

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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TUESDAY, JULY 8, 2003 - VOL. CXLII NO. 5

Landing a Job In a Bad Market

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

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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

During the past 2½ 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.

Last year alone, some 500 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 walloped. 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.

As the economy has worsened, some headhunting companies have also largely pulled back on plans to expand their recruiting beyond high-level executives to include midlevel positions. A few firms, such as Korn/Ferry International, still target some midlevel jobs—people like plant managers, database administrators and financial analysts. But it is difficult to get on the radar screen at most recruiting firms unless you're a vice-president or above.

Still, there are some new options for executives who are either out of work or looking for a job change. Though once little-used, recruiters' online candidate databases, for example, are beginning to play a greater role in job placements. These lists contain detailed information about each applicant, from their job history to their educational background. Most big firms have them, and any person can input their information on the recruiter's Web site—it usually takes 30 to 45 minutes. For the recruiters, these lists are handy because they can be sorted and searched so easily.

That approach worked for Terry Morris, who in June 2002 filled out an electronic profile on Korn/Ferry's Web site. Their database contains over 2.3 million senior executives and 1.75 million middle managers. In September, he landed a job as corporate vice president of information technology at a Florida foods distributor.

RULES OF THE GAME

Some guidelines for dealing with recruiters

- Register on their Web sites to be included in their candidate databases
- Don't overdistribute your résumé. Recruiters are less likely to help if everybody in America already has it
- Become a 'source' for recruiters by passing on the names of other candidates

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.