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HUMAN RESOURCES

A Guide for Landing Your Dream Job

Do you have a dream job in mind? Perhaps you aspire to become the chief business officer of a larger or different type of institution. Or you may be eyeing a presidential or chancellor post.

As a former business officer at several institutions—and a current executive recruiter for higher education—I’ve observed a number of techniques that can lead to satisfying career moves. Essentially, these efforts involve a strong focus on three things: self-awareness, knowledge of the institution and of the particular position, and an understanding of the process by which many institutions and recruitment firms conduct their searches for candidates.

Getting to Know You

To identify a position compatible with a positive career move, think deeply about who you are, consider what is important to you in life, and determine the elements that motivate and fulfill you in your work. What *must* the dream job offer in terms of *content* and *context*?

Consider your current responsibilities and think about ways in which a new position might expand and enhance them. For example:

- Summarize the accomplishments that have been most meaningful to you and set new goals that you would find exciting in a different position.
- Examine the level of authority you currently have and your comfort level with increasing (or decreasing) it.
- Quantify the resources in personnel and tools that are at your disposal and imagine a larger position (or, in some cases, a smaller one) with commensurate support.
- Be realistic in assessing the negative elements and potential minefields that come with any job—the things you really don’t like to do, don’t do well, or can’t delegate. Then, calculate the job’s “negativity quotient,” which, if quite high, may lead to an automatic veto of the position.

The environment in which you will work also deserves careful scrutiny.

For the job and its surroundings, you’ll be evaluating working relationships with superiors, colleagues, board, staff, and faculty; staff competence; institutional culture; and history and scope of the position.

In terms of quality of life for yourself and your family, other factors weigh in, including geographic location; opportunities for spouse or significant other; environment for children, if applicable; and access to sports and cultural venues and other opportunities that you hold as priorities.

Gaining Insight

Now you're ready to monitor the indicators of organizational health.

Plans and press. Job candidates typically look at the institution's strategic and master plans, annual reports and financial statements, and recent Forms 990. If you've not done a job search lately, be aware of useful online tools. For example, Lexis/Nexus, Google, and the institution's Web site provide access to media coverage, student newspapers, and other publications that may help you flesh out the campus's profile. Tap your network for available information about board members, town-gown relationships, and other factors that impact the overall work environment.

Metrics and measures. Current and anticipated short- and long- term health of the institution is critical to your assessment of the job opportunity. Seek information on upward or downward trends in financial results; fundraising; endowment size; and student enrollments. Look at, with appropriate caveats, rankings of the institution and its departments, colleges, or schools. Consider how this perception may affect the quality of the board and the ability to attract and retain strong faculty, deans, and administrators.

Position perception. Try to determine the reason for the vacancy, the successes and failures of your predecessor, and how the position is perceived by colleagues and other constituencies. With this in mind, calculate as best you can the challenges, responsibilities, and potential problems for the short and long term.

Carefully consider the information you uncover and the answers to questions you pose prior to and during the job interview. Then ask yourself, for example, if the culture, operating and managerial style, and personalities of those with whom you will be working are right for you. Also consider whether the priorities and goals for the position are a good fit. Some years ago, I recognized a disconnection, when the president of a major institution interviewed me for a vice president position in finance and administration. During the conversation, I asked, "How would you judge—after the person's first year on the job—whether you had made an excellent appointment?" He responded, "If I didn't have to deal with issues in that person's area." While that could be considered a great response—indicating that I would have significant freedom to act in my department—his answer caused me to no longer consider the position. Although I recognized the president's higher priorities, I wanted to serve a leader who was reasonably interested in and concerned about the areas of my responsibility.

Nailing the Process

A thorough understanding of the recruitment process can give you an advantage over your competitors. Here are key hurdles and some guidance for surmounting them.

- 1.** In the early screening, the goal for the recruiter or search committee is to consider further only those candidates with experience and accomplishments that are reasonably close to those that the new appointee will be expected to face now and in the future.

Tailor your resume to show that you are action oriented and to highlight your specific achievements, using quantitative measures whenever possible. And, of course, align specific experiences, requirements, and personal skills and certifications with those outlined in the job specifications.

2. Search firms and committees avoid proposing “out of the box” candidates—say, for example, putting forward a business officer holding a major position at a university professional school for a similar level post at a cultural institution. However, if this is the path of your dream job, your mission—through your resume and interview—will be to make clear the similarities in the positions. Explain, for example, how working with faculty requires skills that track with interacting with curators. Or describe the ways in which dealing with the campus bookstore parallel the operations of a museum gift shop. If you’ve served on the board of a local art museum, don’t hesitate to refer to this applicable volunteer experience to demonstrate your knowledge and leadership of cultural institutions.
3. If you should make the A List through this initial screening, be prepared for a comprehensive phone interview and, if that goes well, the in-person interview with the executive recruiter or with the search committee. Rehearsing questions that you’ll ask and answer can make the difference between your selection for the job and a rejection letter. (See the sidebar “Ten Questions Coming Your Way” and go to www.nacubo.org for the online exclusive “A Dress Rehearsal for Your Next Job Search.”)
4. Identifying and “preparing” your references is an often forgotten step in the job search. And a thorough background and reference check is much more likely to be conducted and is easier and quicker to perform than it was 5 or 10 years ago. Think carefully about those you choose to list, and discuss with them the position and the nature of the institution. As artfully as you can, suggest skills and accomplishments that individuals might note to demonstrate your suitability for the position. Since a great deal of information is now available, consider sharing with the appropriate person(s) anything that needs some background or explanation so that it does not come as a shock or surprise to the recruiter or search committee and that you are not caught off guard.

This comprehensive preparation requires a considerable amount of thought and effort. But, if it results in realizing your dream job, it will be well worth it.

Ten Questions Coming Your Way

- 1) What do you see as this position’s major challenges and opportunities—and its major difficulties and risks?
- 2) From what you know at this point about the position and institution, what appeals to you most? What do you like least?
- 3) What decisions or actions have disappointed you in your career? If you had the chance to change them, what would you do instead?
- 4) Describe the most difficult supervisory problem you have had to deal with in your present job and how you handled it.
- 5) At our institution, we are currently facing or will face the following problem. Explain how you’d develop a process for dealing with this challenge and what you would anticipate as the outcome.
- 6) How have your present and past positions prepared you to take on the responsibilities of this position?
- 7) Give us an example of a major crisis or chaotic situation you faced and what you did to manage it.
- 8) Suggest two or three qualities or characteristics that you believe would make you stand out in a crowd of excellent candidates.
- 9) If we asked your current supervisor what our president and our institution might do to maximize your strengths and strengthen the areas in which you need some degree of improvement, what would he or she advise?

10) If you could wave a magic wand so that this position turned out to be your dream job, what specific things would you want the wand to ensure?

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