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Fear and loathing in the labor market

Desperation, and six other mistakes job-seekers should avoid

By [Andrea Coombes](#), MarketWatch

SAN FRANCISCO (MarketWatch) -- Economists call it the labor market, but for job hunters competing with almost 15 million unemployed workers, it probably feels more like a labor jungle.

And many economists expect the current 9.5% unemployment rate to get worse before it gets better, possibly topping 10% -- a situation not seen since the early 1980s, when for a 10-month period the jobless rate hovered between 10% and 10.8%, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

In times like these, bad news isn't hard to find. But jobs are -- and job seekers are all too aware of it. That alone can have negative ramifications, some experts say.

"Job hunters, because they are so fearful and full of anxiety, the way they are approaching job hunting is more off base than ever," said Andrea Kay, a career consultant and author of "Work's a Bitch and Then You Make It Work."

They're "not taking time to think about strategy," Kay said. "They're merely reacting."

Hide your desperation

When asked about the biggest mistakes job seekers are making, the three most-cited problems were "too desperate/willing to take anything," "poor interview preparation" and "weak resumes," according to a survey of 500 executive recruiters conducted for TheLadders.com, a career site for executives.

In this job market it's not surprising people are "willing to take anything." Still, career experts say it's important to spend time digging up information on jobs that are well suited to you, rather than applying to any open position.

"It's not about how many jobs you apply to; it's applying to the right one," said Alex Douzet, president and co-founder of TheLadders.com. "The skill and preparation is in narrowing down the right job for you."

The right strategy is not complicated, Kay said. "A good job hunter has two jobs: They should be discovering the problems that employers have for which they need help and then they should be presenting themselves as the solution."

Is the company struggling to stay in business? Developing a new product? "What are their issues that I as an IT person or a marketing person or a customer-service person can help them with?" Kay said.

Others agreed that in job hunting, strategy is all-important. "Even during good times, there are still people competing for virtually every job listing," said Richard Bolles, author of "The Job-Hunter's Survival Guide" and "What Color Is Parachute?"

"During hard times, you have to have better job-hunting skills to compete," he said.

Developing a strategy can help you focus your search and, ideally, help you overcome that sense of desperation. Also, consider these other mistakes to avoid when job-hunting:

1. Relying solely on ads and online job sites

Jobs often are not advertised, and the only way to find them is by networking. "Many employers prefer not to advertise on the Internet. They prefer to fill vacancies in more personal ways. Job hunters who go on the Internet, typically only 10% or less" are successful, Bolles said.

That means finding and contacting companies that can use your skills, Kay said. "Find a live human being there that you can connect to so you're not just another resume coming in the door."

Contact that person via email or telephone, and say, for instance, "I understand you're in the process of rolling out a new product. I would like to talk to you about how I can support you in this," Kay said. Also send your resume and a letter "packed with reasons for them to want to talk to you."

At small to mid-size firms, try simply walking in the door, resume in hand -- but keep in mind that not all employers appreciate this.

"I'm a fan of physically going to the company," said Robert Hosking, executive director of OfficeTeam, a temporary staffing agency for administrative professionals and unit of Robert Half International.

"Get yourself looking professional. Walk into reception. 'I understand you posted an ad for this. I know it said to email the resume. I personally wanted to drop one off,'" Hosking said. "It shows tremendous initiative to be able to do that. It sets you apart from 90% of job seekers out there, and it gets your resume to the top of the pile in hardcopy."

Still, at a larger company, you'll likely need to find somebody to drop off your resume for you, Bolles said. In that case, your network, as well as online sites such as LinkedIn can be invaluable for making connections.

2. Don't make your resume a list of activities

Job seekers often think their resume is for listing "everything I've ever done in my life," TheLadders.com's Douzet said. "No, no, no. This is a marketing vehicle. This is your company brochure. It's your brand statement. It's got to tell your story."

Focus on detailing your achievements, not listing what you've done. Quantify your successes, whether in dollars or time saved for your previous company, or in customers retained, experts said.

Also, your resume should be tailored to fit the company's job description so it catches the eye of the person doing the initial resume sorting. Also, your resume's story should parallel what you say in the interview. "When I meet with you and I've read your story on paper," Douzet said, "there shouldn't be a disconnect."

More resume rules: Two pages maximum, and no colored paper or cute graphics, Hosking said. If you drop off your resume, use a slightly heavier paper so it stands out from the stack the company printed out from emails.

3. Don't go to the interview unprepared

If the company recently made an acquisition or unveiled a new product, you need to know, and be able to speak intelligently about the company's needs and culture. "Companies loved to be loved, just as much as individuals," Bolles said.

Another way to prepare: Come up with two or three messages you want to get across to hiring managers. Again, tailor these to match the job description, Douzet said. Why? More than one person is going to have to approve hiring you.

"These people are going to get together later and discuss your candidacy," Douzet said. "They have to remember something about you and they have to convince each other that you are the right person to do the job."

If you've presented a coherent story about your achievements and how they fit the job's requirements, you're more likely to be considered as a contender.

[Winning at the interview](#)

4. Don't confuse 'networking' with asking for work

Networking is about developing relationships, Kay said. Contact people you know to ask for advice; don't ask for work. Tap their expertise about their industry and company, and what advice they have for you on the job hunt.

Also, don't ask chance acquaintances for a reference, but tap them for information on their firm's hiring process, its culture and even the name and number of the person doing the hiring.

Networking "is developing relationships that may not have an immediate payoff tomorrow but certainly in the long run are very helpful," said Judith Applebaum, director of career services at the University of Buffalo.

5. Don't treat support staff poorly

Sixty-one percent of executives said they considered their assistant's opinion important when evaluating job candidates, according to an OfficeTeam survey. "No matter how stressed you get, keep in mind that if you're not as nice to the front desk person as you could be, that information always gets back," Hosking said.

6. Failing to tap resources

Many college career offices offer their services to alumni of all ages, Applebaum said.

"At the University of Buffalo we provide individual assistance through career counseling, we have vacancy listings, resume databases that we offer to employers, job fairs [and] networking opportunities with employers and with alumni," she said.

Also, search for local nonprofit and for-profit career-counseling agencies, she said. Along with networking opportunities, support groups can help job seekers maintain a positive attitude.

Finally, while you're job-hunting, consider volunteering or taking a class at a local college. The experience will keep you connected and may lead to achievements that will serve you well on your resume.

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