

It Pays to Do Your Homework

Learn about potential employers before going on the interview

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Part 2 of a weekly series helping people with job searches.

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If the first step to an effective job search is to research yourself - your interests, values and skills you enjoy using - then the second is to research the outside world with an eye to where the two intersect.

You may suspect a certain profession would be a good match, but don't call it a "go" without learning more about it, the pros and cons. After all, who wants to base such a major decision on the sketchy information you might have gotten from movies and TV shows?

Research also helps down the road as you target specific employers and go on interviews. The more you know about the profession and the employer, the more you sound like a smart insider, says Wendy Alfus-Rothman, an organizational psychologist and president of the Wenroth Group in Manhattan.

So, where to begin? Start with your own PC or one at a university, library or state Labor Department career center. Look up your potential career in the Occupational Outlook Handbook section of the Bureau of Labor Statistics Web site, www.bls.gov.

Also do a Google search, says Alfus-Rothman, which can lead to "the mother lode" for a job hunter - professional association Web sites providing everything from educational requirements and salary surveys to the latest industry buzz.

Learning as much as you can ahead of time makes attending networking events and informational interviews much less stressful and more productive, she says. The same goes for when you actually start looking for a job.

That's just what DawnMarie Fenech, 33, found last year as she finished her medical certificate program at Branford Hall Career Institute. Besides asking friends in the industry for information on a target employer, Quest Diagnostics, she also jumped onto the Syosset company's Web site. Among other things, she learned the company was expanding, and when she went on an interview was able to "let them know I had investigated their company." She says the recruiter saw her as "a high potential candidate" and asked to check

her references.

She was hired, since left, and is now targeting other employers, including Winthrop-University Hospital. And once again, she's checking their Web sites, looking for details that will help her in her interviews.

"It pays to know these things," says Fenech of Shoreham. "You don't really want to be bluffing." She says she feels far more at ease when she's prepared, "not sitting with jitters in my stomach worrying what kind of questions they're going to ask."

And one that inevitably comes is, "Why do you want to work here?" How can you answer that in a convincing way when you don't know that much about the employer?

Yet people do grab for answers - ones that don't serve them well, said one recruiter for the Long Island Rail Road at a recent career fair. He said he just scratches his head when he calls in a candidate for an interview, asks why he or she would want to work there and is told, "Well, you called me in for the job."

Another employer at the same fair, Joseph S. Cangelosi, manager of marine and aircraft systems at EDO Corp. in North Amityville, says job hunters would do well to put themselves in the hiring manager's shoes. Just think of having two candidates with about equal skills. One has taken the time to research the company and asks intelligent questions about its mission, strategy and latest news announcements. The other has done no research and asks only about employee benefits. Which would you choose?

And he would not be impressed with job hunters who come up to his booth and say, "Aerospace - I have no experience but I might like to get into it."

So, as you target for-profit companies, take a look at their annual reports at www.sec.gov under Edgar. Also check the finance section of Yahoo.com, as well as online industry publications.

Find out about the employer's services, areas of growth, clients, structure, divisions, key managers and backgrounds, company news, how it's doing financially and how it's positioned in the market.

Also look to see if the employer's goals and ethics match yours, says Tony Lee, editor of CareerJournal.com, The Wall Street Journal's career Web site. Is there any cloud? "Any reason to be suspicious?"

Alfus-Rothman says that for those who do not engage in such research, "The world looks flat because they can't see past the horizon. They lack information. When people do make the effort and do the research, it's as though they have moved from a prop plane to a jet – the speed, power, and efficiency is extraordinary and it will take them where they want to go in half the time".