

Strategies to Enhance Your Candidacy and Shorten Your Search

By Susan Britton Whitcomb

To boost your appeal and shorten your search, consider some of the following strategies (these are not exhaustive, of course, and some strategies will work for more than one area). Identify any low scores from table 5.2 in *The Christian's Career Journey*, and then review the magic strategies for the corresponding factor. Skip over any factors that are already strong for you.

Factor #1: Skill Set

Do you have the majority of skills employers want for your target position? Can you get up to speed quickly? Are your skills above average? (This is especially important if the number of total openings for your target position is limited.)

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Learn to counter objections about not matching the employer's wish list of requirements. Find out what needs to be done and demonstrate how you'd do it. Some candidates may have more experience than you but perhaps not the innate ability or track record.

When you're targeting a promotion but lack specific experience, point to your potential and track record of success in taking on new challenges.

If you need to take your skills from average to above-average, look to above-average performers and make them role models for your new performance standards.

If you are targeting a new functional area and meeting resistance, consider entering the target company in a position similar to your current position, with the intention of making a move into the new functional area after you've proven your potential.

Factor #2: Industry Experience and Education

Do you have recent, hands-on experience in your target position? Do you have the number of years of experience most employers are looking for? Is your target industry hot and hiring? Are you experienced in your target industry? Have you researched your target company thoroughly? Are you familiar with its competitors? Do you have the degree or certifications required for the position?

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Overcome the paradox of "we can't hire you without the experience." Get experience by volunteering for projects or taking a part-time position.

If you don't have the right degree or certification, tell the employer you are taking steps to get it. Pay for the training yourself if needed – don't wait for the employer to foot the bill. Consider online courses. If funds are tight, ask a colleague to mentor you or check out library books and undertake a self-study crash course.

If your target industry is shrinking, consider looking into a different industry.

Get up to speed on your industry by joining and participating in industry associations.

Start preliminary research on your target companies and learn about their TOP issues and key internal and external contacts (see chapter 11 for more on learning TOP issues).

Factor #3: Motivation

Do you *really* want this career change? Are you willing to make some sacrifices to get what you want? Do you have an accountability mentality (in other words, "if it's going to be, it's up to me") vs. an entitlement mentality (in other words, "the world owes me because I've been dealt some hard blows"). Are you resilient, with a strong "buoy factor" (see chapter 6)?

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If motivation is low, find the right carrot (an appealing career target or an improved lifestyle based on the new position). If your goal isn't thoroughly enticing, there won't be sufficient motivation. If the goal is right but you're still not taking action, examine potential fears that might be blocking you. For instance, are you afraid of what people will think about you if you're more successful? Are you afraid of the physical, emotional, or financial sacrifices it might take to get where you want? Are you afraid you might fail?

Don't be embarrassed if the answer to any of those questions is yes. It's human nature to have fears! This familiar acronym for FEAR can de-power many an apprehension in your life: **F**alse **E**xpectations **A**ppearing **R**eal. Expose the fear – shine God's truth on it and banish its paralyzing grip. God is not the author of fear. James 4:7 reminds us to "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."

If fear is stemming from a valid concern, put strategies in place to manage it. And, be sure that you're not mistaking adrenaline for fear. Adrenaline is your friend – it arrives when you need to be "on" for networking and interviewing.

Beliefs are another common block to motivation. What thoughts hold you back? You may believe that if you don't have contacts inside your target company, you won't be able to get a foot in the door. You may believe that it's not truly possible to have a career you love or that you don't deserve success. Maybe that little accusatory voice inside your head is telling you that there just isn't enough time to do all the things needed for an effective job search.

Whatever the belief block, break through it with these A-B-Cs:

- **Awareness:** Be aware of what's happening. For example, "Hmmm, I notice that my nervousness about networking is causing me to procrastinate."
- **Beliefs:** What bully-like beliefs are underlying the issue at hand? Here's an example: "That old negative voice in my head is trying to tell me I'm no good at networking." Banish that belief and replace it with truth, such as: "The truth is that Christ dwells inside me, I genuinely care about people, and I want any

interaction with them to be valuable. I am learning that I can be an effective networker, especially with these new strategies I've learned."

- **Choices:** Choose to be proactive, emphasizing small-step victories to gain momentum. For instance, "I will use my new networking skills to connect with five new people this week."

Momentum is one of the surest paths to motivation. Break tasks into small steps that will give you traction and bring some quick wins.

Factor #4: Social Skills

Are you personable and well-groomed? Do you have good communication and relational skills? Are you reasonably self-confident? Can you clearly and persuasively articulate your target and your return-on-investment in networking and interviewing situations?

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A little extra likability goes farther than a little extra competence in making someone desirable to work with. (See "Competent Jerks, Lovable Fools" later in this chapter.) To improve social skills, start with living by Matthew 22:39b ("Love your neighbor as yourself"). Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends & Influence People* (Pocket, reissued 1990) – the grandfather of all people-skills books – is also a great resource, but you'll also need feedback from a supportive yet honest human being. Enlist help from a socially competent friend, colleague, mentor, or coach, and be open to new ways of relating to people.

Get honest feedback on how people perceive you. For a 30-day subscription (\$29.97 at the time of this writing), you can go to www.ReachCC.com and use the 360° Reach tool (www.ReachCC.com/360register), which allows you to e-mail colleagues, clients, managers, employees, friends, or family and gather anonymous feedback about your professional reputation or brand.

If it's a matter of improving your presentation skills, audiotape or videotape yourself in a mock interview. Ask for constructive criticism from someone who is well-versed in making presentations or public speaking.

Factor #5: Support Systems and Network

Are you enlisting the support of others during your search? Do you have a goal-oriented accountability partner? Can you tap into a reasonably strong professional and personal network, or can you resurrect one quickly? Do you know people in the industry? Do you know how to build reciprocal networking relationships? Is your spouse, partner, or family behind you 100 percent in this transition? Are you familiar with the benefit of working with a career coach during this critical time?

Career Journey Travel Tips

Give yourself permission to ask for help, and then receive it! Make requests from those closest to you. Be ready to enthusiastically yet rationally explain why you have chosen your new career goal.

Ask your support people what they need in return for helping you – in many cases, their reward will simply be seeing you happy! Limit your time with people who overtly or passively discourage you from pursuing your goals. Hire a coach to help you get farther faster.

Factor #6: Search Strategy

Do you have a clearly defined position target and company target, giving consideration to geographic area, company size, organizational culture, and so on? Are you using the wisest job search strategy for your situation? Are you working smart as well as hard? Are you leveraging time and not just being busy?

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First, get clear on what you want. Next, work smart! Spend priority time on activities that will yield the greatest reward. These activities are typically face-to-face networking and researching for interview preparation.

Also, take into account how companies normally hire for your target position. If they typically use recruiters, be sure that working with recruiters is a major component of your search. If they use employee referrals, face-to-face networking should be your primary strategy.

Work smart! Don't fall into the trap of devoting the majority of your time to searching online and posting résumés. Balance this isolating behavior with live human interaction – that means face-to-face or telephone contacts with people who can lend insider insights and advice, be a great reference for you, and influence a hiring decision in your favor.

Factor #7: Computer Skills for Job Search

Are you proficient with the technology needed for the target job? Do you have a computer and Internet connection at home for job search activities?

Career Journey Travel Tips

The basic computer skills needed for job search are the ability to access a computer easily (preferably from your home), create and store résumés in MS Word and plain-text formats, receive and send e-mail with attachments (résumés), search and respond to job postings, research companies and contacts, and network online.

If you don't have a home computer setup, find a nearby library or college that provides free Internet access. Avoid using your current employer's computer system for job search.

Sometimes the fastest way to remedy out-of-date computer skills is to ask a tech-smart friend to tutor you. Yes, you could take computer classes, but some informal how-to lessons will often give you exactly what you need in less time.

Competent Jerks, Lovable Fools: The Likability Factor in Career Success

The June 2005 issue of Harvard Business Review featured an article titled "Competent Jerks, Lovable Fools, and the Formation of Social Networks." Harvard researchers were curious about how work partners are chosen. The bottom line to their research revealed that when people in an organization need help getting a job done, they prefer to choose a congenial colleague over a more capable one.

The researchers, Tiziana Casciaro and Miguel Sousa Lobo, conducted a series of social network studies at four organizations that reflected a wide range of attributes (for-profit and not-for-profit, large and small, North American and European). They asked people to rate all company workers in terms of how much they personally liked each one and how well each did his or her job. The two criteria – competence and likeability – produced four archetypes, which they grouped into these caricatures:

- *The Competent Jerk, who knows a lot but is unpleasant to deal with;*
- *The Lovable Fool, who doesn't know as much but is a delight to be around;*
- *The Lovable Star, obviously the most preferred, who is both competent and likeable; and*
- *The Incompetent Jerk, who is neither competent nor likeable.*

Not surprisingly, everyone wanted to work with the Lovable Star and no one wanted to work with the Incompetent Jerk. More interesting, though, were people's preferences when faced with choosing between a Competent Jerk and a Lovable Fool. Casciaro and Lobo noted that "feelings worked as a gating factor. ...if someone is strongly disliked, it is almost irrelevant whether or not she is competent; people won't want to work with her anyway. By contrast, if someone is liked, his colleagues will seek out every little bit of competence he has to offer."

Like it or not, likeability is a business reality. A little extra likeability goes a long way!

Factor #8: Salary

Is your salary goal in line with market realities and current salary surveys?

Career Journey Travel Tips

Be realistic. Research salary ranges at www.salary.com (see more in chapter 15) and talk with people in-the-know to be certain your salary makes sense. If your target salary is too high, you'll price yourself out of the market. Too low, and employers will not respect your value.

Factor #9: Time Availability

Can you devote 30 to 40 hours or more each week to your search if you're unemployed and 10 to 15 if you're employed?

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The most precious commodity of the 21st century is time. For those conducting a search while still employed, consider an alternative workweek (four 10-hour days as opposed to five 8-hour days). And, take a hard look at your schedule to evaluate the activities that are not absolutely essential. What can you let go of or postpone for a later time?

If you can devote full-time effort to your search, treat it as a full-time job. Go "to work" every morning, set daily goals for yourself, and act as if you will be evaluated by a boss for your performance each day.

Establish boundaries with friends! They may think, "Oh, she's unemployed and must have plenty of time on her hands, so it won't be any trouble if I ask her to help with _____." The hours spent on your job search are just as important as clocking in with an employer. If necessary, set up a log to ensure that you put in six to eight hours per weekday on your search.

Create a routine for your day – devote high-energy time (often in the morning) to important tasks such as face-to-face or telephone networking. Save less-important activities for other times. Make your devotional time of Bible study and prayer a priority, and do it before the demands of the day steal your day.

Job search can be emotionally draining and physically tiring, so be kind to yourself. For example, if you don't thrive on meeting strangers, don't schedule cold calls at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, especially if that's the time of day your body usually needs a serious nap.

Factor #10: Potential Obstacles

Are you free of any of these potential obstacles: long-distance search; poor employment record; disability; appearance; "silent" discrimination based on race, sex, religion, or age; language barriers; criminal record; health problems; heavy smoker; emotional problems; anything else?

Career Journey Travel Tips

Don't be discouraged if you have obstacles – they may impede progress but they won't prevent it. The first step with any obstacle is to acknowledge that it exists; only then can you establish a strategy to counter it.

Are you conducting a long-distance search? If so, do plenty of pre-work before making a trip to network or interview (identify target companies, talk to your current local network for leads on contacts in the new area, research opportunities, post résumés, and e-mail and make phone calls to target company contacts). Next, plan a one- to two-week trip to the target area. Set up meetings based on the results of your pre-work. Write a script with a logical explanation of why you're moving to the new area, as people will be curious or concerned that you won't put down roots and stay long. Here are a few reasons that will make people more comfortable: you're returning to your roots, you visited the area several times and loved it, it's the bastion for your industry, your spouse's family is from the area, or the area is known for its quality of life and you're family-oriented.