

## Frustrations Revisited

Recent conversations with TENG members and other job seekers are revealing that hiring activity has increased slightly since Labor Day Weekend. This level of activity is insufficient for me to say we have a trend in the works. Some of you have reported that you are receiving more phone calls, have some interviews in process and may be on the brink of receiving an offer. A few members have been recently hired and I am awaiting their permission to announce their Success Stories. In spite of this, the “frustration quotient” still remains at a very high level. The vast majority of our members, and I am talking between eighty and ninety per cent of our over six hundred members, are still seeking their next opportunity. If you are wondering why I don’t have an exact figure, it is simply that not everyone is letting me know when she or he accepts a position. A few others have sent terse Emails asking to be disconnected from the distribution list as they are off the market. My inquiries to these Emails sometimes go unanswered. Others are consulting or working at some non-career position. A small minority may have given up altogether.

I would love to be able to speak with every TENG member to learn first hand how his or her search is going, but time does not permit that. Although none of my findings is scientific, I suspect that most of what I hear and read mirrors the market at large:

- An article on the front page of the Money section of USA Today, September 26, 2002 issue, discussed the plight of the technology worker. It cited a few examples of workers who ranged from senior executive to professional, who had dropped out of the job market in frustration and who had opted to take on minimum wage positions such as waiting tables or working in a convenience store. All shared common stories of sending out hundreds of resumes with little or no response. Utter frustration, economic pressure and a desire to do something drove them to lower paying service jobs.
- Many job seekers still complain to me about indecisive companies and executives suffering from extreme analysis paralysis. Delays are rampant. Companies who feign urgency suddenly do nothing and leave job applicants on what seems like terminal hold without even the benefit of letting them hear the annoying “music” of any feedback.
- The voluminous follow-up phone calls to recruiters and company officials that end up in the black hole of voice mail build upon the feelings of frustration and isolation. It amazes me that the telecommunications industry is in trouble. At least the long distance carriers should be getting rich off all the follow-up phone calls being made by job seekers and sales representatives. Many professional sales trainers say that it takes five or six follow-up calls before you can close a sale. Nowadays, I think that number has tripled. Maybe we should all apply for jobs with long distance carriers.
- TENG membership is increasing rapidly, yet the activity in the Discussion Group for September was at about twenty-five per cent of August’s level. This either indicates that people are getting burned out and frustrated with the daily rigors of an extended job search, or they are so busy with

warm leads and interviews that they now lack the time to connect as often with their peers. I hope the latter is the case.

- Some of the select minority of newly hired TENG members who go off the market and request confidentiality in their next position are presumably avoiding the expected flood of phone calls and Emails from other members seeking jobs, help and company networking contacts. This what I call “IGMFU Disease”, which means, “I’ve got mine, forget you”. It’s part of the inherent human survival instinct, which is not always admirably manifested. To illustrate this more extremely, I am an aficionado of maritime history. I have read over a dozen books on the Titanic disaster. One aspect of this saga that has always interested me was that the survivors, in partially filled lifeboats, refused to row back to those clinging for life in the water. They feared that these less fortunate people, struggling in near-freezing water would in panic, swamp the lifeboats, killing everyone. While adapting to a new job is stressful, it is hardly life threatening, yet some people don’t want to spend a few minutes during a busy day answering calls and Emails to help peers in need. Once their own security needs have been fulfilled, they ignore the suffering around them. I am reminded of an old saying, “What goes around, comes around”. Many job seekers who suffer today will have long memories and well-annotated Rolodexes, and today’s employees will be tomorrow’s executives in transition.
- Desperation and annoyance are alive and well. I still hear stories of recruiters and companies being swamped by resumes of non-fits. Over the past few months, some TENG members have not screened themselves effectively. Harried search consultants feel as if they are drinking from a fire hose and have asked me to turn off the faucet on a few leads that we have shared.
- Isolation fuels desperation and its effects are pervasive. Members and other jobseekers constantly ask me, “What do I do next? I can’t reach anyone and I haven’t had an interview in months.” Confronting the myriad problems of job search, insecurity, dwindling finances and all of life’s other stresses can seem insurmountable and overwhelming when faced alone on a daily basis. Networking, while painfully challenging and difficult at times, is the strongest lifeline available to us.
- On the subject of lifelines, almost without exception, former supervisors, peers, customers and other business contacts are hiring TENG members to their permanent staff or to consult for them. One of my best clients and a TENG member, who has been out for about a year, recently accepted a six-month consulting assignment offered by someone who had been a business user in a former company. Another member was hired by his former CIO to head up the infrastructure division of a major financial services company. This is the dominant contemporary hiring scenario. These positions don’t make it out to search or the Web. These are very direct, trust-based relationships that do not involve competition with hundreds or perhaps thousands of other candidates collectively being held at arm’s length through Email and voice mail, which reduces the frustration quotient for candidates under consideration. This is the “hidden” or unpublished market that is never made public. People simply call a friend and hire her or him, usually with no competition. How often should you call your closest contacts to let them know you’re still available? Perhaps every four to six weeks. You want to stay on someone’s “radar screen” but not annoy her or him.

- Extreme markets beget comparable and sometimes bizarre behavior. Three years ago, hiring companies offered lavish compensation packages comprised of cash, bonuses, cars and other perks to woo candidates. Earlier this week, I circulated an update to a CIO job lead. One member who interviewed for this job, reported that finalists would be required to spend three days with the company President at his home, undergoing a battery of situational tests concerning ethics, business, technology and “executive pretense”. He didn’t comment on what input the hiring executive’s family or his pets would have. It would appear that this President has had some CIO turnover in the past and is looking for an “insurance policy”. We have moved from hiring warm bodies to microscopic examinations of job candidates. Unfortunately, the hiring process is not a scientific one. I have heard of cases whereby companies scrutinize a candidate with hours of interviews, perform psychological evaluations, complete exhaustive reference checks and verify employment, as well as educational credentials, in an attempt to eliminate all risk. The person then quits or is fired six months later for reasons that were never revealed in the hiring process. It is possible to reduce downside risk, but never to erase it. At some point someone has to make a decision. Nonetheless, overzealous scrutiny is another indignity and inconvenience, which jobseekers must endure in today’s market.

If I could interview each of you to discover your unique experiences during your present job search, I could fill a book with some interesting, humorous, sad and poignant vignettes; but it would have little value other than to prove that no one is alone facing the challenges of today’s job market. So then, what do we do next?

The next step for each of us will be unique to our own circumstances. These are not easy times. I have to admit that I have days when I would rather have a different career, but I can’t think of what it would be. The only sense of perspective that I can gather from our present experience is that we will learn more about ourselves from it. The Titanic disaster and similar events reveal that some are capable of great courage and selflessness while others display cowardice and hopelessness, when confronted with extreme challenge. We can either look back with pride or shame. During a phone conversation the other day with a fellow TENG member, we both agreed that the problems we face pale in comparison to those of most others. All of us still live better than a major portion of the world’s population. We are not enduring famine, disease, government oppression or many of the hardships suffered by those in developing countries. You don’t have to look very far to find suffering, pain and anguish. Open any newspaper or watch the news on television. Then be thankful for what you still have and that you can deal with the challenges facing you.

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