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Get to know your recruiter better

Don't just drop off your resume; work closely with headhunters to map out your career path

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You want a job, and they are the pros whose job is to get you the right one.

So you go to a recruitment agency with your resume, briefly meet one of its consultants and await the good news.

But that is not enough, especially in recessionary times, HR experts say.

If you want to make the most of a search firm when in need, get to know your recruitment consultant better - even before you have lost your current job.

"It is much like going to a family doctor. Someone who knows you and who you have been regularly seeing is in a better position to provide remedy when you're sick," said Mr Declan O'Sullivan, founder of Singapore-based executive recruitment firm Kerry Consulting.

"It's not just about finding an instant solution when one is faced with a problem. A good headhunter should work with you to identify a long-term career goal and plan the route to get you there," he said.

Besides the search firm's reputation, the quality of interaction between you and your recruiter matters too.

So tap the industry grapevine for highly favoured recruitment consultants and, if possible, get friends or colleagues to refer you to them, said Mr O'Sullivan.

And, given the current market where job seekers outnumber job vacancies, schedule regular follow-ups, ideally every four to six months, to keep your name fresh on your recruiter's mind.

Recruiters also have their ears closer to the ground in terms of hiring trends.

One more piece of advice: "The more, the merrier" approach when sending out resumes to search firms may backfire.

Sending out resumes to as many as 30 recruitment agencies, as some job seekers seem to do, risks losing credibility with prospective employers who may have received, and chucked out, repeated copies.

There are more than 2,100 employment agencies, Ministry of Manpower figures show. They range in size from branches of international chains with over 200 staff to two-man boutique start-ups.

Smart job seekers also do their homework by sussing out agencies which specialise in industries or roles they are looking to be in.

Agencies may be grouped into four general categories, said The GMP Group.

Perm and temp firms that place people in entry to junior levels such as administrative staff, secretaries and accountants, among others;

General recruitment firms that serve all industries, typically at junior to mid-levels of recruitment;

Specialised recruitment firms with focused areas of expertise such as banking, IT or advertising; and

Headhunting firms that can help secure high-level or unique positions requiring specialist skills.

In some instances, job seekers may want to leave their resumes exclusively with one recruitment consultant for, say, about one to two weeks.

Said Mr Dhirendra Shantilal, senior vice-president Asia-Pacific of search firm Kelly Services: "Applicants don't have to tell us how many other firms they have approached but if they are serious in their job search, it gives consultants the extra motivation because a successful placement reflects well on us."

This method is admittedly more common among senior-level candidates who require more confidentiality, and its success depends largely on the reputation of the search firm.

"If you have an exclusive arrangement with an average firm with which you don't have a deep professional relationship, then you may run the risk of being ignored," cautioned Mr O'Sullivan.

But this does not hold true across all firms, said The GMP Group's senior manager of corporate services, Mr Josh Goh.

"The ability of candidates to find jobs through agencies would count on candidates' experience and qualifications, and requirements of the clients too," he said.

Candidates can also increase their chances in this employers' market by tempering their salary expectations and staying open to taking up contract positions.

Recruitment firm Robert Half, which specialises in finance and accounting placements, said it has seen the number of contract positions go up by 400 per cent in the last three months.

Said its director, Mr Tim Hird: "We're advising candidates to look at the breadth and scope of the role and whether it will make them more marketable in the next two years when the economy picks up, rather than just looking at pay alone."

In boom years, companies would see about two to three candidates for each position and hire before a good potential gets snapped up, said Kelly Services' branch manager, Ms Connie Chua.

Now companies ask to see about six to 10 candidates per vacancy and take much longer to make hiring decisions.

"Besides cost factors, employers are afraid to hire people who are taking up the job only to tide through the bad times because if it doesn't work out in the long run, it could be more costly for the firms," said Ms Chua.

But the current tough times have also made some of the work easier for consultants, at least when it comes to candidates' demands.

"Previously, we've had job seekers reject offers because they didn't want to travel from their home in Jurong to Clementi for work. Now candidates are much less picky," Ms Chua said.

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