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Taking Control of Your Job Search

Alan E. Willner advocates for an “ABC” approach to job hunting that maximizes opportunity and minimizes regret.

One of the worst feelings in life is regret—missed opportunities, paths not traveled. In job searching, one of the toughest things to do is to reject a mediocre job offer when you don’t have another, better offer waiting for you. Worse still is if you didn’t even get a chance to find out if that better company might want you.

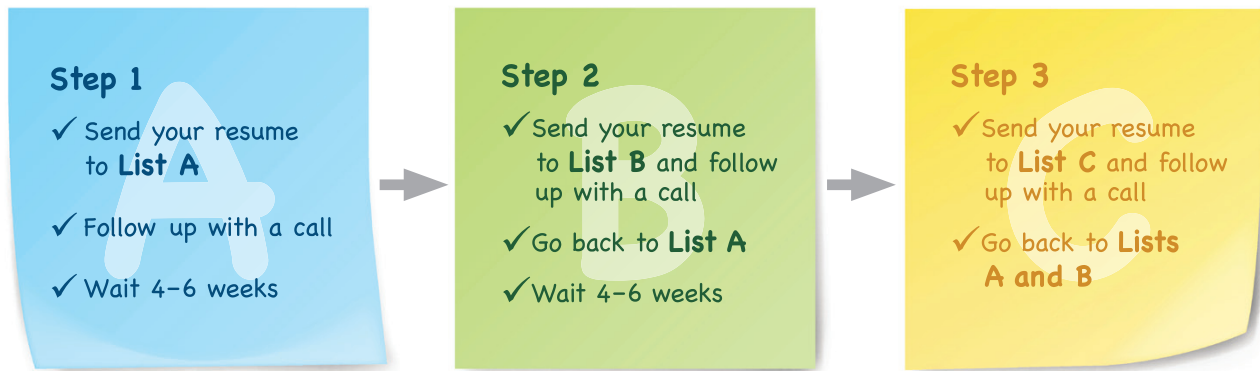
Having experienced and heard about numerous instances of this dilemma, I want to share an approach to job hunting that might be useful to OSA members at all career stages: maximize your opportunities and minimize your regret. Essentially, this approach tries to put the job seeker in more control of the time clock.

The nightmare scenario

First, let’s illustrate the nightmare scenario. You do all your homework—preparing a resume that puts your best

foot forward as well as a list of institutions to which you want to apply. After some trepidation, you hit “send” and email all the places on your list. You have now lost a lot of control, since your job search clock has started ticking. In your list of institutions, there are some places for which you would love to work, others that would provide a good opportunity to learn and be a stepping-stone to something better, and still others that you really don’t want to work for but that would be tolerable if nothing else came up.

Cue the nightmare—within a few days, a mediocre, tolerable institution calls you and wants to interview you. You don’t feel comfortable pushing them off without offending them (or without another interview scheduled), so you go to the interview. Within a few days, they make you a job offer and expect an answer within one week.



What now? You never even heard back from the institutions you really want to work for, and those places certainly can't interview you and make an offer within one week. Good luck turning down a mediocre job offer when you don't have a better one on the table. In my anecdotal experience, many people will accept the job for fear of not getting a preferable one—and the dilemma is a source of major anxiety and stress.

The ABCs

I have been advising my students over the past decade to take a different approach, one that tries to avoid the above problem and keeps some control over the process in the hands of the job seeker. I suggest making A, B and C lists of institutions to which you want to apply:

List A: Several institutions you would love to work for. If any gives you an offer, you can celebrate!

List B: A larger list of institutions for which you believe that working for them would be enjoyable and give you valuable experience. You could leave one of these in two to five years for something better aligned with your career goals.

List C: You don't want to work for them, but you need a job. If you

aren't happy there, you can always look for a better job in a year.

Now that you have your lists, take a three-step approach to the application process:

Step 1: Send your resume to List A. If you don't hear anything, follow up with a phone call. Give List A about four to six weeks to drum up support.

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Step 2: Send your resume to List B. If you don't hear anything, follow up with a phone call. Simultaneously, go back to the institutions on List A that you didn't hear back from, didn't give you a definitive "no" or said there was no opening. In all these cases, there is a viable chance that there was no internal opportunity at the time you applied, but something opened up over the past six weeks. Give List B and the second round of List A another six weeks to make something happen.

Step 3: Send your resume to List C, and (you guessed it) go back to Lists A and B to see if anything changed for the institutions that didn't give you a definitive "no."

Happy hunting

Following this approach will lessen the chance that you end up in a mediocre job without ever finding out if you could have nabbed that dream job. Ultimately, keep in mind two important issues. First, new employee slots in any institution open and close at seemingly random times, so timing is critical. And, second, many jobs never get posted, especially if job posters know potential candidates directly. Therefore, contact institutions even if they don't list a vacancy. You want to already be on someone's mind and get hired quickly, which saves the potential employer valuable time.

Good luck in your search! Hopefully, using the ABC approach, you won't be left wondering "what if?" about a dream job that you didn't have time to explore. **OPEN**

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