaggerated (it is Hollywood after all!), but my hope is these unintentional moments of wisdom through pop culture provide some fresh ideas for job seekers and job holders alike.

- [Cosmo Kramer becomes a ball-boy](#) (at the 3:00 mark): "It's ball *boy*, not ball *man*."

Age bias is one of the most common objections candidates face in the marketplace. They are either under qualified or overqualified and I maintain that the only way to overcome this obstacle is to get in front of the hiring manager. Had Kramer submitted his "résumé," he would have been immediately dismissed due to his age, but instead Kramer got in front of the decision makers and let his actions do the talking. With today's technology and information access, hiring managers can be readily identified through keyword searches on LinkedIn, company web sites and other research tools. I recommend identifying these individuals and seeking a way to connect with them in person rather than hoping a résumé somehow reaches their desk.

- [George Bailey selflessly gives to his community](#).

George Bailey is the ultimate pay-it-forward character. Through the classic movie, "It's a Wonderful Life," he begrudgingly gives his own time and treasure to the community sacrificing his dreams of travel and an exciting career, but we all know how the story ends. Job seekers are under pressure and need help. Those who are privileged to have gainful employment should think about one person who

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is in a job search and do something to help them. Role play an interview, make an introduction, offer to review their résumé, or simply send an email letting the person know that you are thinking about them and are willing to help.

*And vice versa.* Job seekers should actively look for opportunities to help others. After receiving help from someone, ask them “how can I help you?” It is a very simple question but can have a powerful effect. By genuinely learning about that person and offering to help them, you’re forming a mutually beneficial relationship. Speaking of helping each other...

- [Jerry Maguire begs for help from his client...in order to help his client.](#)

In the movie “Jerry Maguire,” the namesake character manages Rod Tidwell, a very needy and frustrating client, and their relationship comes to a head in the famous “Help me help you” scene. Jerry will do anything for his one and only client, but Rod will not make it easy for him.

I often ask job seekers what they’re looking for and how I can help them. The most frustrating responses are ambiguous, such as “I’m looking for a good role at a well-run company in a growing industry.” Isn’t everybody? That type of blanket statement is meaningless. When job seekers sit down with an individual who is attempting to help with their search, it’s imperative that the time spent together is productive. Like Jerry Maguire begging Rod for help to help him, job seekers must help the person they are networking with to help them. Got a headache yet?

Come prepared to the meeting with a clear description of the role you are seeking and the industry you are targeting. From there, prepare a list of 10-20 ideal companies and ask the person you are meeting with if they have contacts within those organizations and if an introduction would be appropriate. Assuming the meeting goes well and there opportunities to help one other, make the next steps easy with a follow up email that summarizes the action items. *“Tom, I enjoyed our discussion today and look forward to staying connected. As we discussed, I have invited you to connect on LinkedIn and would encourage you to view my network. If there is someone I am connected to who would be worthwhile for you to meet, please let me know and I’ll make an introduction. I have attached a soft copy of my résumé as well as my target companies. Per your suggestion, I will touch base with you on Friday to follow up from our meeting.”*

Or, if your networking contact has committed to introducing you to someone within their network, help them make that introduction by sending an email that is intended for them to forward to the connection. This is much appreciated and saves the connector time.

- [The King receives council on his delivery of public speeches.](#)

In order to overcome a speech impediment, King George VI, played by Colin Firth in “The King’s Speech,” receives therapy and coaching from a speech coach played by Geoffrey Rush. He also scripts what he is going to say in speeches and rehearses in advance.

When writing an email or letter to a prospective employer, ask a friend to proofread it before sending. If you are planning a follow-up call to a prospective hiring manager, script what you would like to say and rehearse. It is also wise to also have a voicemail script that is concise and provides all of your necessary contact information for a call back. A long winded email or voicemail conveys nervousness and desperation rather than confidence. Remember that candidacy for a particular job is evaluated by

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the communication skills exhibited *after* the interview as much as what is said during the interview. A wordy voicemail or poorly written follow up could be what swings the search to someone else's favor.

- [Coach of Marshall convinces the University President to try again with the NCAA](#): "I am willing to bet that you didn't propose over the phone. And I know dam\* well that she didn't say 'yes' in a letter."

In the movie, "Marshall," the university applied for an exception to a rule that would allow freshman football players to play. They sent multiple letters that denied serving a major blow to the football program. This clip shows how they strategize a new approach for their last effort, by getting a face-to-face meeting with the NCAA authorities. Marshall's coach, played by Matthew McConaughey, uses the example of marriage proposal perfectly because all-important questions cannot be asked through letters.

Treat your job search as a quest to find your husband/wife because the reality is, at 40-60 hours per week, you'll spend just as much time at your job as you will with your spouse. Once you have found your job opportunity that you want to marry...do you send an email or a letter? No, you ask for opportunities to connect with the hiring authority *in person*. It is always best to try and have in person meetings because the power of personal rapport and chemistry far outweighs qualifications on paper.

- [Rudy makes Notre Dame's team although the odds were stacked against him](#): "You're 5 foot nothin', 100 and nothin', and you got hardly a speck of athletic ability."

Rudy is the ultimate example of perseverance and persistence in the timeless movie, "Rudy." Although he lacked the athletic ability to play at Notre Dame, he showed the coaches that he had the heart and drive to out-work his competitors. Had Rudy sent his high school football tapes (his résumé) to earn a spot on the team, he would have been immediately passed over due to his lack of size and speed. Similarly, when job seekers' only option is to apply online, they are judged by their résumé and nothing else. Rudy got the opportunity with Notre Dame because he got in front of the decision makers and convinced them he deserved a chance. Job seekers must take the same approach, especially if your résumé isn't perfectly aligned with the job requirements. By personally meeting the hiring authority, you have the opportunity to explain why you are the right person rather than letting your résumé do the talking.

- [Aging pitcher tries to block out the distractions](#) in "For the Love of the Game."

Kevin Costner's character is attempting to throw a perfect game in Yankee Stadium and the crowd is going bonkers to get in his head. He repeats over and over "Clear the Mechanism" to have a laser focus on the only thing he should be worried about – striking the hitter out.

Recently, I was conducting an interview and asked a question to the candidate. In the middle of his answer, the candidate reached for his Blackberry and proceeded to read an email while finishing his answer to my question. When you are interviewing, networking, or just holding a casual conversation make sure you block out any distractions and give complete focus to the other person. Even the simple lack of eye contact can make the other person think you are uninterested. This idea of being a good listener seems easy, but with today's technologies, interruptions and distractions are difficult to ignore.

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- [George Costanza changes his life and gets his dream job by doing the opposite](#): “If every instinct you have is wrong, then the opposite would have to be right.”

I have spoken with countless candidates who have grown frustrated with their search and cannot understand why their efforts have failed to produce. When asked what their approach has been to searching, I often hear a similar story in some form or fashion. Search online, apply, interview (if they hear back anything at all), and send a “thank you” email to the hiring manager.

If the habits that have been formed have not yielded results, it is time to change the habits – this is what “Seinfeld’s” George Costanza realized and he applied “the opposite” theory to his entire lifestyle. What I’m suggesting is much easier. Seek out counsel from your network by asking for candid coaching on what can be changed and make those changes! Changing the norm will be a shock to any comfort zone, but old habits and doing what was comfortable are likely the main reasons for a prolonged job search. However, if anyone tells you to yell at your potential boss, run away!

My hope is that this article will provide some humorous perspectives on the job marketplace. I have observed that routines and bad habits can form whether you are job searching, networking, interviewing, or simply managing the everyday grind of going to work. These moments of wisdom taken from the entertainment industry serve as a fresh way to look at frustrating everyday challenges for prospective employees and employers.

Better solutions are often available if you have the patience to observe and listen to new ideas. Having the humility to learn from others (friends, colleagues, and even the entertainment industry) is critical to achieve success as a job seeker or leader within an organization. Slow down and acknowledge the wisdom all around you. As Ferris Bueller said, “[Life moves pretty fast. You don’t stop to look around once in a while, you could miss it.](#)”

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## About the Author

Matt Tovrog is an associate partner of Bell Oaks ([www.belloaks.com](http://www.belloaks.com)), a nationally-recognized executive search firm. He works closely with clients to help them build their teams by identifying and attracting top talent. Matt has a passion for consulting clients on their hiring needs and working with professionals engaged in an active job search. He may be reached at [mtovrog@belloaks.com](mailto:mtovrog@belloaks.com).

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