

When a Recruiter Calls (Or Not)

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By Jon Jacobs

We've talked about how candidates should work with recruiters. Here are some pointers about catching their eye and navigating around pitfalls in the relationship.

Recruiters tend to approach people who are visible in their industry. Avenues to visibility include having your name listed in professional directories, attending industry conferences, and cultivating relationships with people you meet in the course of work. Ron Blair, managing director at Century Group, an executive search and project placement firm based in El Segundo, Calif., suggests something even more basic: stay employed. "It's much harder for us to work with people that don't have a job," he says.

If you've been out of work for awhile, Blair advises taking on consulting projects. Beyond maintaining a degree of visibility, it will keep your skills fresh, show employers you haven't been sitting on your heels, and may even help you find a full-time job that you wouldn't have come across through a recruiter.

Take the Call

Even if you don't want to leave your present employer, you may still benefit from taking a recruiter's call. Recruiters can be good sources of information about conditions in your market. Plus, experts say, making connections with recruiters, like networking generally, is best done when you aren't seeking a new position. If you've already made a good impression, there's a better chance the recruiter will take *your* call if you need a new job somewhere down the line.

"Recruiters record what people say. We all keep a database," says Sandy Gross, managing partner at Pinetum Partners, a search firm in Greenwich, Conn. The message: Rejecting a recruiter's call outright can amount to burning a bridge.

To avoid misunderstandings, Gross says that first call should be used to establish some parameters. Before revealing anything about yourself, ask the recruiter who she might speak with about you. A recruiter working on contingency has an incentive to approach other employers besides the one they're calling about. Doing so without your knowledge can lead to big problems. "You always have to know where your stuff is going," says Gross, who once headed HR and recruiting within Amaranth Advisors, the multi-strategy hedge fund that was liquidated last autumn.

If you're currently employed, you should understand your firm's attitude toward job-hunting while working there, says Benjamin Normann, vice president at the Weatherly Group, a New York executive search firm. Although some Wall Street employers routinely fire people they catch looking elsewhere, Normann says others actually view it in a positive light: "They want to see that aggressive business mind-set."

For investment banking analysts, who in most cases are expected to leave after completing a two- or three-year program, some employers will actually facilitate a move. Others, however, won't want to know about it.

The initial contact with a recruiter is also a good time to clarify what your role is, so you won't be called in the future about situations that lie outside your area of expertise.

Don't Be Disappointed

If you do end up pursuing an opening through a recruiter, but later decide you're not interested, don't continue interviewing for it. Normann says candidates sometimes will keep the process going just to get practice interviewing. If you don't pull out until very late in the game, you might damage the recruiter's relationship with the employer they're working for. More important, you'll destroy your standing with both.

On the opposite side of the coin, if a recruiter seems to lose interest in you, keep things in perspective. If they decide not to submit you for a position or tell you that the employer gave a thumbs-down, it doesn't mean you're unemployable. All it means is you're not a perfect fit for that particular slot.

"Recruiters are not career counselors," says Ron Blair. "They're there to help companies find people. They're not there to help people find jobs."