

The Opportunity Game: Presenting Yourself to Employers as a Great Candidate

Looking for employment? You're in good company. Lots of people are doing the exact same thing. Yes, it's competitive out there, but competition can get the adrenaline and excitement going. This is exactly what you need: a spark of enthusiasm, tenacity, optimism and a sense of adventure. This fact sheet covers some of the essential points made in our webcast.



QUESTION: What do I mean by "The Opportunity Game?"

ANSWER

Well, I mentioned competition. This implies a spirit of taking on a challenge that involves hard work, but is actually fun. Think of games you enjoy: video and board games, cards, sports, hobbies, and other leisure pursuits. All of these activities take brain power and effort. The same holds true for the job search--let's expand that to career search. After all, you are looking for more than employment; you want to find job opportunities that are part of a bigger life plan. When I use the word career, I like to think of it as everything that makes up our lives: employment, relationships, avocation/recreation, community participation and contribution, lifelong learning, spirituality, and health/well-being.

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Employment is a very important part of our lives -- think of the word "livelihood." We work to pay for the things we need and want, but we also work because it gives us a sense of purpose and identity --the pleasure of having a means to express our gifts and talents. Now back to the question. Opportunities are out there for you to find. That's the game part. Your mission is to track them down.

QUESTION: What exactly does "Career Development" mean?

ANSWER

This is an excellent question! There are libraries full of books on the subject of Career Development. Not to mention umpteen online resources. Let me take all that information and put it into a few words. Career Development is a continuous process, a lifelong process that involves:

1. Self-Awareness;
2. Awareness of Opportunities;
3. Exploration of Interest Areas;
4. Preparation; and
5. Employment History.

Notice I said "continuous" and "lifelong." That's because as we go through our lives, every experience we have leads to new discoveries, connections, insights and direction. Every experience we have builds on our past experiences, and we can look back and marvel at what we've created and accomplished.

QUESTION: How would I describe each career development component?

ANSWER

Let's start with self-awareness and ask a lot more questions.

Do you know what you do really well? How about fairly well? What are some things you'd like to learn to do, or get better at doing? These are skill areas, and they fall under many categories, like academics, physical/manual, technical,



artistic, social and others you might think of. There are many ways to acquire, build and improve skills: education and training programs, hands-on experiences, observing others in action, and talking to people. Most of all; we gain skills by diving into them.

Do you have interests (related to types of occupations, recreational pursuits, and personal mission)? Interests are what drive us; they motivate us to take action. If you don't have clear interests, it means you haven't done enough exploration, which we'll talk about in a minute. There are a lot of interest inventories out there that can get you thinking. Consider taking a few of these assessments. Google "How can I determine my career interests?" You'll be amazed at the things that pop up: Blogs. Tools. Resources. (Caution: when going to websites, realize that some are commercial ventures, and by clicking on their sites you may get inundated with unwanted advertisements. But you knew that already, right?)

Another key point is **your aspirations**. What do you want to accomplish in life? Think big, then medium, then small. My personal belief is that we need big dreams to excite us. Even if we don't reach our biggest dreams, the journey towards those dreams will yield unexpected paths to great things. I like to say "it's the detours and ditches that land us in awesome places." Don't worry about whether your aspirations and life goals are realistic. Just know that you have to work towards them and see what happens. Alexandra Dixon, a strong self-advocate, told me: "You have to have Plan A, B, C. And, remember there are 23 other letters in the alphabet!" (She is a professional navigator for the Affordable Care Act, and a staunch supporter of human rights who volunteers her time to many causes.)

All of us need to **know our limitations**. These are the things that we can't do, find hard to do, or want to do but haven't figured out how to do. Once we've identified these challenges, it's then time to strategize: What creative solutions can we try? Who can help us?

Knowing your interests, skills, aspirations, limitations and support strategies makes you self-aware.

Awareness of Opportunities

Let me be totally honest here. Some people can have an opportunity that falls in their lap (and it *does* happen from time to time!). Most of us have to work hard to find the opportunity. When it comes to finding the job you want, one that fits your goals, interests, skills and needs for support, there's no getting around it: research is crucial. Research sounds scientific. It can be. But it's also an art: here I mean using every avenue possible to see what's out there.

What companies and organizations need people like you that are in your local area (or elsewhere if you are open to relocating)? If you want to be in business for yourself, will there be enough customers to sustain your business? To find answers, get online. Search your local chambers of commerce. Go to the online Yellow pages. Dive into business websites. Go to the U.S. Department of Labor's O-Net website: www.onetonline if you want to blow your mind with resources. Jump into the rabbit hole of the many giant career search engines out there (they are too numerous to mention here, but for example, I mean sites like Indeed.com. Start by Googling "Career Search Engines").

There's an expression I use a lot: Exposure precedes interest. If you're one of the lucky ones who know exactly the career area you want to pursue, great. But if you're not sure, then you need to be open to exploring the possibilities. In addition to your cyber sleuthing, get out there and start talking to people. Find out what they do, how they got there, what they like and don't like about their work. Ask them a questions. Asking questions is one of the most powerful things a career seeker can do. Such as, "**Do you have any ideas, contacts, or leads for me?**"

This is a great segue into the next two career development components: Exploration of Interests and Preparation. Dr. Mike Ward (a professor at The George Washington University and one of the pioneers of the self-determination movement) puts it this way: "Every experience you have in life is valuable, even the tough ones. Learn from them." He also reiterates the importance of observing people in action and talking to everyone you can about their experiences.

If you want hands-on experiences that build skills that you can add to your resume, then get out and volunteer; find an internship (paid or unpaid); go to college or trade school; take advantage of the many new short-term certification programs that can prep you for amazing, high demand occupations. Where there's a will, there's a way (as they say). If you haven't talked to people in your local vocational

rehabilitation office, you should. Find out the services and resources they may offer. And don't get discouraged. If one representative doesn't give you useful information, then keep talking to other representatives. And be sure to scour your region for any and all organizations that can provide assistance to people with disabilities. Start with www.disability.gov and prepare to be wowed.

QUESTION:

How can you differentiate yourself from other job seekers? In other words, how can you stand out from the crowd?

ANSWER

It's like when you are playing a video game. In order to win, you have to stand out. Or like a great football player or entertainer, you have to be unique. This is good news for you, because you are already unique! No one else on the planet is YOU! So take advantage of this. Earlier I mentioned the phases of career development. If you know yourself, know what's out there opportunity-wise, have done your homework and prepared your skills set. It's time to **package and pitch** you! What does that even mean? Okay, it refers to things like putting together a **resume or bio** that:

1. paints a vivid and accurate picture of you;
2. is tailored to your targeted employer.

In other words do yourself a favor: even though it takes a lot of work, make sure the information on your resume matches what the employer needs. In these days of computer screening, key words will either get you to the next level in the process, or boot you out. So, take the time to customize your resume for every job application. Always ask a talented resume person to look over yours, to offer suggestions and point out those typos and awkward sentences that will have an employer rolling their eyes, or worse.

Let's talk about the dreaded **interview**. Trust me. You are not the only one in the world to dread an interview. But here's a little secret: most employers dread conducting them too! So we're all in the same boat. Denise Bissonnette says if you get an interview, the first thing to do is celebrate. You got the interview! Next you want to do everything you can to prepare. Denise says that when you get right down to it, the purpose of an interview is NOT to see if you can do the job. After all there are plenty of people who are interview stars, but lousy employees. The prospective employer wants to see if they think you'll **fit in with their team**. From Denise's perspective, you want to convey: I like this job and this company. I can do this job. If you hire me, you'll be glad you did.

Your goal is to **showcase your talents**. There are many ways to do this. Volunteer for an organization (or get an internship). If you have samples of your writing, projects you've done, artwork you've created and so forth – portfolios are a good way to go. In some cases, video clips may be appropriate. Consider designing sharp-looking business cards that you can easily distribute when you meet people. Some job seekers have actually developed personal websites. Don't forget the power of social media to ask for ideas, contacts and leads! Another word to the wise: social media and anything that you put on the web means exposure. Exposure can be great, and it can be extremely detrimental. Be very savvy when using these mechanisms for getting the word out about yourself and opportunities that you are seeking.

On the subject of talent, there's one that is often overlooked. I interviewed four professionals (all of whom have physical disabilities), and they said the same thing. They are natural problem-solvers. Their daily routines involve solving problems one after another, 24/7. And, employers are looking for people who are creative and can come up with solutions to one challenge after another. Play up this talent!

Another important topic we talked about is their view on **disclosure** of your disability. This is important. And it's also something that only you can decide how to handle. There are pros and cons to talking about your disability with a prospective employer. When, where, how, and to who (if at all) do you disclose? Two colleagues of mine share the belief that it's more advantageous to be totally upfront with people from the get go. For them, it's about putting people at ease, eliminating the surprise factor, being in control of the message ("Hey, I'd be great at this job. Here are some things that help me do the job."). More and more companies and organizations are actively recruiting people with disabilities. So, that's another reason to disclose. But, this is a very personal matter. Again, do your research; many resources await you. Remember: you're in charge of the message. If you decide to disclose, come up with a way to talk about your disability and accommodations in a way that feels right to you and will feel right to others. Practice your spiel until it feels totally natural and comfortable for you.

The Americans with Disabilities Act makes it illegal for employers to ask about disability, but let's be frank. They can't talk about it unless you bring it up. If you don't talk about it, and the result is discomfort on

all sides, chances are an employer will say they found a more qualified candidate. The old adage says “people do business with people they know, like, trust.” This is food for thought.

Do you use or need assistive technology (high, low or no tech) to do your job, take a class, get around, or communicate with others? Then be sure you locate and access all available resources. Here is something to consider: the fact that you can operate certain equipment and technical devices is yet another skill to include in your resume!

QUESTION: **How much time should you put into your job search?**

ANSWER

I have a feeling that you might not like the answer to this, but here goes: a lot more time than you think. A dear friend of mine, an employment professional I greatly admired, named Maggie Leedy used to put it this way. If you are unemployed and you are looking for a 40-hour a week job, you should be devoting 40 hours a week to your job search, 20 hours, 10 hours. You get the idea. Maggie was fond of saying: “Getting a job IS a job. Finding work IS work.”

QUESTION: **What does it take to have a successful career?**

ANSWER

Really the question should be: “What’s it take to be successful in life?” We could fill up a room with books on this topic! I framed the answer with an acronym: **TOPS**. Success in life depends on Talent (What do I have to offer the world?); Opportunity (What and where are they? What do I have to do to tap into the opportunities?); Planning (How do I organize my time to maximize my energy levels? For every goal, what steps do I need to take?); and Support (Who can assist/challenge me to persevere? Who can celebrate with me when I accomplish things, large and small? What resources are out there and how do I access them?)

QUESTION: **What are the most important things to remember from this fact sheet?**

ANSWER

We’ve only scratched the surface, but my intent was to hit some highlights. Perhaps the following thoughts will be useful to you.

- Do an honest inventory of what you have to offer employers or customers. What are your areas of real interest and expertise?
- Be honest about the assistance that you might need and find it.
- If your dream job requires it, get whatever education and training you need.
- If you don’t want to go back to school, figure out how to modify your career goals so you can still work in your field of interest. But if you find you have to switch your career area entirely that’s where Plans B through Z come into play.
- Find ways to really showcase your talents.
- Don’t just sit around and expect opportunities to fall out of the sky. Seek them out.
- Ask everyone you meet -- if they have any ideas, contacts or leads for you.
- You’re the one who gets to decide if, when, and how you’ll disclose your disability to a prospective employer. Figure out your strategy ahead of time.
- Identify your long term goals. Break them into manageable steps. Then take action.
- Surround yourself with champions and allies – people who believe in you, encourage you, give you ideas, contacts and leads – and who will challenge you to keep going.
- Celebrate every victory – no matter how large or small. Reward yourself when you accomplish a step in your personal action plan.

If you can master these critical steps -- you will be well on your way to presenting yourself to your chosen employers as a viable candidate. You’ll be promoting yourself as a great potential asset to their team – and ultimately – finding yourself a winner at the opportunity game.

Information for this fact sheet was developed for the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC) on Employment of People with Physical Disabilities at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU).

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