The Keys to Career Management Effectiveness: Part I

One of the Healthcare Executive Career Resource Center’s most popular programs is its half-day Executive Job Search Workshop. Designed to help executives enhance their resumes, as well as enhance networking and interviewing skills, the workshop is offered at select educational programs throughout the year. Before participants can properly develop these skills, however, the workshop teaches them the fundamentals of job searching—the keys to unlocking their career potential. This month’s Career Intelligence Report reviews two effectiveness keys that can help you unlock the potential of a successful job search. Subsequent postings will explore other job search fundamentals to further help you manage your career.

Key #1: Self-Awareness

Career management begins with self-examination. Knowledge about your psychological type supplies information about how you will function in a given environment and gives you the insight you need to convince a potential employer that you are right for the job.

Knowing what you value in your current work life will allow you to narrow your search to certain types of positions. By focusing your efforts, you will make the job search process less overwhelming, and you will target positions for which you would be a qualified candidate and a good fit. Some areas to consider include your need to lead, whether you are more motivated by wealth or by intrinsic rewards, and how strongly you desire recognition. You may benefit from participating in HECRC’s Personality Type Assessment or Benchmarks® Workshop, or you may find that you learn more from personal introspection. Often, it is a combination of formal programs and reflection that will tell you most about yourself.

Once you have firm grasp of what you want and why, the next step is to identify the values that prevail in prospective positions and organizations. Teamwork, loyalty, community service, and life/work balance are just a few of the issues that you should consider. Hopefully, your analysis will reveal a compatible opportunity and you can earnestly pursue the position. Self-awareness is also a great asset in the interview process. Most candidates will think they want the job, but you will have invested time and energy in learning why you want the job. Because you will understand how your needs and values match the job’s requirements and environment, you will be able to distinguish yourself from other candidates.

When you apply the insight you gain through self-reflection, you make yourself a more employable product. Distinguishing yourself from others is not enough by itself to land you the job, but when combined with steps that increase your skills, knowledge, and experience, your position yourself to be more desirable than other candidates in the market. That’s where the big returns can start.

Key #2: Preparation

Recently, one Executive Job Workshop participant asked “Can’t you be over-prepared for an interview?” The question provoked some lively discussion, and ultimately some important resolution. One probably can’t be over-prepared, but it is possible to be over-rehearsed. When
interview answers are too smooth and too generic what often comes across is insincerity. However, proper preparation will give you the knowledge and confidence to face questions intelligently, without resorting to pre-scripted answers. This type of preparation is a multi-level, ongoing activity that will equip you for any situation.

Preparation should be part of your standard work life. Even when you are in a job that meets your needs and goals, you should still be working on strategic-level preparation. You can do this by studying the industry, market, and your own organization, staying current with trade literature, and attending monthly healthcare executive networking meetings. When you begin applying for jobs, you should start your tactical-level preparation. This includes research into the prospective company, market, and leadership team. You can learn a lot about a company through annual reports, studies, and the Internet. But probably the best sources for information are your networking contacts.

Once you are well versed in the environment you will be entering, you will begin the logistical phase of preparation. This is the time to take into consideration all of the routine events that can have you playing catch-up before even getting in the door. Prepare for traffic delays and know where you are going to park, know where the interview will take place, and know who you will be meeting with and how to pronounce their names.

It’s easy to skip these steps when you have bigger things to worry about, but a small amount of time preparing can help ensure that everything goes smoothly. Preparing properly will give you the background and ability to enter the interview with confidence. Once the interview begins, just put your best foot forward and enjoy yourself.

**The Keys to Career Management Effectiveness: Part II**

*Last month’s posting introduced the topic of effectiveness keys integral to career conducting job searches. This month, we explore tailoring your presentation and handling rejection—two keys that influence your point of view, as well as your actions.*

**Key # 3: Tailoring Your Presentation**

Tailoring begins as a way of viewing yourself but it ultimately must become a pattern of acting. Essentially, it is allowing your actions to be driven by customer needs. First, you develop information about yourself and the employment market through keys 1 and 2, self-assessment and preparation. Then you use that information to present your strengths and skills that will make you most employable.

Today’s employment market is one in which the number of positions with traditional acute care providers is shrinking and the supply of executives keeps growing. Gone are the days when a score of MHA programs dribbled out handfuls of new graduates to more that 7,000 growing hospitals. Now there is more balance between the demand for and supply of healthcare managers. That means executives face stiff competition for new positions. The implication of
such a balanced and competitive employment market is clear: Executives must differentiate themselves from others and be attentive to the needs and preferences of a potential employer.

The market contains increasing numbers of nontraditional employer organizations beyond the acute care setting and even beyond being healthcare providers at all. There are PPOs, managed care organizations, insurers, information technology vendors, suppliers, regulators, and consultants, so it is likely that at some point you will find yourself applying to new segments of the field. Knowing what these new segments value in a candidate will help you tailor your resume and self-presentation for maximum effect. A presentation of responsibilities and accomplishments that stresses success only in an acute, inpatient hospital environment will appeal only to employers with unmet needs for managing acute, inpatient hospital services. Such employers may find no value in an accounting of your publications or presentations at national meetings. However, a consulting firm might find a glowing record of publications and presentations an important predictor of success in landing new accounts.

Once you have determined which settings are of interest to you, it is important to determine which of your existing skills are transferable and which are best left out of conversations, cover letters, and resumes. Some traits may apply across an entire industry segment, while others are appropriate only for a single employer. You may even want to develop multiple versions of your resume. In a highly competitive market, knowing how to show employers the side of you that will interest them most is indispensable.

**Key #4: Handling Rejection**

No matter how well you present yourself or how much experience you have, there will times when you face rejection. This can be difficult to accept emotionally and, in cases financially. Rejection is a fact of life; however, it should be thought of as a two-way-street. When it becomes apparent that there is not a good match between candidate and position, then either the employer or candidate should break off negotiations. Usually this falls to the employer, but not every job offered is one an executive should accept. Forcing yourself into a poor fit will ultimately result in damage to both you and the company. When imminent mortgage or tuition payments are larger than one’s resources to cover them passing up an offer can be as difficult as being rejected. It can often seem easier to quietly compromise than to disrupt the lives and aspirations of those closest to us, but there are personal costs involved when one gives in to expedience. No matter how difficult it is, passing up a job offer is sometimes a necessary step.

Rejecting tempting offers or missing hoped-for opportunities can be more manageable when one is prepared. One way to prepare is to develop a personal support network of colleagues, friends, relatives, and mentors. Also, you can often find community, religious, and professional organizations that host support groups. Having a support network can ease the sting of disappointments and help salve the pain of passing up an offer. Also, they can lift one’s spirits so that rejection brings a maximum of learning, a minimum of wallowing, and little or no interruption in one’s job search. And continuing your search will always reduce disappointment over rejection because the next offer is just around the corner.
The Keys to Career Management Effectiveness: Part III

This third, and final, posting in our series on career management effectiveness explores the paired behaviors of follow-through and follow-up, and integrity.

Key #5: Follow-Through and Follow-Up

No doubt, you are familiar with the term follow-through—it is a well-known expression applicable in many popular recreational pastimes. Follow-through is that crucial concluding physical act that enables players in sports such as baseball, basketball, golf, or tennis to direct a ball where it needs to go. Without follow-through in the shot, swing, or stroke, the result will be misdirected. The same is true for managing your career. Ignore follow-through in your job search, and your career plans may fall off course.

In career management, follow-through is really a complement to the earlier effectiveness key, preparation. Preparation helps ensure a good delivery, but there are typical moments when executives fail on their follow-through. For example, creating a resume is good preparation for your job search. Some executives work with exhaustive diligence to create a masterpiece—the margins, headings, spelling, and content are all perfect. Unfortunately, during the single-minded pursuit of a perfect document, the executive has failed to develop a network. This lack of follow-through renders the resume ineffective. Relying on only your resume to land the job is a common rookie mistake. It is not fatal, but overlooking networking is almost certain to extend the period of time involved in finding the right job.

Another typical point where lack of follow-through frequently occurs is when one makes an initial networking contact as a prelude to a subsequent and more significant contact. An executive recruiter illustrated this point during a panel presentation. She recounted receiving a resume in the mail with a cover letter indicating that the writer would phone her next week. “So,” the recruiter told the audience, “I noted on my calendar to expect a call from Mr. Networker. Well, for whatever reason, he didn’t call. I didn’t have to write that down to remember him as someone who doesn’t follow through.”

Follow-up is a close companion to follow-through. It is the portion of the job search that establishes an executive as someone who is serious about obtaining a position. For example, the recruiter mentioned above recalled a candidate who did not send a thank-you letter after an interview. “I used to think it goes without saying that a person interviewing automatically sends a thank-you card for the opportunity to meet and discuss employment opportunities. Apparently not.” By not sending a timely “thank you,” that candidate had distinguished himself negatively from the other candidates. His initial positive impression was erased by the negative impression he created when he did not follow up with a thank-you letter. The lesson: It never hurts to follow-up, but it may hurt if you don’t.

Follow-up is not only the responsibility of the job seeker, but also the employer. It is frustrating for a job seeker to submit a resume and not receive acknowledgement from the employer that the resume was received. It is reported that the acknowledgment rate for resumes received across industries has fallen to below 10 percent. Given the number of unsolicited resumes that circulate,
it is understandable that they often go unacknowledged. However, employers should realize that by not following up with applicants, they are creating a negative public impression and risk alienating talented workers they may wish to hire in the future.

Key #6: Integrity

The final effectiveness key to consider in career management is integrity. In all aspects of your life, and in career management especially, the most important characteristic is integrity. During the job search process, blatant misrepresentation of qualifications is a transparent and foolish way to compromise one’s integrity. Employers do check references, credentials, and degrees. Increasingly, employers seek transcripts and past employment references as part of an application process.

A less obvious compromise of one’s integrity occurs when a person accepts a position despite harboring reservations that it may not really be a good match. Here, the risk is that the executive will assume personal unhappiness and ineffectiveness in the short run and decreased employment opportunities in the long run. Poor performance and a less than cordial separation may make landing the next position much more challenging.

The postings in this series explored the six keys integral to effective career management: self-awareness, preparation, tailoring your presentation, handling rejection, follow-through and follow-up, and integrity. Paying attention to these job search fundamentals will unlock the potential for a successful job search and help you further your career.