

Conscious Careering



Reading between the lines; when job hunting, train yourself to dissect advertisements for useful clues!

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It's probably not a very uplifting analogy, I'll admit, but today's job advertisements share a striking similarity to the average crime scene. At first glance, you may not notice all that much out of order, but when you really start sleuthing around you're likely to uncover a few important clues which escape casual notice.

I say this because I've consistently found that job seekers tend to overlook (and underutilize) the rich contextual clues which are typically embedded into Internet-based employment ads. Falling back on old habits from the newspaper era, the average job candidate tends to scan an advertisement once or twice, throw together a fairly generic cover letter, and send it off to the employer with a copy of their resume and their fingers firmly crossed. Sound familiar? If so, and this has largely been your approach, I'm here to tell you that there's a better way—and it's based on carefully "dissecting" a corporate job ad for clues about the employer's real needs, interests, and motivations.

Are we talking about some revolutionary new concept in job hunting here? Absolutely not. All I'm suggesting is that you study an ad carefully and take a few extra minutes to customize the cover letter and resume submission before sending it in. What's different, however, is the way in which you sort through and prioritize the information presented. In today's electronic labor bazaar, as I'm sure you've realized, companies have the luxury of writing fiendishly-long job descriptions without the restriction of paying for every word or column inch. They are therefore able to be far more specific about the challenges they face and the type of candidates they're seeking, while at the same time, throwing in a bunch of additional "fluff" which *isn't* directly relevant to the primary needs of the job or the hiring process.

Consequently, it takes some savvy detective work to cut through this extra clutter and isolate the top couple of job requirements to stress in your application materials. This isn't a simple task, necessarily, given that you have a maximum of only a few paragraphs to make your case and get your point across. You have to train yourself to quickly separate the wheat from the chaff and zero in on the exact

qualifications most likely to make or break your candidacy. With practice, however, you'll get better and better at isolating these key buying elements and using them to gain a critical advantage over your competition.

Let's take a quick case in point. In jumping over to the NW Classifieds employment website, I've grabbed one random management-level position for a Marketing Project Manager which is currently being advertised. Let's examine this specific opportunity and see what secrets the content of the advertisement might reveal if we study it carefully and systematically.

The text of the ad reads:

"A company in Woodinville that specializes in integrated business services is currently looking for a Marketing Project Manager. This person will be responsible for managing the creative execution of projects for multiple clients; developing and overseeing project schedules; coordinating project details; managing the creative process; and budgeting and negotiating costs of services. This position requires someone with a strong grasp of multi-media production and who has experience in planning and executing multiple projects. The ideal Candidate will be proactive, organized, and reliable. At least four years of project management experience is required."

Okay, for starters, we know that this lead is likely being fielded by a staffing agency, not directly by the employer themselves. How do we know this? Because the advertisement describes the company in a confidential, third-person fashion that clearly suggests an intermediary of some kind is involved. In addition, the contact information given in the ad (not shown) references a company called Adams & Associates, which a quick Google search reveals to be a fairly major staffing agency in the Seattle/Bellevue area. The job candidate, therefore, should realize that their application materials will be going through an external staffing company—and they may want to change their cover letter language to reflect this dynamic. For example, instead of saying "I can help your company manage critical marketing projects," they might instead write: "I am confident that I can help your corporate client successfully manage their marketing projects."

Of course, we'd be able to respond even more appropriately if we could somehow determine who the company is and conduct some market research on the organization. The advertisement intentionally does not disclose the company's name, however. So how else can we track down the employer in question?

Again, while it's not going to be possible in every case, there will often be a trail of crumbs provided in the job announcement that can lead us to the mystery employer.

For starters, in this particular case, we know that the company is located in Woodinville, which is a fairly "finite" business community and immediately narrows our search down to a

limited set of corporate entities. Secondly, some of the language used to describe the company's industry niche—such as “integrated business services” and “multi-media production”—is highly explicit. There's a good chance, therefore, that this terminology is likely to be incorporated into the company's website, as well. Combine this language with the search term “Woodinville” on a few of the major Internet search engines, and voila, it's a pretty good bet we'll be able to isolate the organization in question.

In using this strategy with the example above, around the time I wrote this column, I was 98% certain I was able to successfully identify the target employer in question—especially since there turned out to be an almost identical job lead posted on the company's website! I'll respect the anonymity of the organization, however, and won't spoil the surprise. Clearly, they had their reasons for wanting to keep the search to a relatively low profile.

If you were seriously interested in pursuing this opportunity, however, you would of course use the knowledge acquired to dig up additional information on the company which you could use to fortify your application materials. This highly customized approach would not only help your materials stand out from those of your competitors, but would also immediately brand you as a very resourceful individual, which is a quality most companies tend to view favorably in job applicants.

Beyond these two issues, however, there are additional gold nuggets, yet, that we can mine from this fairly typical, run-of-the-mill advertisement. For example, we can study the responsibilities being requested and make sure that our resume and cover letter specifically itemize the skill sets being requested such as project management, budgeting, contract negotiation, and the like. In performing this step, don't assume that the resume screener will read between the lines and deduce from your employment history that you have the requisite skills to do the job. Call your relevant qualifications out specifically, even to the point of making them ridiculously obvious.

In cases where a job description ends up being packed with 15-20 desired qualifications, a scenario which happens more often than not given the lack of Internet restrictions, focus your presentation around the handful of stated requirements which appear to have been crafted with the most care and consideration. You can usually tell which requirements employers really have some conviction and energy around—and which qualifications (e.g. team player, self-starter, good communicator...) they've simply thrown into an ad as an afterthought.

In the particular case of the Marketing Project Manager ad, for instance, you'd definitely want to showcase the fact that you have four or more years of project management experience. This credential stands out like a sore thumb, don't you think? Four is too precise of a number to

have been selected at random or pulled out of a hat; it must therefore be considered a pretty significant threshold of experience by somebody within the organization.

You can also treat personal attributes and “soft skill” requirements the same way. If the employer includes a list of adjectives they're looking for in the ideal employee—such as proactive, reliable, and organized—ignore the ones that sound clichéd and place your emphasis instead on the ones which seem somewhat distinctive. Proactive and reliable, for example, aren't words you see in the vast majority of job ads. They probably represent an attempt by the company to “overcompensate” for a former employee who was neither very reliable nor very good at taking the initiative. So you might want to play up these elements in your materials if a) they're true and b) you have room to include them. By focusing on the employer's hot buttons, there's a good chance you'll score big brownie points.

In the end, while not quite a forensic science, taking the time to study the exact language used in a job advertisement will pay dividends in a competitive job market. Most employers end up giving you more clues than they realize about what they're really looking for and how to win them over with your application materials. You might just need to hone your instincts a bit and pay a little extra attention to text elements that you'd previously overlooked!

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