Landing a Job In a Bad Market

Shifts in Recruiting Business Offer Applicants Some New Options as Unemployment Rises

By KRIS MAHER
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

During the past 2 1/2 years, the U.S. economy has lost more than three million private-sector jobs. Unfortunately for anyone hunting for work, that figure includes thousands of recruiters.

With unemployment at a nine-year high, the offices of professional recruiters are getting flooded with resumes. But the industry has gone through its own major contraction, and as a result it has never been more difficult for job hunters to get someone to take their call.

As the economy has worsened, some headhunting firms--or about 10% of the industry--went under, according to consultants Kennedy Information, which publishes a directory of executive recruiters. Large firms, too, have been wallopped. Heidrick & Struggles International, one of the world's biggest headhunters, laid off 1,000 people, or 40% of its global staff, in the 12 months ended in April 2002.

Another change: While recruiters traditionally have been less interested in working with people who didn't already have a job, that's not as true anymore. Recruiters say that with so many people out of work--the unemployment rate rose to 6.4% in June, its highest level in nine years--some of the stigma of being unemployed has melted away.

There are recruiters geared at a surprisingly wide array of professions, from sports management to plastics. Raines International, for example, focuses on management consultants and even operates a separate Web site for consultants transitioning to the corporate world. Toyjobs, meanwhile, specializes in the toy business, where recruiters are not as active.

The best way to find the right recruiter in your field is to talk with people in your industry to find out which headhunters they've worked with, and to check recruiters' Web sites to see if any of their clients are companies for whom you're hoping to work. Scanning job postings online, and taking note of which head hunters are brokering the openings that intrigue you, also helps.

People who approach a firm for which they aren't well-matched risk appearing "desperate," says David Manaster, president of Electronic Recruiting Exchange Inc., New York, which runs a Web site for recruiters.

Tempting as it may be, don't send out resumes to hundreds of employers indiscriminately--or hire "resume-distribution services" like ResumeBlaster.com to do it for you. Most recruiters will shy away from candidates who have spread their resume around too widely, because employers can avoid paying a recruiter's fee if they learned of a candidate first from an unsolicited resume. Instead, if you're simultaneously dealing with recruiters and employers, apply selectively to individual corporate Web sites so you can keep track of where your resume has been.

Don't overlook internal recruiters. Mostly to save money, some companies are now taking on some of the search work traditionally done by outside firms. Sprint Corp. and Unisys Corp., for example, have recently created departments, independent of their human-resource staff--to find and recruit qualified candidates. Job seekers targeting specific companies as potential employers should try to find out how the company is finding the majority of candidates at the job seeker's level.

It's fine to approach a recruiter the first time over the phone, but have a concise pitch ready. E-mail introductions are not recommended--they can be easily ignored.

The best entree is to get a mutual contact to refer you and then follow up with a phone call. A good go-between is a senior employee at a company that has hired the recruiter in the past, says Marilyn Machlowitz, president of Machlowitz Consultants Inc., New York, which handles searches for financial-services companies, cultural institutions and foundations. If a client refers you, "it is very difficult" for the recruiter to ignore you, says Ms. Machlowitz.