

# Conscious Careering

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**In today's job market, it's tough being a jack of all trades; get a "hook" that will set you apart!**

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Generalist. Jack-of-all-trades. Utility infielder. If one or more of these terms describes you, and you're in the hunt for a new career opportunity, pay attention—you're likely to have your work cut out for you in today's market!

"But wait," you say, "doesn't my flexibility and versatility make me more valuable to an employer than somebody who only knows how to perform a single, specific work function?" Oh yes, unequivocally. Companies love generalists and have relied on them, since time immemorial, to save the organization's bacon when plans go awry and important projects start to track sidewise. That's when jack-of-all-trade employees become an indispensable asset since, typically, they're masters at being able to learn new skills quickly and transcend traditional company roles in a single bound. Just say the words "special project" and up their hands go, ready to tackle a new challenge and fill in where the company needs them most.

When it comes to the hiring process, however, the unfortunate reality is that many hiring managers seem to suffer complete and utter amnesia when it comes to their perception and treatment of generalist job candidates. Even if they, themselves, rose up through the ranks by stretching into new and unfamiliar roles, they will still often penalize job candidates severely if they aren't highly specialized in a particular field or work function. "What's that?" they might say, "You didn't decide to become a financial analyst in the third grade? And you weren't born knowing everything one could possibly know about the wireless industry? Sorry, I'm afraid we're going to have to pass in favor of somebody with more direct hands-on experience in our industry."

To truly get our hands around this issue and prepare to overcome it, however, it's important we first acknowledge a few of the specific reasons why employers have gotten somewhat gunshy about hiring people who don't bring a precision-machined set of experience and qualifications to the table. The biggest culprit behind this behavior, I believe, is the fact that most employers (and therefore by extension, most human beings) are highly risk-averse. When we have a specific job we need to fill, the

safest route is to hire the candidate who appears to be the closest possible mix on paper to the "ideal candidate" in terms of skills, abilities, and experience. We therefore look for that perfect pedigree and assume that this approach will supply us with the candidate who will need the least training, be able to make the quickest contribution, and who will present the lowest risk of turnover due to their previous track record in the chosen profession. While we might sense and resent our own tunnel vision, in this regard, we just may not feel we have many alternatives when it comes to weeding through a large pool of candidates.

In addition, there's another factor at work with this approach that has to do with "covering" a certain body part. Whether we admit it or not, by shirking qualified generalists and interviewing only those candidates who offer slam-dunk industry credentials, we also might unconsciously be protecting ourselves from recrimination. In other words, if the candidate we hire ends up being a complete bust, we'll likely be exonerated from blame—after all, we hired the most "qualified" candidate for the job, didn't we?

So what you do if you happen to have worked in a lot of different capacities over the years and don't have one distinct, unambiguous field of expertise? Are there ways to overcome the hiring stigma and convince employers to view the benefits of your diverse experience, rather than just the liabilities?

There are a few strategies, in fact, that can aid your cause. Here are a few specific approaches I recommend to my "generalist" clients for improving their success rate:

● **Don't misrepresent yourself, but don't underestimate the power of "spin," either.** While you may not have the most picturesque, narrowly-focused employment history, that doesn't mean you can't emphasize certain areas of experience over others. For example, if you've done a variety of random marketing projects for companies over the years, and have also tackled some related projects outside of the workplace, there's no reason you can't package all of this experience together to justify a "Marketing Project Coordinator" header at the top of your resume. Or let's say you'd like to break into the sales field, but have only worked in administrative positions over the years. Can you go back through each of your past jobs and stress just those parts of each position that involved influencing others, developing persuasive communications, and providing exemplary customer service?

While presenting your experience in this selective fashion certainly isn't a magic cure-all, it's definitely within the bounds of fair play and will go a long way toward helping you break down some of the "tall walls" that exist in today's market.

● **Focus on relationship-based job search channels and limit your reliance on ads and**

**recruiters.** Guess what, generalists: time to get smart about where that next job is going to come from. For starters, the Internet job world is going to be almost a complete waste of time for you, since published advertisements are the most rigid and competitive channel when it comes to landing employment. Candidates who have “broken the mold” and acquired a wide variety of experience simply don’t fare that well on the open market against more seasoned, specialized competitors. The staffing agency and recruiter world doesn’t tend to be a highly effective route, either, since these firms get paid to place people with extremely focused skill sets.

So rather than fighting an uphill battle on these two fronts, concentrate your attention, instead, on job search techniques that emphasize relationship-building and quality personal interactions. Ask the people in your network to endorse you to their friends and business contacts. Reach out to suitable companies directly in search of opportunities. And make a habit of attending any and all job fairs, networking events, and relevant association meetings that you come across. As a generalist, you’ll be far more effective in opportunities where you can deal face-to-face with people, and sell yourself directly, than in cases where you need to rely on your resume to stimulate initial conversations.

● **Come up with a creative “hook” that sets you apart from your competition.** Even if you don’t have a demonstrable career specialty, you are still likely to have a number of unique abilities and talents that set you apart and make you an exceptional employee. Don’t overlook the power of these credentials. Make sure that you isolate these transferable strengths and constantly communicate them to employers via your resume, cover letters, and during each phase of the interview process.

Marketed properly, these one-of-a-kind qualities will help differentiate you from other candidates and serve as a memorable “hook” that will distract employers from your generalist background and get them focused on your distinctive advantages, instead. For example, I had one client who made a point to always present herself as “fearless” throughout the interview process, and another one who billed herself as a “universal translator” since she had worked effectively for 12 different bosses during her career and had shown a gift for being able to convey their message across different corporate departments. In each case, the power of these personalized marketing phrases helped distinguish my clients from the crowd and get them hired, despite the limitations they faced in terms of formal work background and education.

In the end, while these techniques alone won’t fully eradicate the bias many employers have against jack-of-all-trade candidates, they’ll at least give you a fighting chance. Hopefully, once you get your foot in the door with the right employer, you can begin searching for a niche

you enjoy and in which you can become more specialized. Ultimately, while generalists aren’t likely to ever completely go the way of the dinosaurs, the labor market continues to move in a “round peg, round hole” direction—and the rewards will go to those who adapt accordingly!

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