

Asheville Job Seekers, Know your Target, Says HR Experts

By: Mark Barrett

Sending a simple thank-you note still helps. So does doing a little homework.

In a time when jobs can be scarce, researching a potential employer and coming across as someone who would be a good fit with co-workers might be the most important ways to get a leg up in a crowded field of applicants, area human resources professionals say.

But doing the little things like sending a thank-you note after a job interview still matters, the professionals say, and might matter even more when applicants are trying to set themselves apart from candidates with similar qualifications.

Hiring managers in Western North Carolina usually have plenty of qualified applicants, with unemployment in the Asheville metropolitan area at 8.1 percent in November and more than 10 percent in many more rural counties.

So, how can an applicant stand out? Here's what people involved in hiring decisions at several area employers said:

CHOOSE YOUR TARGET

Sending a resume and cover letter to as many employers as possible might seem like covering all the bases. But HR experts say that is not as effective as identifying the specific jobs you are seeking and who might have some to fill and spending more time pursuing those.

The more the materials applicants send to an employer are targeted toward the specific company and a specific job or type of job, the better. A generic cover letter, for example, is not as likely to get a response as one that is tailored to a specific target.

"An employer would want to know this person is interested in this job for this reason, rather than just being interested in any job," said Scott McLean, hiring services manager at the Biltmore Co.

KEYWORD SEARCH

Some employers use specialized software to scan resumes for keywords, noted Sharon Craig, district manager for staffing company Kelly Services.

Take a look at the advertisement for a position and be sure some of the key terms appear in your resume, she advises.

Employers are often looking more for evidence of specific skills and accomplishments rather than simply a list of jobs applicants have held, said Carol Rovello, president of local consulting firm Strategic Workplace Solutions.

YOU CAN LOOK IT UP

Learning who is hiring is not enough, HR experts say. Job seekers need to spend some time before even applying, learning about a prospective employer: What they make or sell, changes they have made recently, what's going on at their competitors and what working there might be like.

The Internet, of course, is a good resource, as is the library and copies of the local newspaper.

Carol Nguyen, a human resources analyst with the city of Asheville, also advocates what she calls "informational interviewing."

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http://www.wcu.edu/WebFiles/PDFs/March_Career_Journal.pdf

She suggests contacting people in your field and asking to meet for a cup of coffee or have a short telephone conversation.

Job seekers can learn more about employers in a less pressurized situation and make contacts that can pay off later, she said.

“In a tight market, you have to be proactive and motivated,” Nguyen said.

Research helps job seekers target jobs where they would be the best fit and demonstrate their level of interest to employers.

It also prepares them to both field and ask questions about a company during an interview.

“The employer’s going to want to know the level of interest by an applicant, and one way to gauge that is the number of questions coming back” from the prospective employee, McLean said. Keep in mind that employers can look up applicants, too.

Early on, job seekers should Google themselves and check their Facebook pages to see if there is any material that casts them in a bad light, Craig said.

I’LL FILL IT IN

There are bookshelves full of advice about how to handle a job interview. One idea local experts came back to repeatedly was to conduct yourself as if you would fit in well with your prospective employer.

That means demonstrating some confidence in yourself without becoming a braggart.

“By the time somebody gets in the door in the interview, they’ve already got the qualifications,” Nguyen said. “What we’re really looking for ... is seeing if that person fits the job, is going to fit the team.”

“It’s kind of a balance because you want to really demonstrate your confidence,” Rovello said. But people making hiring decisions “don’t want to see a big ego.”

It is natural in this job market for applicants to have low self confidence and come across as desperate.

Job seekers should fight those feelings as best they can, HR experts said.

“You want someone who really wants to work at your company and to be a part of your organization ... instead of just, ‘Wow, I really need a job right now,’” Craig said.

Hiring managers look at people who are desperate for any job whatsoever as at risk for leaving once the economy improves, McLean said.

THE LITTLE THINGS

Using good spelling, penmanship and grammar on an application won’t get you a job, experts said, but it will keep you from having a disadvantage from the beginning.

They had similar advice about what to wear on the search or to an interview. Hiring managers do not expect applicants for jobs involving manual labor — or many other jobs, for that matter — to show up in a suit and tie, but, “as a default, certainly neat and clean wins the day,” McLean said.

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Nguyen suggests wearing clothing to an interview that is about as dressy or casual as the supervisor for the job might wear.

Job seekers should ask about the hiring timeline and find out the appropriate way to check on their status at the end of an interview, experts said. The answers are good guidance for deciding how to follow up.

Generally, it's best to check in as suggested by the interviewer. Too many repeated contacts after an interviewer can come across as badgering, Rovello said.

Each expert interviewed for this article said sending a thank you note after an interview is a welcome touch — and a small advantage, since the majority of applicants don't bother.

"It really sets folks apart. It tells me those folks are following up. They've got an eye for detail. They're interested," McLean said.

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