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EXECUTIVE SEARCH

## *Successful Professionals Caught in Unsuccessful Industries*

By Matt Tovrog, associate partner of Bell Oaks Executive Search

As an executive recruiter and active career ministry volunteer, I meet with all kinds of exceptional professionals engaged in an active job search. These individuals are out of work, frustrated with their current job, or know intuitively they need to start their search process. Many of them are (or were) top performers at their companies, but have fallen victim to working in an industry severely impacted by the economy. Real estate, construction, manufacturing, banking, professional consulting and the auto industry are the most prevalent industries forcing employees to seek greener pastures.

The majority of the candidates I speak with are looking for a more stable opportunity within their field, or they want a new start in a completely different industry. In the latter, which has become more common, individuals view their industry as one that's suffering and will not return to prosperity anytime soon. These professionals are typically well educated, have great references, and are confident in their abilities but frustrated with what they view as the bureaucratic, close-minded mentality companies have about hiring outside their industry.

Their frustrations have merit. They see companies with open positions less interested in finding the most talented candidates and more interested in finding candidates with industry experience. But at the same time, should these organizations be faulted for that? The available talent pool is richer than ever so they have the luxury of being picky. According to Jennifer Matthews, HR manager at Murata Electronics: "A bigger pool of applicants also means that the employer can be highly selective in setting the minimum criteria used for candidate selection, and industry experience definitely sets the candidates apart."

With so many people on the job market, hiring companies look for both talent *and* industry experience. If a job requirement has 20 key responsibilities, employers want candidates who can check "yes" next to each bullet point and also have a successful track record of industry experience. Training programs and on-boarding time frames are being reduced because it is more critical these days for new hires to make an immediate impact.

This is especially true in revenue-producing roles where the hired candidates are expected to not only know the industry, but bring with them a healthy Rolodex of contacts and cast iron business development opportunities. I've spoken with candidates where the interviewer required them to share their vision on the direction of the company, reveal strategies they would implement if hired, and discuss sales opportunities they would look to achieve and how they would close those deals if hired.

So the question remains; how do you overcome your lack of industry experience when applying for a job that doesn't correlate with your previous experiences?

**The answer is to identify your passion, conduct thorough research, and connect with the hiring manager.**

The kneejerk reaction is to target the fastest growing industry and look for a stable company within that sector. Businesses in energy, healthcare and software are the flavors of the day because they haven't been quite as affected by the recession and there is significant government and private sector investment. But spend time looking beyond even those industries to see what's out there. Jobs in the emerging fields of agrotechnology, sustainable food production, multimedia/mobile communications, green technologies and distance learning may offer some exciting opportunities.

Let's explore how *identifying your passion*, *conducting thorough research*, and *connecting with the hiring manager* can overcome a lack of specific industry experience. For each, I provide a real example of a professional who successfully transitioned to a new industry and how they specifically excelled in each theme.

**I. Identify your passion:** Harold was an investment banker doing well professionally but lacked personal satisfaction for his career accomplishments. An active member of the Hispanic community, his true passion was helping other Hispanics achieve success. After much self reflection, Harold concluded he wanted to marry his professional career with his personal passion. He researched organizations having a positive influence on the Hispanic community and found a non-profit called The Hispanic Scholarship Fund. Harold wanted to make the leap from investment banking to nonprofit with no experience in fundraising or selling nonprofit opportunities to corporations.

For the first time in his career, however, he was passionate about this company *and* their cause. Harold explains: "I accepted a pay cut in order to get started, but it didn't matter because I knew my willingness to go the extra mile would result in success and the money would come back. That willingness stemmed from my personal passion to make an impact in the Hispanic community."

Consider the following scenario involving a sales job within the medical equipment industry for a company called XYZ Medical and two different candidates. Candidate A has worked for three different medical equipment companies. He knows the industry lexicon, has performed the requirements listed in the job description, but has bounced around to several companies. He is casual about the interview, has done very little research on XYZ Medical, and expects his résumé to do the heavy lifting. He would be a relatively safe hire in the short term, but long term leadership potential and company loyalty are a concern.

Candidate B has been a superstar sales person, albeit in the software industry. She has a compelling story of why she wants to get into medical sales and makes a sincere effort to engage the employer. The candidate may not know all the industry terminology, however, hours of preparation on the company and its products, management team, financials and clientele has prepared her for a great interview. Candidate B expresses that she wants her career to be in medical equipment sales for honest and honorable reasons, and she's attracted to XYZ Medical based on the research she's conducted. Although Candidate B lacks the industry experience, she's made the better case for being hired over Candidate A. Her commitment prevailed over industry experience with several hours of research and a sincere passion for the job.

Be sincere and develop your compelling story. Identifying your passion will produce sincere excitement and energy that is undeniable to a hiring executive. It could be the difference that overcomes your lack of industry experience!

**II. Conduct thorough research:** Tia was a senior manager at a multibillion dollar Internet service provider. She knew she wanted a career change but didn't know what career would fit. She sought the advice of her alumni career service advisors and participated in a self assessment. From that data, she created an ideal career profile and subsequently identified her ideal company profile. Tia realized she desired a career that offered her the ability to interact with others and provided periodic changes in her work environment to help her stay engaged and excited about the work she was doing.

Tia identified a career in management consulting to be the natural fit, but she knew little about the profession and even less about the actual companies leading the industry. She began her search from scratch: "I leveraged my alumni career service advisors to expand a contact base for others in the field of consulting. Over the span of a few weeks, I exchanged emails, made phone calls and had coffee with a variety of individuals to further develop the flavor of management consulting that would be most fitting for me. These conversations led me to develop a target list of 'ideal' firms, and from there, I connected with individuals who could help make introductions to these firms."

How do you identify companies that align with your own career and company profile? Furthermore, how do you refine that list to companies who are open to employees coming from outside their industry? Once you determine your passion, how do you go about finding companies that are the right fit for you to turn that passion into a profession? This answer is relatively predictable ... the Internet! Here are several online tools that will help you identify these companies:

1. Company web sites: Look at the bios of the executive management team on specific company web sites. If members of the executive team have diverse backgrounds, it may be a clue that the company encourages varied professional experiences and is more interested in finding top talent over specific expertise. Should you find an executive who came from outside the industry or even from your current industry; you will immediately have something in common with a key leader of the organization.
2. LinkedIn: If you haven't become familiar and comfortable with this site ([www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)), I implore you to get started. There are LinkedIn workshops and articles that will help you become well versed in the multitude of uses for the site, including this one by our Managing Partner Randy Hain: *Practical LinkedIn 2.0*. The research available on LinkedIn about a company and its employees is invaluable and free. View employee profiles to see if they have diverse professional experience.
3. ZoomInfo and Hoovers: If your passion is communications and you identify a company that's a leader in this space, [www.zoominfo.com](http://www.zoominfo.com) and [www.hoovers.com](http://www.hoovers.com) provides helpful information about that company. It also includes a list of competitors that can round out your target list.
4. Indeed: You have identified companies within the industry you have a passion for, and, through your research, know they are open to new employees coming from various industries. Now you want to know if and when they are hiring. The best web site to alert you of new job opportunities is [www.indeed.com](http://www.indeed.com). Set up an email alert for when an open job position at Company X is posted on the company's web site or any one of the many online job boards. Or, if your passion is nonprofit, you can be emailed whenever an opportunity with "nonprofit" is in the job title or job description. Instead of bouncing around the Internet looking for job opportunities, Indeed streamlines these job boards and allows you to focus your search on specific companies, job titles, locations and salary ranges.

**III. Connect with the hiring manager:** Eric started his career as an investigator for a government agency. Next, he transitioned into a financial analyst role for a medical services company. Today he is the HR manager for U.S. Lumber, a multimillion dollar building materials company. Not only did Eric change industries in his most recent job transition, he also changed professions from finance to HR. How did he accomplish both? Here's Eric's explanation: "In 2005, prior to my hiring, U.S. Lumber reevaluated its HR strategy and teamed up with a gentleman I met previously at a networking event to assess the organization's needs. If I would have sent my résumé to U.S. Lumber without any previous contact, I would never have gotten the chance to tell my story and been dismissed because of no HR and specific industry experience. I firmly believe that I was able to get the initial interview because their advisor knew my story and knew that I would be able to sell myself as an HR business partner.

"Their advisor connected me with the CFO, and I was able to speak his language because of my finance experience. U.S. Lumber needed an HR professional, and they liked that I had an MBA and a background in finance which did not make me your typical HR manager. I felt I connected with the CFO by showing that I had the ability to succeed as an HR professional and that I would fit in well with the organization's culture."

Had Eric applied for this job online, he would have been one of the many résumés lost in the shuffle that didn't perfectly align with the job description. He was prepared for the interview, briefed on the company culture and long term strategy, and able to connect with the hiring executive by leveraging his finance experience.

Once you've found job opportunities within your targeted companies and industries, **DO NOT** apply online right away if you are confident that your network will produce valuable introductions that can improve your chances to earn an interview. CareerXroads, a staffing strategy consulting firm, recently conducted its 9th Annual Source of Hire Survey researching hiring trends based on 176,420 open positions. The data offers this insight: "The results show that while most positions were filled by internal transfers and promotions (51 percent), the greatest number of hires for the remaining 49 percent of open positions were filled by employee referrals (26.7 percent). The best way to find your next job is through someone you know. If you are in a job

search, ask yourself who do I know, who should I know, and what tools can I leverage to make more connections and accelerate my search.”

Strategically assess how you can connect with current employees, especially hiring executives, so you can **speak directly with them** rather than letting your résumé perform for you. By expanding your LinkedIn network and utilizing all the tools offered by the site, you’ll have a number of gateways into an organization rather than having to apply blindly online. If you know someone within the organization, LinkedIn will tell you. If you and a hiring manager went to the same school, were members of the same fraternity or sorority, worked for the same company at one time, have the same birthday, are members of the same networking or social group, have read the same book or simply enjoy the same activities, LinkedIn can tell you. Your outreach to this person becomes a welcomed networking call based on the things you have in common rather than a one-sided conversation that ends with you asking for a job.

To conclude, when pursuing a job opportunity, assume that you’ll be competing against a professional with more industry experience, accomplishments and specific examples that align with the job description. Also consider that companies are open to talking with top talent, even if they’re not advertising jobs online. According to a recent survey conducted by Careerbuilder.com, “Thirty-seven percent of employees say they plan to replace lower-performing employees with higher performers in 2010.” These confidential opportunities are found by continual networking and getting in front of executives to tell your compelling story. By identifying your passion, conducting thorough research, and connecting with the hiring manager, you set yourself up to be seriously considered rather than blindly dismissed for open positions as well as those unadvertised roles. In order to overcome your lack of experience, these three steps are critical to achieve the desired goal – a new job in your targeted industry.

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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).