

## Preparing for a New Career – a Search Consultant’s Perspective By Christopher Swan 4/16/2009

What a rollercoaster ride this economy has been over the last six months. I can remember telling people two years ago that the international economy is going to save us, because growth in Brazil, China and India will keep unemployment under 6%. So much for blind optimism, but I wasn’t the only person who underestimated the scale of the financial crisis. Optimism is a basic American virtue, but it must feel very sardonic to the 9% of Americans who are pounding the pavement (or keyboard) looking for new employment or those of us who have seen a sizeable portion of our income and wealth vanish in a few short months. It is easy to forget that you are important and that you will add value to another organization again in the future. So how do you construct a viable thesis that accurately describes your talents, abilities, passions and unique expertise to a skeptical employment market?

As an executive recruiter working alongside corporate leadership, part of my role is to identify and define the intangible qualities behind a job candidate. When the market tumbles like it did last fall and companies are forced to make personnel reductions, I have the experience and perspective to understand who is shed and why. Generally speaking, our clients are results-driven, making rational decisions to protect the solvency and profitability of their enterprise. They keep the best and cut away the pieces they can live without. There are certainly many gradations between the “Best of the Best” and the “Worst of the Worst,” so often the evaluation process blends the subjective with the objective, balancing potential and performance, all the while considering the long and short term needs of the organization. The point is that if you are looking to scapegoat someone; the idiot boss, the conniving assistant, or the dysfunctional system, stop it! As much as it may be true, it is not relevant. Job-hunting is now your full-time profession and as with any position you have to optimize your tools. You’ve already perfected your résumé, bought a new suit and have been networking feverishly. What now? If you have been actively looking for more than a month, and assuming you don’t have multiple offers, you should at least consider the possibility that you need to improve the most important element to your job-search – YOU.

Companies pay executive recruiters like me to identify employees who are truly great performers. So if your thesis for employment is weak, you are not going to maximize your potential in the job market. Therefore, it pays to do some challenging self-analysis and really define your thesis. Your goal is to settle on a credible and compelling message with which to engage employers. You will be more successful as a candidate if you are clear about what you bring to the table and can convince the employer that you will translate your special talents into an effective team member. So after you have cried on a few shoulders, hoisted a few beers and decompressed for a few days, you must start the process of reassessment and repositioning.

Here are my Five Points to concentrate on when you formulate your personal thesis:

- 1) **Self Improvement** – As a search consultant, I want to see candidates with initiative to improve as an employee. Advanced education is a great example of this, but it is not the end all be all. For some employees it could be getting involved in a professional organization. For others it might be attending civic meetings or earning a professional credential. One easy approach is to look at successful people one or two levels above you and see what they do for self improvement. Ask them what they did when they were in your situation and what they might do differently today. This approach has the added advantage of exposing yourself to senior co-workers and demonstrating your desire to improve. If you are unemployed or have limited access to executives, you should identify top-performers at other companies and explore the same questions. Life coaches often call these contacts informational interviews, but you can simply look at it as networking. A few thoughtful phone calls and an email or two might give you some great ideas. Be sure to reflect your new impressions in your résumé.

- 2) **Focus and Clarity of Thought** – I always consider what a candidate is most interested in – a paycheck so they can buy a Nintendo Wii for the kids, or securing and growing a new business unit for my client’s operations role. In the case of the former, I do not need you on the bus. If you are the latter, then you will research and learn as much as you can about your potential employer before any direct contact. If you understand their philosophy and business practice, you can translate your ability into value that the company will quickly understand. Try describing what you know about a potential employer to your spouse or friend before an interview. If they can’t understand it, you don’t truly understand it. Go back and do some more homework. Break down your thoughts into outline form. Make sure your commentary is concise and that you can count the points of emphasis on one hand. Keep things simple, but be prepared for those detailed hypothetical questions that relate your experience to the business problem at hand. If you get that far, you want to walk away with the job!
- 3) **Ego** – Few people spend adequate time thinking about their own ego and how it affects their success. In his book *A New Earth*, Eckhart Tolle discusses how all of us allow our egos to control our lives, instead of appropriately controlling our egos to serve our life’s purpose. How I interpreted his work is, “Grow up and exercise your childish demons from your thoughts and perceptions. Find the value in others without devaluing yourself. Listen to the feedback of others, without being controlled by it. Find balance in everything you do, including employment.” Most good interviewers use some form of behavioral interviewing. Specifically, they want to know what you have done, how you did it, and what motivated your actions. They want to hear your story, so tell relevant anecdotes and how those stories play into your ego. The interviewer should look past their own insights and into your circumstances, not judging right from wrong but listening for balance and an ability to present an ego-free reality.
- 4) **Confidence** – You cannot effectively lead an organization without core confidence. As an executive recruiter, I look for a few key traits in a well-balanced person. Think of a story in your repertoire that exemplifies a particular trait so that you can retell this story as you hear the questioner subtly touch on a particular topic. Practice your stories. When was the last time you talked about a particular circumstance? What does a particular circumstance say about you? This is your thesis, but to confidently describe yourself in a defined period of time, you must deliberately practice your stories multiple times and with as many different sorts of people as possible. A great thesis deserves a great delivery and you will be able to project that calm, focused, honest, direct, perceptive, professional, friendly and fun leader that you are. If the story is organized and you are not trying to think of the details, but can thoughtfully modify it to match the exact tone the questioner is listening for, you will be ahead of the game.
- 5) **Proactive Listening** – Proactive listening is the most crucial element of communication skills and frankly, it’s the easiest to explain and fix. You can learn to do this in a day if your ego and confidence factors are in check. Here is a quick strategy for you to use in your interactions – listen 75% and talk 25%. Ask specific and detailed questions until the other person has provided a complete picture of their thoughts. Try to wait for the other person to ask your opinion before offering it. Analyze what you learned through proactive listening and give a thoughtful response. Proactive listening can solve many business problems because it has the added benefit of giving you time to think and consider what is being said. If you think clearly and can remain calm, the words will flow straight from your brain to your mouth. This also provides you with the added advantage of only having to fill 25% of the conversation. By economizing your words, you will be considered succinct, focused, confident, and in control of your ego.

My colleagues and I have the ear of many employers, so consider what I have just said. Good luck with your career!