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Become a Jeep® and Create Your Own Job Market

Getting a job is much like competing for market share. Auto makers, for example, strive to control a larger share of their market just like job-seekers contend with hundreds of other candidates for a position.

Where you encounter the fiercest amount of competition is where there exists the least amount of "dissimilarities," or distinguishing factors . Dodge® and Chrysler®, for instance, compete in the booming economy-car market yet their cars are very similar. Thus, they must turn to heavy marketing and promotion to distinguish themselves.

This scenario closely resembles the search for your first job out of college. Competition is brutal at this level. Why? "Because everyone looks the same on paper," says Ben Biba, Human Resources Manager at Bellcore. "You've all received the appropriate degree and, for the most part, none of you have experience."

Since you can't buy advertising like Dodge and Chrysler (well, you could, but how would decide on which billboard to post your resume?), you have to find some way to separate yourself from the competition. And that is by becoming a specialist.

Now, I know I sound contradictory right now and you are saying “how do I become a specialist if I’m like everyone else?” The answer, of course, is to NOT be like everyone else. Make yourself so unique that you not only eliminate the competition but you actually create a situation where there is no competition.

Let’s go back to our auto industry example to demonstrate this point. Specifically, let’s look at the manufacturer, Jeep®. Jeep is now part of the Daimler-Chrysler car conglomerate, but years ago, Jeep was an entity in itself. They were specialists in building all-terrain 4X4 trucks when no one had even heard of the phrase Sport Utility Vehicle. This “niche” that they created was so successful that Jeep never had to advertise. There was no reason to because there was NO competition and the company prospered.

So how do you become the Jeep of your job search? By creating a niche for yourself. No matter how insignificant you may feel it is, distinction among the masses is critical.

One way to stand out from the crowd is by having special aptitude for a skill that is desirable within the company. “If you’re going for a job at a consulting organization,” says Biba, “outstanding project management skills will definitely factor into the decision.”

Yet while being the best at a particular function will give you an advantage, it won’t create a niche. What I’m talking about is eliminating the competition and raising your value, right from the start. This is done by offering potential employers unique, special skills.

When I graduated from college with a combination business/journalism degree, I wanted to work in advertising as a writer. The competition for copy writing jobs is notoriously ferocious. But I was offered the first advertising job I went for – and at a more than competitive salary - because since I had a business degree (most writers are English majors), I could help with the business side of the agency while writing.

After two years of working at the agency writing, helping out in production, and even working with the agency's accounting books, I felt my portfolio had enough depth to start looking for a job just as a writer.

But I didn't give up my niche because now I was a writer who also had some business experience - a rarity in advertising . So what I could offer my next employer was not just proven writing skills, but business knowledge and the ability to better understand the agency's clients. I could read business plans, attend client meetings and offer strategic advice. Such unique skills helped me at that time but also for the future.

“Special skills will be rewarded, especially if the person is someone the company is grooming for bigger and better things,” says Chuck Day, an executive recruiter with The Stewart Group, Ponte Vedra Beach, FL. “It may not be reflected in the immediate, but the real value is realized come promotion time.”

My “niche skills” were rewarded quickly and handsomely. In the first two years at that job, my salary was increased over 100%; in other words, I doubled my salary in two years. How? Because my employer realized my value and that he was not going to find another “me” anywhere very easily. I had eliminated the other copywriters from competing with me.

So how do you start developing these special skills? By taking a backwards approach. In addition to focusing on skills the company values, identify skills you have a special talent for and see how you can showcase them while presenting yourself for a potential job. If you and another candidate were up for the same job and everything else was equal, the person who could shift into four-wheel drive would most likely get the job... metaphorically speaking, of course.