

Get a Job

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1. Publication Information

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"Does that come with dental?" - *Grosse Pointe Blank*

2. Find Your Next Job Now

I've had twelve salaried jobs so far (nothing to brag about, I know - it probably indicates I'm pretty good at getting a job, but not so good at picking one) and I've been called a "short-timer" by many of my ex-coworkers. But in retrospect, it's apparent I've never left too soon (unless you count the severance pay that I missed). Even if you're reasonably content with your current job, you should be prepared if it becomes time to find a new one. Even if you have to settle for less just to pay the bills, you'll be ready when opportunities present themselves.

2.1. Know What You Like

Rather than waiting until a new job opportunity shows up and then rationalizing that it's a good move, recognize early on the type of work that interests you.

- I made one of my worst career choices when moving to Silicon Valley. Moving to the center of the dot-com boom near its peak was a good move - taking a job offer because it was convenient was the mistake. With a little more effort I could have continued talks with AvantGo, a company that appeared to be filled with talent and developed mobile applications, one of my top interests. Instead, I went to a software startup that had just been acquired by PRI Automation, a supplier of semiconductor fab equipment company I knew and respected the CTO whom I had worked for previously, and they offered me a job almost immediately. After a wasted year of turmoil and corporate intrigue, during which I found the whole field of manufacturing completely boring (and the state of manufacturing software completely appalling), I found another job at a mobile internet startup called Neomar. That didn't last long, either, but it was a lot more fun, and we had a product out in six months.

Don't fall into the trap of just taking a job because it's convenient, or because you're dissatisfied with your current job and anything new sounds better.

2.2. Know What You Want

I have an uncle, a Silicon Valley executive, who has tried to impress upon me the importance of having a five-year career plan. I still prefer to wing it (and look where it's got me), but I do feel you should know the direction you want your career to go.

- My best career move was in leaving the defense contractor BBN for a small company developing commercial 3D software called Nichimen Graphics. BBN had a great technology history and culture, but I'd worked on corporate and government projects for my entire career, and, especially with the Internet boom starting, I wanted to work on products that you didn't need a security clearance to use. Nichimen didn't last long, but it turned out that I really did get more satisfaction from delivering shrink-wrapped packages to real consumers, and small companies moved at a pace that I enjoyed.

2.3. Figure the Odds

My advice - don't take a new job unless it offers at least two distinct things that appeal to you.

- I once asked a prospective employer what I would get out of the job. The only reason she could come up with - "You'll learn a lot." And I did - mostly, that I shouldn't have taken the

job.

It's a matter of risk management - if you change jobs based on one reason, it may well turn out that rationale was invalid. But if you have more than one reason for taking the job (and being unhappy with your previous job doesn't count), then there's a decent chance you won't feel like you made a terrible mistake.

2.4. Peer-to-Peer Networking

Recruiters writing job-advice columns love to tell you how you should network by calling up all everyone you know when you need a job. But that's not networking, that's panhandling. It's what recruiters do, but it's pretty annoying.

- Most of my jobs and all of my contracts have come through referrals by friends and colleagues, and I try to keep them in mind whenever I hear of an opportunity any of them might be interested in. On the other hand, there are those who only seem to remember me when they want a contact name or even a personal introduction (a lot of salespeople fall in this category). Those guys are on my anti-networking list.

Networking is an economy - you get out of it what you put in. If you contribute answers and useful information to discussion lists, then you will more likely be rewarded with assistance when you need help (and more likely to be treated with leniency if you ask a dumb question). If you help people get jobs, then you will more likely be remembered when those same people hire or make referrals. Those who only reach out when they need a job, a loan, or introduction to business contacts are as welcome as the pal who calls only when he needs help moving his sofa.

Most importantly, be good at your work. People will remember, and the jobs will come to you.

2.5. Don't Waste Time on Recruiters

I've known people to get jobs through third-party recruiters, and I've managed to get some decent interviews and even a couple of jobs (but not good ones) through recruiters. So I'm not saying don't use recruiters, but don't let them waste your time.

- The last recruiter I wasted time on was an outfit called Remington International, a high-flying outfit located in a fancy Westwood, LA office tower. At least one of their staff was honest enough to tell me that if I didn't check with them every two weeks they would forget about me. This was after waiting in the lobby after being warned the previous day not to show up late, and then sitting through a "practice interview" in which I was supposed to give them leads at every company I'd ever worked at. But it was

entertaining to watch the recruiters running around giving each other high-fives.

Don't be misled into thinking that recruiters work for you.

- At the height of the dot com boom, I applied for a position advertising a high salary. But the recruiter from the imaginatively named firm General Employment not only assumed I was at his beck and call ("Hey, I scheduled an interview in an hour - can you show up?"), he spent most of his efforts knocking down my asking salary. "It's not 140k, that was a mistake. It's 120. So you'll take 110?" Maybe his rent check was due.

Third-party recruiters work for themselves - they get paid when they close a deal, like realtors (but without the license or two-week course).

3. Be Prepared

3.1. Do Your Research

In this great Internet day and age, it's easy to do some research on your prospective employer. Any self-respecting company, including startups, will have a web site, where you can check out the company history, management and products. Not only will this allow you to form an initial impression of the company, this will give you a foundation for asking some questions during your interview, either to impress your interviewers with your preparedness or to figure out if these guys are for real.

3.2. Quiz Show

I don't like interview quizzes (made fashionable years ago by Microsoft and more recently by Google).

- But quizzes are a fact of life and you should prepared for them. I prefer asking candidates about their projects, why they made the choices they did, and what tools they used. Anyone who actually accomplished anything should be able to answer those questions.
- During the height of the dot-com era, I interviewed a Java programmer who cited involvement in several Java web projects but could not name a single Java classes she used in any of those projects. And yet she expected close to a six-figure salary!

It's easy to forget the various tools, languages and API's that one encounters in a programming career, but take the time to review them and jog your memory before the interview.

- One C++ game programmer I interviewed kept talking about "object orientated"

programming. That was really distracting.

3.3. Don't Ask, Don't Tell

Important as it is to refrain from discussing race, sex and religion in the workplace, it is even more crucial to keep your opinions to yourself in the interview. There are plenty of federal regulations intended to prevent those factors from keeping you out of a job, so take advantage of that protection. If it means that much to you, you can inflict your opinions, pecadilloes and dogma on your coworkers-to-be when they're stuck with you.

4. Put Your Best Face Forward

This is stating the obvious, but make a good impression.

- I interviewed a technical writer who was looking to make a move from Chicago to the bay area during the dot com boom. On the cover of the technical report he submitted as a writing sample, "technical" was misspelled.

Cross your t's and dot your i's.

4.1. Don't Look Like a Mercenary

Of course, money is important (unless you're fortunate enough to be young, rich and stupid). But when you're applying for a job, you should at least pretend that money is not your only motivation.

- A coworker introduced me over a cheap dinner to a friend of his who expressed some interest in working for our company. His only real question to me was "how much does the job pay?". Considering he didn't have much to say about himself, and we weren't a large company looking for a Level 2 Software Engineer with a specific pay grade, I had no idea and little interest in coming up with a figure. I couldn't tell how good he was, but I was under the definite impression that his primary interest was in finding a higher salary.

4.2. Don't Be Late

First impressions make a difference, and showing up late to an interview is just about the first possible bad impression you can make.

- I used to have a terrible punctuality problem, but the worst was when I showed up a half hour late for an interview with iRobot - I left work at what I thought was the last possible moment and then crawled through commuter traffic all along the Charles River. For

some reason, I seem to be more punctual these days, possibly because I no longer deal with Boston traffic, but also I try to get there a bit earlier, at least to scope out the lay of the land.

Scheduling yourself to arrive fifteen minutes to half an hour early gives you some safety margin - and if you do get there early, it gives you time to check out the office building and check out the surrounding area.

4.3. Don't Be Weird

If you're rich and weird, you're eccentric. If you're interviewing, keep a lid on it.

- I conducted one of the most painful interviews of my life with a guy who started off by professing his infatuation with Asian women ("I love Asian women", I believe were his exact words). I can only imagine he got started on that thread because the previous person who interviewed him was an Asian woman (and in management, to boot). It turns out that was the most interesting thing he had to say for the next very long hour.

5. Look for Flaws

A new job is an investment - you are committing time in the expectation of gaining income, expertise and connections that will advance you in terms of career, finance and overall happiness. There is an opportunity cost in taking a new job - that is time you could spend elsewhere, learning other skills, completing other projects and meeting other people. So do your "due diligence".

5.1. The First Date

Job interviews are like first dates. Everyone is on their best behavior, so any visible flaw you see will certainly be present several times over if you actually "hook up".

- I spent one interview listening to the general manager yelling into the phone at his subordinates. He assured me that he never did that with his engineers (not true) - nevertheless, I ended up buying an iPod to tune him out, and my final meeting at that company lasted three hours, much of it a high-volume blamefest. A company president with a similarly self-absorbed personality complained to be numerous times before I joined about the rudeness and insensitivity of programmers (at least we appreciate irony). That got pretty old after a while and again, when times got tough, the tough got accusatory.

If you see any disturbing behavior, imagine what it's going to be like on the job, especially

during stressful times.

5.2. Meet the Family

It's not just the boss you have to worry about. Check out your prospective coworkers, and see if they're hiding anyone in the closet. And get a feel for the company culture.

- When I was working on a poorly managed defense project in suburban Maryland, insult was added to injury as I worked overtime with the flu while my coworkers attempted to engage me in "debates" on the evils of gay pedophiles (as opposed to straight ones), interracial marriage, how America was a Christian nation, and what Rush Limbaugh said last night.

A company culture might not just offend you - it can change you, for better or worse.

- At my first job in Silicon Valley, I learned a thing or two about political infighting, but I felt dirty (and physicalyl a little ill), and the moments of wicked satisfaction didn't make up for lost time. Later, I joined a game company filled with so much childish behavior (crying, foot stomping, throwing things - and that was the management) that I wanted to take my toys and go home.

5.3. Order the Lobster

One traditional date test is how much the guy is willing to spend. Hopefully, that is no longer the case in this modern day and age. But still, it's something to watch out for when "dating" a prospective employer - a company that is cheap during the interview will be even more stingy with you as an employee, and particularly for small companies, it may be a sign of low operating funds.

- Even companies that are not particularly generous will put on a good show during the interview, but I did have an interview with a company in New Jersey that didn't even offer to reimburse me for taking a train to the interview from Boston (and back the same day). Combine that with their reluctance to give a specific offer when they expressed interest in hiring me, I opted for a job that seemed less interesting but seemed to have more abundant and secure benefits.
- Another employer kept asking me during my interview to think about the least amount of money I needed for my standard of living. In retrospect, I should have responded by asking them to consider the maximum amount of money they could spend on me. And then perhaps I wouldn't have ended up getting the job, which involved a pay cut, reduced benefits, and ended up with me purchasing hardware for the project so I wouldn't have to listen to the boss make a big deal about spending the money.

5.4. Read Between the Lines

Some ominous phrases:

"We're a family." The dysfunctional kind, like the ones in the Jerry Springer Show.

"We have a good core team." Everyone else left.

"We won't deliver a product until it's ready." We're late.

"I know we can do this." All evidence to the contrary.

"We're in stealth mode." We have no marketing.

"I'm really direct." I'm really obnoxious.

"On occasion we need everyone to work extra hours." We have a stupid schedule.

"We have some high-power management ready to come in at a later date." After you do all the work, you're not getting promoted.

"You're recommended by X? Then this is just a formality." This place is really political.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of you." Promises, promises.

In my experience, your best shot at avoiding politics (if that's what you really want) is in startup companies that have less than twenty people. Once they grow to a certain size, then people start worrying more about their titles and turf than in getting something done and keeping the company alive. But if you're more interested in structure and security, that might not be the right situation for you.

5.5. Believe the Rumors

The rumor mill is right. That's not to say you should believe everything anyone says about a prospective employer. But the reputation of a company is propagated by numerous employees, customers, vendors and partners over the years.

So if the word on the street is to turn around and run the other direction, then do it.

6. Check the Benefits

Don't take any benefits for granted. I started my career at large corporations with standard benefits and relocation packages, so I've been caught by surprise a few times when dealing with small and even some medium-sized companies.

6.1. Relocation

- When I got an offer from an interesting startup in California, I assumed they would reimburse me for my move from Boston, but fortunately I casually mentioned the issue just before I verbally accepted the offer. My manager-to-be was surprised by that assumption, but was quite reasonable and came back to me with a modification of the offer - an amount that didn't quite cover the cost of relocation, but was still better than nothing.
- With a much larger company numbering several thousand employees at the height of the dot-com boom, I again assumed that relocation was a standard part of the offer, but only after I formally accepted and called up the HR department did I learn that it wasn't. After starting work, a coworker who just started said he had been relocated by the company, so I should have just made sure of this during the offer negotiation.

6.2. Vacation

When I started working, it seemed that three weeks of vacation was standard, and I even had one job that provided six weeks a year. But like all other benefits, you can't take it for granted, anymore.

- The first console game developer I joined lowballed me on the salary, which distracted me from noticing that they only offered five days of vacation. And they were pretty stingy with those - even after working every weekend, they would deduct a half day if I was out for an afternoon (and yet still worked the evening)

Some advice I've received but have yet to apply - when you've finished negotiating your salary, also negotiate your vacation. Particularly if you've had a long work history - there's no reason you should start with an entry level amount of vacation.

6.3. Health

In the United States, it's a lot easier to lose health coverage than gain it, so this is one area where you should pay special attention. First of all, check that health benefits are indeed available, as technically speaking, companies are not required to provide it. And those that do, may not activate it immediately or may have certain restrictions.

- For example, worked at one company that had just spun off from a major consumer electronics firm and still carried the same benefit packages - however, the health insurance did not start until one month after the start date. I believe this is fairly common in the entertainment industry.

Make sure your previous coverage will last up to the beginning of your new coverage. Short-term policies are convenient for this situation, but don't waive or terminate your COBRA rights until you've established new insurance. If your new job falls through before your new coverage starts, you don't want to compound that problem by not having health coverage.

6.4. Know Your Worth

I remember in particular one piece of advice at Texas Instruments, my first job right out of college - "You would be a fool not to keep track of your market value." And this was from a distinguished computer engineer who'd been at that company for decades.

Industry salary surveys are a starting point, although the methodology is usually sketchy.

- For example, I saw in one issue of the popular Game Developer magazine salary survey that none of the programmer salaries in the survey exceeded \$200,000. Then if you read their explanation of the survey methodology, they note that they discarded all reported salaries over \$200,000. Which means what? Nothing.

And I suspect that survey results are skewed high - if you feel good about your salary you're more likely to respond to a survey than if you're low-paid or unemployed.

You may be willing to trade off salary for other aspects of a job, but keep in mind, when you take a pay cut, it may not be easy to make up that difference later. Employers tend to negotiate based on your most recent salary, not your highest previous salary. And while employers are quite willing to point out that economic times are slow, the job market is not good, and the cost of living in their area may be lower than others, they are not quite so enthusiastic about offering more when times are hot and they are based in an expensive area.

- The one time I took a significant pay cut for a new job, I regretted it. The decrease was even more significant if you consider the portion that was actually a signing bonus and returnable if I left the company for any reason during the first year, and if you count the markedly lower benefits. The company shares mentioned in the offer letter were conveniently forgotten by the employer, and the job turned out to be quite unpleasant. It didn't take me long to feel stupid - right after I joined, my new boss rattled on about how she was willing to pay twice as much for others she was trying to recruit.

So if you're taking a pay cut, be sure about what you're getting in return.

And (this is old news now since the dot com bust) don't do it just for the stock options.

- When I left PRI, I didn't bother to exercise the startup's pre-IPO shares, reasoning that the money was better spent on a Dreamcast (and it was). When I left Neomar, I did exercise

my options, but largely out of politeness - the stock certificate still sits on my wall today.

I will note, however, that employee stock purchase plans in a public company are a good deal. If always sell as soon as possible, you'll make a little something.