Job Search Myths Worth Shattering

I am going to share some advice about the job search process with you that you should definitely take. But before I do, I want to make sure that you know that not all advice you read that focuses on the job search is good. Or rather, not every piece of advice you read will be applicable to every situation you face.

Anyone who says that there is only one way to write a successful résumé or cover letter, or one approach to answering interview questions, or just one secret to effective networking, is probably oversimplifying the whole process. That's not what I try to do -- I like to complicate matters. In fact, what I find enjoyable about working in a career advising role is that the answers to students' and postdocs' questions are rarely black-and-white. Most fall along a wide continuum of gray.

Here are some examples of commonly held views and what's actually the case.

No. 1: Professional recruiters spend an average of eight seconds reading your résumé. You'll see a statistic like that mentioned in many articles. I am sure some data have been collected on this, but I am also positive that those data are unlikely to be representative of all industries, jobs and résumé readers. The reality is that different people will read your application materials at different points along the hiring process, and each person will be looking for something specific from your document.

People who are screening lots of résumés at the start of the process probably read through them more quickly. Those at the end (i.e., the people making the hiring decisions, who will likely supervise you) are likely to spend more time. But they all have busy jobs and lots to do, and so they can't spend an awful lot of time trying to figure out if a poorly written résumé makes you a good fit for a position.

In fact, in an increasing number of cases, eight seconds is actually a vast overestimate of the time taken to read your résumé at the start of the process, because the first one who reads your application might not be a person at all. More and more companies are using application tracking systems and software to compare keywords from résumés against keywords from the job descriptions. In an instant, those systems can give a score that measures how many keywords, skills and concepts from the job ad you've covered in your materials. If the match rate is too low, then a real person is probably never going to read your materials. Those robots (as I like to think of them) make the hiring process more efficient from the employer perspective, but they can rule out some candidates who are eminently qualified for a position yet haven't talked about their skills in the language that the employer used within the job description.

Your role in writing your résumé is to demonstrate to a specific group of people at one organization interested in filling one particular role that you have something of value to bring to that role. You need a tailored and customized résumé for each job application, so that in the time that someone does spend reading the document (however short that may be), it really addresses their needs. This leads us to topic

No. 2: Only cover letters should be customized for each separate job. Cover letters also need to be customized. But if you have a one-size-fits-all résumé and only customize your cover letter, and no one reads the letter, then have you actually customized anything at all? Not everyone will read a cover letter. Some application tracking systems won't scan cover letters in their analysis.

Now, don't get me wrong: you want people to read your cover letter. You want them to read both the letter and the résumé. Each document provides something different. The résumé focuses on the key skills for the job and presents them as short, punchy bullets that illustrate those skills in action, provide enough context that they make sense and, ideally, point to outcomes that show how effective they are. The cover letter takes the most relevant of those skills and tells more narrative stories that have some aspect of humanity integrated within. So in a résumé you might state:

Created a new experimental protocol in partnership with a bioengineer from a separate lab that resulted in a run time that halved the experimental timeline and produced sufficient data for a publication now in press.

In a cover letter, you might tell the story behind that bullet-point experience using the STAR format (situation, task/challenge, action, result):

In my last experiment, I was trying to get data from my cell lines using the standard lab protocols, but I realized that I wouldn't have enough time to complete it before my funding ran out. I tried all sorts of approaches before I reached out to a bioengineer from another lab at my university who I had heard give a talk about a new filtration technique that she was developing for her research. I was able to collaborate with her to modify her approach to my cell lines and actually double the experimental yield. It was really exciting to try an untried and innovative approach, and I really enjoyed the collaboration I established. My adviser has started using our modified protocol on his own research, and we now have a paper in press. I am looking forward to bringing my creative problem solving to this new role, as I know this quick thinking is essential in a lean start-up environment.

Words such as "enjoy" or "excited by" are hard to use in a résumé but are more easily integrated into the cover letter. A one-page cover letter that has a couple of interesting and distinctive stories that contain just the right amount of drama and emotion is engaging to read.

No. 3: You will never get a job by applying online; you have to network to get a job.

Networking will absolutely maximize your potential to get a job -- and the job you want -- but plenty of people whom I've advised have received interviews and offers after applying directly to a job posted online. Companies wouldn't waste their time posting on LinkedIn, Indeed.com, their own websites or a host of other sites if they were just for show. Since companies rely on their own tracking systems to manage the application process (e.g., who has applied and for what, and who will move on to the next round), you will need to formally apply to most jobs through an online system at some point.

Networking helps you along that formal process. For example, you might only have a 60 percent keyword match from your résumé, but if a staff member at the organization to which you are applying can speak directly to the hiring manager and advocate for you (because of the professional relationship you have been building through your networking), the match percentage becomes almost irrelevant. People have a general preference for hiring people they know and people the people they know know … if you see what I mean. A real person's recommendation almost always trumps the applicant tracking software's objective analysis.

No. 4: You should always ask questions at the end of a job interview. This is probably one of those few black-and-white topics. If time allows, you should always ask questions during your interviews -- always. In every situation where I've been an interviewer, the people who don't ask any questions, who ask only

one question or who ask a weak, half-hearted question are always seen as the least favorable candidates by the search committee at the end of the process. Saying that you don't have any questions basically tells the interviewers that you are uninterested -- even if in your own mind, you are satisfied that they have answered all the questions you have. If you are applying for a new job, you can't possible know everything about it, so take every opportunity to ask smart, engaging questions about the specific role that you are interviewing for. Here are a few examples:

- Over the first three to six months, what will be the main priorities for the person in this role?
- How does this role fit into the team structure in this office?
- What types of professional training opportunities are available for the person in this role?
- What are some of the most exciting challenges the person in this role might face in this work?
- How is feedback given during and after projects are completed?

You will never know for sure whether the next hiring manager who reads your résumé is using their own terrible résumé as a guide to what they are looking for in an ideal candidate, or whether the employers' applicant tracking systems are secretly plotting humanity's downfall by maliciously rejecting ideal candidates for important jobs. (I don't think that is actually happening … yet.) But one thing is certain: the job search process has plenty of uncertainty. The more you understand what you are faced with when applying for jobs, the better prepared you can be to adapt successfully.

Credit: http://www.insidehighered.com