



Juggling Your Priorities

Sometimes a job search must co-exist with your day job

By **David G. Jensen**
Search Masters International

MY OLD FRIEND WAS THINKING about changing jobs, and she sounded more than a bit concerned about how she was going to handle all the work required of the process. "It's a gigantic project," she told me one day. "I have so much to do, starting with writing up a resumé and then developing some kind of game plan to organize it all. I'm thinking about giving my boss a couple of weeks' notice so that I can manage this job search full time. What do you think of that idea?"

As her friend and unofficial career counselor, I winced when I heard what she was planning. Sure, you can certainly dedicate more time to a job search when you are unemployed, but the resulting lack of negotiating power with prospective employers really stings when offer time comes around.

"Have you considered what you might accomplish without doing that?" I asked her. "You'd be amazed at how productive you can be if you focus on your search a little each day. If you plan your time effectively the night before, you may be able to get quite a lot accomplished during a portion of your lunch hour, or thirty minutes every morning before things get too hectic at work."

She gave me a concerned look. I could see that she doubted my advice, and I certainly knew where she was coming from. A job search is a monster project. Like any sizeable commitment of time and brainpower, it looks staggering when you sit back and consider tackling it. However, just like any other project in the lab or on the manufacturing floor, when you break it into its pieces and start to look at accomplishing those pieces one at a time, the beast returns to manageable size.

All It Takes Is Thirty Minutes a Day

Shortly after my conversation with this woman, I attended a scientific meeting and gave a seminar on the topic of job seeking. Sure enough, my friend's concerns were echoed by a number of attendees. Some of their questions and comments are listed below, with my suggestions about how the job search can be managed despite the workload and feelings of misplaced loyalties.

Q. How can I focus on a job search while also trying to do a decent job for my current employer? I'm swamped, and can't see past my desk, let alone conduct a job search!

A. The key to the problem is your word "focus." Identify just what the most important connections are, and then spend your thirty minutes each day furthering those. For most people, it will be most effective to actually get on the phone and do some networking. Ideally, the time that

you spend on your search should be the same time every day, and a habit should develop that makes it automatic. Many people successfully manage this either first thing in the morning or towards the end of the day. Some do this during their "brown bag" time!

Q. It doesn't feel right to me to be a loyal employee during the day and then to make phone contacts about a job search at the same time. Is this really ethical?

A. If you are considering a change, then there must be reasons for your current dissatisfaction on the job. Rethink those reasons for a job change, and if they are valid, develop and implement a plan to go forward. Companies have contingency plans as well. Developing a "Plan B" for yourself is not unethical in any way as long as you remain effective in your present job. The minute that your job search has you spending hours on the phone making marketing calls, or re-writing your resumé on company time, you have crossed that ethical border. If you are making phone calls out of the local area from work, using your cell phone or a phone card will help you feel that you haven't become an undesirable employee.

Q. My networking list has run dry. How can I keep a fresh flow of contacts in my search when I am only devoting 30-60 minutes a day to the process?

A. Those networking contacts can come from a variety of places. In fact, you can start building a networking list right now -- whether you are looking for a job or not. One friend, the Director of Pharmacology for a major pharmaceutical company, described her process for me. Although she isn't in the job market, she's a great networker, and she keeps a detailed log of these contacts handy: "I always have a yellow legal pad on my desk which I use to scribble notes from my phone conversations," she describes. "And then I file those pads in a cabinet, by week. In that way, I've always got an easy reference to calls from the past, and when making up a list of people to call about a particular matter, all that I have to do is to go back to my logs."

Another great idea for the long-term development of

David G. Jensen is the founder and principal consultant of Search Masters International, a unit of Kelly Scientific Resources, a leading worldwide Biotechnology and Pharmaceutical Industry executive and scientific search firm. Contact him at jensedg@searchmastersinternational.com, or at Tel: (928) 282-5366; Fax: (928) 203-0077.

a networking list is to collect and save all attendance lists from industry or scientific meetings. These names are as good as gold, because they are people who are interested in the same topics that you are. But, while ideas like these may help a person starting from scratch to develop a good list of networking contacts, it won't help you if you've run dry and have an urgent need to get more names. In that case, have you considered asking a headhunter or two for contacts? While this may seem at cross-purposes to the recruiter's work, most good recruiters are working only on a given set of assignments at any moment. When you don't fit one of those projects, they are often quite helpful in suggesting the names of contacts who might assist you in non-client companies.

Q. I've made contact with a recruiter who was referred to me by a colleague. She told me that she would not present me to a company unless they have an assignment from that firm. I don't understand this. My impression of headhunters is that they will help you find a job -- what's up?

A. Many recruiters operate only on "sole source assignments." In other words, they are geared specifically to

certain contracted positions with their client companies. You may be able to find a recruiter who will make contacts on your behalf in order to open some doors, but make certain that you are dealing with a reputable firm. And make certain that they are presenting you to companies where they have an existing relationship (as opposed to stuffing your CV, and an invoice for \$15,000, in an envelope to someone that they don't know).

You'll find recruiters who will ask you to limit the number of headhunting firms that you contact, or to leave it to them exclusively. In reality, you could contact a half-dozen firms and still not have any conflicts, as each firm operates in their own sphere of influence. My advice is to spread yourself around a little bit, and to avoid any firms that suggest you restrict your networking.

Q. The company that I have interviewed with has requested references, and they've hinted that they would like some from my current employer. How can I manage this?

A. There is no way that you can give your OK to a series of reference checks with your current employer. It is just too risky. If you need to do so, it is often easy to bring a colleague into your plans and ask that person to provide a reference in confidence. Use that person's reference only in those situations where you have an offer pending, however.

I remember the time in my early career where I thought I was safe enough in my current employment to level with my direct supervisor and ask him to provide a reference. He and I were old buddies, and I felt that it was OK to be completely truthful with him. What a mistake. Not only did I not get the job, but I shot myself in the foot for future career growth at that firm. Watch out who you take into your confidence!

It's tough to manage a job search while currently employed. Obligations exist on both sides – both your current company as well as your professional future deserve attention. To be successful in both endeavors, it is important to separate the two projects. As many successful job-seekers have discovered ahead of you, it is indeed possible to put a sharp focus on 30-60 minutes of your day to create a new future while at the same time being a solid employee.

My friend found, to her great delight, that a few well-placed networking contacts proved to be like seeds that grew and provided her with numerous interviewing opportunities. That monster project actually was quite tame! ■