

Focus on Your Goals To Boost Job Prospects

*Even the best credentials can be overlooked
if employers don't know how you would fit in*

BY TAUNEE BESSON

Editor's note: This month columnist Taunee Besson addresses a common job-hunting problem. If you have a question or concern about your job search or career, send it to Ms. Besson at the National Business Employment Weekly, P.O. Box 300, Princeton, N.J. 08543-0300. All names are kept confidential. Although she can't answer all inquiries personally, she will address commonly mentioned concerns in her column.

I recently received a letter that began: "When I graduated from MIT in 1974 with an electrical engineering degree, my future appeared secure. Forecasters were predicting a strong demand for electrical engineers, managers and executives far into the future. I never would have expected, especially after obtaining a master's degree in management from MIT, that, at age 39, I would have been out of work for over a year and employable only at a wage substantially below that of new graduates with no work experience."

Jim started his career in 1974 as a "shirt-sleeve, plant floor" process engineer with an optical fiber manufacturer, and was promoted to manager of the process engineering department. Seven years later, he returned to MIT for his M.B.A. because he felt it would improve his career prospects.

After completing his degree, Jim was hired as a product engineering manager at a substantial increase in salary by a battery manufacturer with annual sales of \$1 billion. Eighteen months later, the company told him he would never make vice president. So he decided to look for a company that would reward his hard work with positions of greater responsibility.

Late in 1985, Jim helped structure a leveraged buy-out of a \$15 million educational science supply company, and became its vice president of operations and a board member. During his tenure, the firm's annual revenues swelled to \$48 million, but Jim was fired after questioning some large payments to the president and certain board members.

In May 1989 he began his job search, concen-

trating on opportunities within 100 miles of his home. (His wife has an excellent position as a vice president of marketing.) In January 1990 he broadened his search to include a triangle from Chicago to Atlanta to Boston. All told, Jim has sent letters to 200 retained search firms that concentrate on positions that best fit his work experience; sent resumes to 70 major venture capitalists in an effort to reach the almost 700 companies they invest in; networked with other MIT alumni and former business associates; and mailed an average of five to 10 resumes a week in response to ads in *The Wall Street Journal* and major metropolitan Sunday editions.

Responses have included: "Your 1983 master's degree is obsolete," "We promote all our managers

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from within . . . if you want a job with our company you'll have to start at the entry-level. However, we don't hire people with your experience at the entry level," "Your experience isn't in our industry," and "We get a lot of resumes from bright engineers, but we just don't hire them."

He also applied for a federal government position, but was passed over for a candidate with more government experience. Deciding the best way to obtain government experience was through a lower-level job, Jim interviewed for several positions paying \$15,000 to \$40,000 annually. No one would hire him.

Recently, General Motors Corp. offered Jim an entry-level position paying \$45,000 annually. When GM offers new M.B.A.s \$50,000 to \$55,000 a year to start, Jim can't help but wonder why his 13 years of experience is worth less.

Jim's career counselor says it may take another

year before he finds work at his previous level. The counselor has advised him to make his resume more technically oriented by deleting his master's degree and eliminating some managerial job titles.

While Jim's story is pretty disheartening, I can't agree with his counselor. Even if he convinces an employer that he wants a "focused" technical position, this course is fraught with peril. For instance, there's a good chance he might get in over his head technically. Engineers must stay current with state-of-the-art developments. As a vice president, Jim wasn't concerned with nuts-and-bolts technology.

Further, a potential employer would be skeptical that an MIT graduate with 13 years of experience would still be at an entry level. Even if he were hired, he'd never be placed on a management track. Jim's self-esteem would suffer and so would his career in the long-term. It's highly unlikely he'd make vice president at a firm he entered this way.

One of the fastest ways for professionals to derail their careers is to settle for less than they're worth. In fact, "settling" can prolong reaching your goals and destroy your self-esteem as well. Companies are smart to reject overqualified 18-wheelers when all they need is a pick-up truck. They realize that hiring a manager for a technician's role is a poor use of resources and a bad match for both parties.

While Jim may understandably feel rejected, he's discovered some universal truths. Large corporations rarely hire managers from the outside unless they're starting a new project or (shame on them) haven't cultivated in-house talent. If Jim wants a management position, small- to mid-sized growth companies are his best bets.

Consider Smaller Firms

Large companies, especially technically oriented ones, want to hire specialists. Smaller firms, however, need management generalists who can fill a variety of roles, see the big picture and enjoy overseeing a multitude of projects. Small companies also don't care as much about credentials. Instead, they're interested in your track record and ability to do the job. Collectively, they employ many more people than the Fortune 500.

Sending resumes blind to search firms, potential employers and in response to ads rarely helps job

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Ms. Besson, a bimonthly columnist, is president of Career Dimensions, a Dallas-based firm specializing in career development and job search programs for professionals and corporations.

Focus your goals

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hunters. Networking is far more effective, leading to 60% to 70% of available positions, most of which are never advertised.

By contacting fellow alumni and business colleagues, Jim has made a good start. He should increase this activity to include college professors, health club buddies, fellow parishioners, professional management societies, attendees at conventions and continuing education workshops, volunteer colleagues and anyone else who seems appropriate. Finding a position is a numbers game, but the numbers work best when you deal with people, not paper.

Jim also may have to think beyond Chicago, Atlanta and Boston to find what he's looking for. The New England states are in the doldrums, while Texas has become a magnet for high-tech business. Silicon Valley and the North Carolina Research Triangle also are faring well.

Positions at Jim's level are more difficult to find because they're at the top of the pyramid. To increase his chances, Jim needs to focus on his goal, then concentrate on creating a niche for himself. So far, he's looked for positions ranging from operations vice president and PC supervisor to physics lab manager and teacher. What does he really want? Until he figures this out and is prepared to confidently sell his unique talents and experience, he won't have many buyers. People don't trust or know what to do with chameleons. Which would you prefer? A high-tech generalist with a B.S.E.E. and M.B.A. from MIT and 13 years of on-line and managerial experience in high-growth, small- to mid-sized firms, or someone who says he can be whatever you need him to be?

Once Jim establishes his goals, he should research specific companies that might need his exper-

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tise. This can be accomplished through networking and reviewing professional journals, industry publications, local newspapers and so on. With his credentials and background he may even be able to create a job for himself.

Given that Jim's most recent experience was with a smaller firm, major corporations and the federal government may question his loyalty and fit in a large, less entrepreneurial environment. Movers and shakers aren't usually welcomed at GM. (Remember Ross Perot?) However, consulting firms that specialize in helping high-growth companies, business incubators and venture capital firms might

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value his unique combination of shirt-sleeve supervision and strategic planning skills.

I hate mentioning it, but another universal truth is that the private sector doesn't have much confidence in government experience. If Jim takes a federal job, he should probably plan on staying there. Fair or not, many business people believe that federal employees only know how to operate on a cost-plus basis.

Jim has much to offer, but he's been running around the forest and missing the tree. If he focuses on what he wants and changes his approach, he'll make some small- to mid-sized high-tech firm an excellent general manager. ●