

Career Compass No. 4: Spot That Opening, and Take It!

In our latest installment of Career Compass, Dr. Benest offers tactical advice on finding your next opportunity, even in the current market, and successful methods for preparing for a job interview.

- *I have noticed that there are job openings, in my organization as well in other local governments, in the current economic climate. How do I get ready to apply, research the opportunity, and generally increase my chances for getting the job?*

Yes, there are job openings even in tough times. But competition for those jobs is up and research and preparation are critical to differentiating you from the rest. To become more competitive, here is a basic checklist:



1. Getting Ready for a Future Opening

Before you start applying, you need to:

- Assess your skills, experiences and capabilities in order to identify the types of positions for which you may be qualified; get feedback from a trusted colleague or mentor (a colleague or mentor can help you determine if you're being too ambitious or not ambitious enough);
- Update your resume and get it critiqued from two or three colleagues, mentors, and/or Range Rider in your area;
- Be on the look out for jobs: let HR staff know of your interest in appropriate job openings in your current organization, notify the colleagues in your network to be on the look out; check out job sites which post local government job openings; join ICMA and other professional associations that advertise job openings in your field;
- Increase your network: start with colleagues in your organization; make connections with local government professionals in adjacent communities; become active in regional and statewide professional associations; and introduce yourself to the Range Rider in your area;
- Engage your manager in a "development conversation," discussing your aspirations as well as your assessment of your skills, experiences and competencies; encourage the manager's feedback and ask for your manager's support in further developing your skills;
- Identify opportunities to fill gaps in your experience and skill sets; seek interim or acting positions, special assignments or new projects; use community or volunteer activities to fill out your portfolio of experiences and skills.

2. Once You Identify a Job Opening

Once you identify a job opening, here are some steps to take:

- Do some research in order to assess the opportunity; customize your resume and prepare for any interviews; your research should help you answer the following questions:
 - What are the key duties?
 - What are the important challenges facing this position or the division or department?
 - Who is the manager? What is his/her management style?
 - With whom will you be working as part of the team?
 - Who will actually be making the hiring decision?
 - What is the reputation of the organization and the department? Why would you want to work there? Why wouldn't you want to work there?
 - What are the professional reputations of the department director and chief executive?
 - What are the demographics of the community, its values, its economy, major institutions, and the like?
 - What's the political climate of the organization and the community?
 - Does the organization value learning and employee growth and development?
- Ask yourself and members of your network if the job opening appears to be a good fit
- Customize your resume and cover letter so it corresponds to what the hiring authority is seeking

3. Sources for Gathering Intelligence

- Check local newspaper articles
- Talk to colleagues working for the organization or in adjacent local governments
- Talk to developers, non-profit professionals working in the community or residents whom you identify through friends, colleagues or family or other research
- Make an appointment to speak with the Chamber of Commerce executive, the publisher of the local newspaper, and/or the government

- Contact the Range Rider from the area

4. Preparing for the Interview

Assuming you are qualified for the position, you may well get an interview. To prepare for the interview:

- Look at the interview as good practice (while you don't want to apply for positions for which you don't qualify, practice makes perfect--the more interviews, the better you become at taking interviews)
- Brainstorm with a trusted colleague or mentor some likely questions
- Outline your responses to likely questions
- Conduct with a friend or colleague a mock interview; consider videotaping the mock interview and critiquing it
- Identify key points about your competitive edge for the position and work these into your responses to interview questions (or briefly summarize your competitive edge at the end of the interview)
- Use specific experiences as you respond to interview questions (vignettes and stories are powerful ways to communicate)
- Write down as soon as you leave the interview the questions that were asked and how you responded; consider how you could better answer the questions (this will help you for any second interview for the particular job opening or for interviews for future job openings)

5. Getting Feedback and Following-Up

At the end of the interview or as a follow-up, you can (and should):

- Ask when you will hear from the manager making the hiring decision or from the HR department
- Send immediately a brief note (not an email) thanking the manager for the interview
- Contact the HR staff person assigned to the recruitment in order to inquire about the status of the hiring (if you don't hear any word in a week or so)

Assuming that you did not get the job, you should wait several weeks and then:

- Email the manager (and/or the HR staff sitting in on the interview) and indicate that you would like to talk to him or her in order to improve your chances for the next position that you seek; schedule a telephone call and ask the manager:
 - How did you assess my portfolio of experiences and skills? How could I improve my portfolio so I can become more competitive for similar positions?
 - Were my interview answers responsive to the questions? Where my answers too long, too short, substantive enough?

Some Final Comments

You are unlikely to secure the first or second job for which you apply. It is like any worthwhile effort—you need to be tenacious.

Getting a new and better position is a learning adventure. The effort will help you hone your research, interview and other job-seeking skills and enhance your professional network. In the process, you will meet some interesting colleagues and discover different organizations and communities.

Moreover, job-seeking is an art. Any art takes practice.

Finally, I believe that there is some luck or fate involved. When as a department director I began to apply for City Manager positions, I got into interviews for several positions for which I was not qualified, and I got ignored for other Manager jobs for which I would have been qualified. I did finally get a perfect first-time Manager job that boosted my skills and experiences and kick-started a long and rewarding City Manager career. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Good luck is another name for tenacity of purpose."

Enjoy the learning journey. Happy job hunting!

Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's senior advisor for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future Career Compass, email nextgen@icma.org or post it in the discussion forum.

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