

Real-Life Stories

I invited several of our recently landed Associate Members to attend a Stamford Chapter meeting and share their experiences with our Active Members. Specifically, I asked them to tell us how long they were in transition, what job hunting techniques worked for them and equally important, which ones did not work. Four of our Associate members kept our attention for more than ninety minutes as they shared their experiences and answered our questions. I took several pages of notes at this meeting and will share their experiences with you in this newsletter. Although these executives are known in our local chapter, I am using fictitious names to protect their privacy.

“Tom” was out for thirteen months and had no interviews during his first six months of unemployment. His very first interview was with his former employer and he then had interviews with eight to ten other companies this past spring. All were unsuccessful for him. He previously had been a Director of IT Infrastructure for a software company and ultimately accepted a Manager-level position in a large consumer products company. After a few months on the job, he is happy to have a paycheck, but has had to face the adjustment of stepping down to an operational level and not having other managers as his direct reports.

Tom reported that he tried to network into every job opportunity he targeted, including those posted on the Web sites such as Monster. COM. Rather than Email his resume to a blind Email account in response to a Web posting, he first went out to his network of contacts until someone gave him a referral to a company employee. He then contacted that person who then referred him to the hiring executive and/or the correct Human Resources contact. By networking into each company and building relationships, he would then classify himself as an “Employee Referral” on each job application. He found retained executive search to be unsuccessful because he was not considered senior enough. Contingency recruiters were mostly useful for sharing names of leads in companies and providing moral support, although a few did send him on interviews. He made a special effort to build relationships with each company that interviewed him. He also dedicated himself to maintaining a dialogue with everyone he met, both in IT and Human Resources and included them in his expanding career network. By building relationships with these professionals and monitoring the Web sites of their companies he was able to react quickly when new opportunities developed. He landed his present job with a previously contacted company by tracking its corporate Web site. He spotted a new posting late one afternoon. He immediately re-sent his resume by Email to three insiders, both in IT and HR to remind them of his availability. The next morning, he was called for an interview. Four weeks later he started his new job. Now that he is employed, he has found that the corporate recruiters prefer having an employee refer a quality person to them, if it will help them to avoid digging through the voluminous resumes they receive from the Web.

Tom also maintained periodic and regular contact with his references. He prepared them for upcoming reference calls and furnished them with “cheat sheets” that highlighted the salient points of the job he was considering and his strengths relative to each new job. Some company positions he considered were placed on hold or frozen while he was under consideration for them. He felt that he should have checked back with these companies every thirty days or so to learn if they had reopened. As he explained, “I

ended up congratulating some colleagues on accepting jobs that I wanted.” The hiring companies thought he had gone off the market. By following up, he would have kept his candidacy current with them. His only other regret is that he did not enjoy the time he had while out of work, since he spent all of his time working to find another job. He added that he did exercise regularly, which proved effective in helping him cope with stress. He worked every day from nine to five, as well as many evenings, performing job search activities.

“Dick” spent ten years with a large telecommunications company and was Director of e-Business. His former company gave him a choice of accepting a downgrade in his job or being laid off and he chose the latter. This was late last year. After six months, his severance was running out and he found that he was competing for jobs against other more senior and experienced executives. He took a step down and accepted a Manager-level position with an office technology company. He is no longer in Information Technology, but is working in product development, managing a development team, with direct impact on the company’s bottom line. While stepping down a rung on the management ladder was not easy at first, he has found that he appreciates the environment of his new company and is now glad that he left the telecommunications industry. He is very comfortable and is upgrading his job to add more value to his new employer. Now that he is back in a corporate environment, he is finding that his new employer, when hiring, works through a small, select group of vendors and employee referrals, but does not typically go to the Web.

Dick said that he was forced to reassess himself and how he fit the marketplace. He knew that he could not compete against the more experienced, higher quality candidates who themselves were evaluating lesser positions. Networking paid dividends for him. Two Vice Presidents at his new company came from his former one. They introduced him to and handed his resume to critical people in the hiring chain. Networking allowed him to be considered for jobs where he was not an exact fit, but where he could leverage his experience and background, because others now knew him and trusted him. He also found that leads from Execunet were helpful and lead to quality contacts. The job boards were completely valueless on one hand. He created “agents” on the major boards to download the latest jobs, but he found that many jobs were not real, instead being attempts by recruiting firms to collect resumes. On the other hand, posting his resume to job boards caused some corporate recruiters to seek him out. Outplacement was not very beneficial. Sending out mass, blind Emails of his resume were fruitless. Many bounced back from senior executive Email accounts as “not accepted”.

He learned that waiting is discouraging. The best way to fight the negative side of waiting is to get moving, be proactive and work at getting a job. His approach was to leave no stone unturned. He found the print version of the New York Times classified advertisements to be richer in content than the on-line version. He also found that interviews and opportunities come in waves. He also networked with known professionals such as dentists, doctors and the like who have other patients who may have hiring needs or may know those who do. When he accepted his present position, he was pending against three others. He chose to accept his present company because he felt it gave him an excellent opportunity to build his career beyond its previous level. He claims to have spent at least twenty-eight to thirty hours per week in job search activities.

“Harry” is a fast-track executive and the former CIO of a failed startup software company who just spent twenty months in his transition. He has accepted a Vice Presidency in the Information Technology

department of one of the Federal Reserve Banks, reporting to the CIO. He networked into this position through a contact he created with the Chairman of the Board of this bank. Although he had no prior industry experience, he specifically targeted IT opportunities in finance and banking. Having worked in some smaller enterprises and suffered through the burst of the technical bubble, Harry liked the Federal Reserve for its stability. He is tired of subjecting his career and his family to violent swings due to economic conditions. The Federal Reserve found Harry attractive because it is re-engineering its internal processes and culture. He has valuable experience on how to run a leaner, more fast-paced IT organization and brings them the fresh experience they need.

Networking was Harry's most valuable tool. He also found that his membership in Execunet was valuable in establishing contacts and generating interviews. Russell Reynolds and a few of the boutique search firms were also helpful. When he used the job boards, he received a poor reaction from recruiters, but found that corporate responses were better. He did some mailings and sent out both print and Email versions of his resume. Typically he sent the print version to top Human Resource executives and CEO's, feeling they would be less likely to read Email. This landed him an interview with the CEO of a major property and casualty insurer. Whenever he did his mass mailings, he tailored his cover letter to his perception of the needs of the targeted company, based upon his research. He also contacted venture capitalists. As he explained it, "they have big Rolodexes and have a lot of time to talk now, because they're not lending very much money".

Harry agreed with Tom that you should always follow-up with companies that froze positions in mid-stream. He suggested a monthly, regular pattern. He waited too long and missed two job offers. In both cases, when he spoke with the company, he was told that they would have offered him the position but thought he had gone off the market. He also read the business news regularly, keeping an eye out for management changes. He followed up on these either monthly or quarterly, as he saw fit, to learn if other positions were opening. One of our Active members asked him how he disguised the length of his unemployment. Harry said he simply didn't talk about it. He was able to land some consulting assignments, which allowed him to say he had been consulting. He also maintained contact with a stable of high caliber references, which helped him with the top-tier search firms such as Russell Reynolds, Heidrick and Struggles and Korn Ferry. Harry ran an intense search seven days a week from seven in the morning to well into the evening. Being on the east coast, he found himself having conference calls late at night with people on the west coast. He occasionally worked until past midnight.

"Joe" had been the Vice President Information Technology / Chief Information Officer of major health products company and lost his position as the result of an acquisition and management change. He elected to take a severance package and spent nine months in transition. He landed a position with a global consumer products company and is the Managing Director of Enterprise Architecture. During his search, he pursued two career tracks: senior corporate IT management and consulting. While he finds his present job to be a change that necessitates adjustment, he seems to be enjoying it and is adapting well to its challenges. He reports to a Chief Technology Officer who is overseas and has a dotted line reporting relationship to a CIO in the US. His primary focus is business / technology strategy and integration.

During his search, Joe would always research any job posted on the Web prior to apply for it. He leveraged his relationships with Tier One recruiting firms, which he had forged when he was a CIO. He feels that in the future, many recruiters will find their business changed and will become niche players.

He also turned to many contacts he has with major software vendors, consulting firms and IT service providers who all sold to him in his previous position. In almost all cases he tried to differentiate himself through a networking approach. In his early search, he confined himself to local opportunities. Once he considered a national market, he developed numerous other opportunities two of which resulted in offers, along with the one for his present position. When hired he was also in an extensive interview process with another company. Considering he spent many years in health products, each of his new possibilities came from unrelated industries. Three job offers in our present market speak well of his efforts.

Joe found outplacement useful, because it allowed him to speak with people with different backgrounds from a variety of industries, which helped him get a fresh perspective on his search. He worked with a strategy but continually revised it. He also trusted his own instincts. He maintained close contact with a group of ten or twelve people whom he called every few weeks, to let them know how he was doing and to learn if they had new ideas and leads. He also stayed in regular contact with his business references, updating them on his activities and coaching them on their reports, to keep them fresh and current. Joe worked regularly on his job search. He took a disciplined approach and paced himself. He planned his week in advance and did his research on weekends. He also avoided having two major interviews or meetings on the same day, preferring to take one step back to assimilate what he learned and also relax. Although he now has a busy work schedule, he calls at least two of his network contacts every week to stay in touch.

What did we learn from these people?

- In a tight market such as this one, your top three activities should be to network, network and network.
- Plan and manage your time. Searching for your next job is a full time job at the least. It will require focus, effort and determination.
- Don't send your resume to a corporate career site to respond to a job posting. Move quickly, but take the time to find and contact an insider who may become your champion with the internal decision makers.
- Build relationships with as many corporate insiders that you encounter, both in IT and in Human Resources. Stay in touch with them. Your availability may save them a great deal of time and work in the future. When companies are hiring, they frequently want to get the job done without expending time and resources.
- This may be coincidental, but each of these people took a step backward. Each of them seems poised to leap forward as business conditions improve. In the last recession, I saw other people accept lesser positions and lower incomes. Many of them found that they gained new career traction and in the long run, were better off than they would have been had they maintained their previous track.

- Each of our panel of experts was able to cross industries in a market that treasures the “been there, done that”. When people hire friends and network contacts, they relax the standards because they know the candidates and are familiar with their problem solving skills, intellect, self-discipline and interpersonal skills. When they hire a stranger, a tighter fit becomes the only measuring tool that a hiring manager can use. Anyone can produce a few good references. A strong referral by a colleague and a relationship built over time can open doors when trust is critical and a job has to be done right.
- A job hunt during our present era requires faith, fortitude, courage and soul-searching. It also requires a sense of humor and a sense of balance in your life. Support from friends and loved ones is essential.
- When done right, a concentrated job search in our present market can yield multiple opportunities and offers.
- Maintain regular contact with your references. Let them know about the jobs you are considering. Prompt them verbally or in writing to tailor their reports to position you better prospective employers.
- Don’t let your network die. Keep building it even after you land.
- Don’t give up.

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