

The Job Search, 2009 Style

If you're among the many professionals currently seeking a new job, you have to turn up the heat to set yourself apart from the pack. Here's how.

By Julie Monti

Face it: unemployment is at one of its highest points in decades. All too often I hear people who find themselves unemployed say they'd rather sit tight or live on their severance until the market turns. However, history has shown that an economic downturn often provides tremendous opportunities for strategic growth as well as the potential to become an industry leader – but only if you're up for the challenge and ready to move ahead.

It's time to get back to the basics. It may seem counterintuitive, but the best first step is to "look outside, not in," a simple statement loaded with impact from Gail R. Meneley, founder and principal of Shields Meneley Partners, a leading executive consulting and transition firm in Chicago. Gail and her partners have worked with hundreds of top executives across the country providing objective, confidential counsel to business leaders from small to Fortune 500 companies.

"Look outside, not in" means that your initial research should be conducted at the macro level: determining what businesses or industries need someone with your skills. Head to the library, search Internet directories, read trade publications, check out online resource guides. Watch the business news to determine if it's the right time to transition into a new area. "Most people are comfortable with the industry and the position with which they are most familiar," Gail says. "But the employment market demands that the savvy job seeker imagine herself in other venues that will benefit from what she does well."

Examine companies and industries that interest you. Review Web sites, read mission statements, review annual reports and strategic growth plans, examine stories about community involvement or other things of importance to you. "You can't overestimate the importance of cultural fit," Gail says. "If a company doesn't share your values, it should be a non-starter. Some of the values are suggested on Web sites and in mission

statements. The rest you have to observe."

During the interview process, observe what people do and how they interact. If your intuition senses things aren't what they seem, pay attention. Dig deeper, talk to other people until your concerns are allayed. You can't be successful in any company where you question its values or ethics.

Making Connections

The old adage, "It's not what you know, but who you know," still rings true. In fact, according to Gail, "Networking is everything, and the more senior the role, the more important the ability to build and maintain relationships with people."

No matter where you are on the ladder, networking is invaluable. It's a part of any research process, but it's also a vital component to a successful career. One of the biggest misconceptions is that networking is a one-time thing: attend an event and get connected to a job. It doesn't work that way. Networking is about building relationships. Becoming part of a group that reflects your goals and values is your best bet. You'll have more in common and it's easier to create a bond. Arm yourself with an "elevator speech" that's short, concise and contains these three components: who you are, what you do and what you're seeking. We live in a world that's quick to judge and – although your purpose is to convey your message – don't forget that networking is a two-way street.

Looking Ahead

Focusing on the basics will help you get started. But in this world of uncertainty one question persists: Do we see the light at the end of the tunnel? In response to this question, Gail quoted a joke that Ronald Reagan used frequently about a little boy whose parents were concerned about his optimism. They took him to a psychiatrist who walked the little boy into a barn full of manure, who then squealed with delight. When the doctor



asked why, he responded, "With all this manure, there must be a pony in here somewhere!"

Seeking the positive amid all the twists and turns in life is the challenge. There is a pony in every room and light around every corner. Having the perseverance and drive to create opportunities in life is up to you. ■

Julie Monti is vice president of The Larko Group, www.thelarkogroup.com.

WHERE TO GO

In a shrinking job market, effective networking is critical. Here are a few groups to get you started:

American Business Women's Association www.abwa.org

Business Marketing Association www.marketing.org

Chicago Women's Network www.cw-network.org

Executives' Club of Chicago www.executivesclub.org

Executive Network Group of Greater Chicago www.engchgo.org

The Financial Executives Networking Group www.thefeng.org

Le Tip International www.letip.com

Step Up Women's Network www.suwn.org

Young Executives Club www.youngexecutivesclub.com

Not sure which group is right for you? Check out these Web sites for more information regarding networking groups and events:

www.networkingmonkey.com

www.meetup.com

www.linkedininchicago.com