

NO SILVER MEDALS

THE EXECUTIVE CONNECTIONS CAREER DEVELOPMENT GUIDE





When it comes to getting jobs there are no silver medals.



You either get the job, or you don't. There might be twenty or just two applicants, but there is only one winner. You can kid yourself you came close, but companies take great care in letting people down gently. And if you aren't disappointed at not getting a position, you should seriously question as to whether or not it was the right opportunity for you. It's black and white. You either win or you lose. It's not the taking part that counts, it's winning the job.

Hence this document. *No Silver Medals* has been distilled from many years recruitment experience as well as an ongoing survey of employers designed to identify what differentiates one candidate from another when it comes to choosing someone for a particular job, i.e. the difference between winning and losing.

In the hunt for the best jobs, the competition is fierce, but really understanding the recruitment process, particularly through the eyes of employers and recruitment consultancies, can give

candidates a competitive advantage. This is what *No Silver Medals* sets out to do. It's a comprehensive guide which covers each step of an ideal recruitment process, paying special attention to both the employer's and the consultancy's perspective, and offers advice on how best to tackle each different stage.

You may be familiar with some of what this document covers, although it's always useful to review certain key principles, but because of the depth of the client feedback we have received, I would venture to suggest that no one who reads this document will fail to find something new, something which could make a real difference to the success of his or her own job-hunting strategy.

I hope it does make a difference and wish you every success as you develop your career. If there's anything I or any of my colleagues can help you with, please don't hesitate to get in touch. Good luck.

David Hughes
Managing Director
Executive Connections Group

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Where does it all begin?

It begins now, right this minute. If you are not already planning your career, you need to start. That doesn't necessarily mean moving jobs, it might not mean a move for a number of years but it does mean that you need to start managing your career.

Managing your career involves knowing where you want to go and what you need to do to get there, and being able to manage the process and make the right decisions along the way.

Identifying a career path is crucial for five key reasons:

1. It will help you *objectively assess your current role and prospects, which may either raise issues that you need to address or simply reassure you that your career is well on course.*

2. It will put you in a *much stronger position to negotiate the development of your career within your company at your next appraisal or review.*

3. It means you *won't be taken by surprise if your role suddenly changes, as can happen with internal restructuring or a takeover or merger, as you will instantly be able to assess the impact of the changes on your career strategy.*

4. It will enable you to *fend off approaches from consultants or companies who are more interested in serving their own ends rather than understanding your career goals.*

5. It will enable you to *objectively assess different opportunities, both internal and external against your career map.*

When we talk about a career map or plan, it is

important that we recognise the need for flexibility. You may not know exactly where you want to go but you will almost **certainly** know where you don't want to end up. A good plan will leave several options open but eliminate the possibility of you ending up in the wrong place. Your plan may be adapted, modified or otherwise altered over time to suit your changing career needs, but you still need a plan.

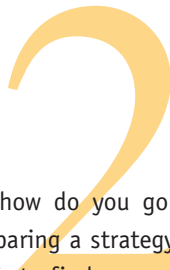
Once you have a plan, you need to review it regularly. Both accountancy and the job market are changing so fast that you need to manage your career on an ongoing basis. A very good practice to follow is to undertake an annual career review, along with a briefer six monthly reassessment of your strategy.

You can conduct the review yourself, or with a recruitment consultant you trust, and the six monthly check could simply be a conversation either with a mentor or again, a good consultant: it's up to you, but you need to work out how you are going to monitor your career and start doing it now.

Bear in mind that a good recruitment consultancy will look to build a long term relationship with you, and will be quite happy to offer an impartial perspective on your career progress, so don't be afraid to ask.

As we said when we started, reviewing your career is not about moving; it's about putting yourself in the best position to make the right career decisions. So even if you are very happy where you are, it begins now.

Let's now look at how you set about identifying your goals and preparing your strategy.



Setting goals and preparing a strategy

So how do you go about identifying goals and preparing a strategy? The first thing you need to do is **to find a source** of specialist advice, for the simple reason that if you don't, you will only be able to consider options with which you are currently familiar. One source of such specialist advice is a recruitment consultancy, but whichever source you choose, you will need to do the following in order to prepare your strategy:

1. Make a list of possible goals

Start by making a list of all possible goals open to you. For example, do you want to use your accountancy skills as a springboard into general management or as a passport into a specific industry? Do you want to be a Financial Director or a Senior Partner in a worldwide practice, or do you eventually want to set up your own business? The list goes on, as each possibility branches out into more different options. For example, if you want to be a FD, what type of company do you want to work for, etc.?

Even though many positions may not appeal, the more exhaustive your initial list is the better.

2. Gather information

Once you have your list, find out as much as you can about what each option entails. Here a specialist advisor can really save you time.

3. Work out the pros and cons

Use the information to make a list of pros and cons for each of the options. Do it for all the options, even the ones which appeal least.

4. Narrow the list down

Next, narrow the list down. To do this, you may need more information. It's a good idea to talk to people currently performing the roles you wish to find out more about. Your consultancy should be able to help if you don't know anyone personally.

Ask detailed questions about what the role entails and check that the responsibilities match what you are looking for. If it involves managing people, ask how much time is spent managing and what the best and worst things about that are. If the attraction of the role is its strategic input into a company's business direction, find out how much involvement the role would carry. Only when you know exactly what a job entails can you decide whether or not it's right for you.

5. Work out the requirements

Now that you have identified a number of roles in which you are interested, work out what kind of people get those roles and consequently, what is required. Looking at job and person specifications for the positions in question is a good place to start. For example, an MBA can be a prerequisite for certain positions in many American corporations. If you don't possess the relevant skills or characteristics already, ensure that you can acquire them along the way.

6. Assess the likely competition

Playing football for England might be a great goal, but if you're past 20 and not playing for a major club already, the chances of you achieving it are somewhere between slim and none. Career goals need to be realistic, even optimistic, but not idealistic.

It can be hard, but you need to understand what you are really capable of. What are your strengths and weaknesses?

Discounting impossible or extremely difficult options doesn't mean you can't choose a high risk strategy. For example, going into a smaller company where you will get much greater exposure to senior management can result in a sink or swim situation - it can be highly successful but it does carry the risk of failure. Only you can decide if taking such a risk is right for you.



7. Choose your goals

Now it's time to make some decisions, although, provided you understand the implications of the choices you make, you needn't sacrifice flexibility.

For example, if you have just qualified and can't decide between specialising in tax or moving into a financial accounting role in commerce, it is worth considering the long term implications of both moves. Taking on a more general role may make it more difficult to specialise in tax later in your career. However, if your long term plans involve a move into financial analysis, a financial accounting role may prove to be a good stepping stone.

You can still retain a great deal of flexibility but you do need to make some choices.

8. Identify your strategy

Now that you know where you want to go, you need to decide how you are going to get there. Just as there are different routes on a map to arrive at the same destination, there are different strategies which can also help you reach the same career goal. Only after evaluating these strategies can you choose the right one for you.

Let's consider the following different strategies to arrive at the same goal:

Imagine you are a recently qualified accountant and wish to become the FD of a £40-£50m turnover business (either a private company or a subsidiary of a plc), by the time you are 35-40. Here are four possible ways you could get there:

Route 1 (the traditional route)

First you move into a line finance role in an appropriate company, then up the career ladder within the finance team until you reach your goal. This strategy may involve changing employers before your final promotion to FD.

Pros

- Solid grounding in finance by the time you become FD
- Easy to follow, predictable career route

Cons

- Possibly limited commercial and strategic business experience
- Longer term perception as 'purely an accountant' could limit later career moves

Route 2

First you move into internal audit for 12-24 months, then into finance where you follow the traditional route as per route 1. (albeit at a faster pace).

Pros

- Many audit teams are now so commercial that the experience gained at the front end of the business is first class
- As per route 1

Cons

- None to speak of although most newly qualified accountants (especially ACAs) wrongly perceive internal audit as being akin to external audit - in most cases it couldn't be more different

Route 3

Initially you move as per routes 1 or 2, followed by a move into general management of a business. You return to finance at FD level after 2-4 years.

Pros

- Gain an in depth understanding of the business
- Creates a highly marketable CV

Cons

- Difficult to achieve and realistically will only occur as a result of internal moves within a company



Route 4

Initial move into corporate finance (CF) or venture capital (VC), where you are exposed to many entrepreneurial businesses. After a number of years you move directly into an FD slot.

Pros

- Outstanding commercial experience (although less so for the first year or two in CF)
- Great opportunity to build up network of contacts

Cons

- Notoriously difficult to get into. Outstanding academics a must and, particularly in the case of VC, specialised CF experience essential

These routes are not exhaustive and there is no “right answer”. Some routes will be quicker than others, some will be safer and some will appeal

more to certain individuals than others. A decision can only be made after careful consideration of an individual’s situation, attitudes, abilities and goals, but this example is indicative of the variety of routes which will be on offer. Work out what they are and choose the one you feel most comfortable with.

9. Accept that your goals may change

Accepting that your goals will change is very important. This could be the result of personal or family factors, or changes in the industry, or changes in the economy or even an unforeseen event. The best way to deal with change is to see it positively and grasp the opportunities it presents, rather than to resist it.

Having identified a strategy, let’s now look at implementing that strategy. First we will consider additional ways in which you can arm yourself for the selection process which lies ahead.



Arming yourself

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Once you've formulated your strategy, you will be aware of the technical skills you will need to acquire to reach to your goal. In addition to those skills, here are some other factors you should also be aware of:

Contacts

Many people fail to recognise how valuable contacts can be. From an idealistic viewpoint, contacts are unnecessary - your qualifications, skills, experience and abilities are the only determining factors, but the world isn't that simple. Our whole world is structured around complex human interactions, so it makes sense that interpersonal skills and the ability to communicate effectively are just as important as sound technical skills.

Don't become one of those people who end up rueing the fact that they didn't cultivate contacts when they were younger, unable to appreciate their value until late on in their career. Think of making contacts as the business equivalent of making friends and ask yourself - would you rather meet someone at random or someone a friend has said he is sure you will like? It's a similar process.

It also goes some way to explain why a substantial proportion of financial jobs are never advertised, but instead are filled via the contacts (candidates) already known to the clients' contacts (recruitment consultancies). Knowing who you are dealing with really does matter.

So don't be afraid to network and make contacts - peers in the profession, friends of friends in the profession, clients, industry figures, members of professional bodies and recruitment consultants; all have something to offer and any one of these people could make a real difference to your career.

Memberships and additional qualifications

In addition to being great sources of contacts, professional bodies offer a number of other advantages. For example, serving on an industry or professional body, or even an internal committee is viewed favourably by most potential employers and gaining additional qualifications, even though they may not be essential to the route you are following, can again serve to demonstrate real interest in certain areas.

However, it would be counterproductive to devote time and energy to something in which you are not interested, so

don't dive in without thinking in an attempt to score a few more points. It's extremely unlikely that you won't be able to find something which will be helpful to you in career terms, even if the only thing which interests you is becoming a member of an internal social committee. When you are looking to gain an extra advantage over the competition, it's worth considering anything that might help.

Additional skills

Although not always essential, certain additional





skills can weigh heavily in one candidate's favour over another's for certain types of job. For example, if you are looking for a job in a foreign speaking country, knowing the language could make all the difference. Equally, even if you don't speak the language concerned, being able to speak a different language is a good indication that you are likely to pick it up more quickly than someone who has never studied languages at all. With the increased globalisation of so many companies, languages are extremely useful.

Developing basic skills

As you look for a new job, your potential employers are looking to buy quality of experience. They may have several candidates with the requisite technical skills, but the key

question is what have they done with them?

You should be looking to develop your skills at every opportunity and this should be a key part of every review you make. Ask yourself how often your current job can be developed or restructured to help you build your experience. The possibilities are amazing, but equally amazing is the frequency with which possibilities go unexplored simply because people don't ask these questions. Manage your career, don't just let it happen.

If you're serious about your career, you should be doing all of the above, whether you're considering changing jobs or not. When the time comes that you are ready to think about moving, how do you go about it? Let's now look at this process, beginning with your CV and covering letter.



CVs and covering letters

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Whether applying for a specific vacancy or contacting a recruitment consultancy to discuss opportunities generally, you will need to provide a CV. And even if it's not requested, you should never send out your CV without a covering letter.

The objective of a CV and covering letter

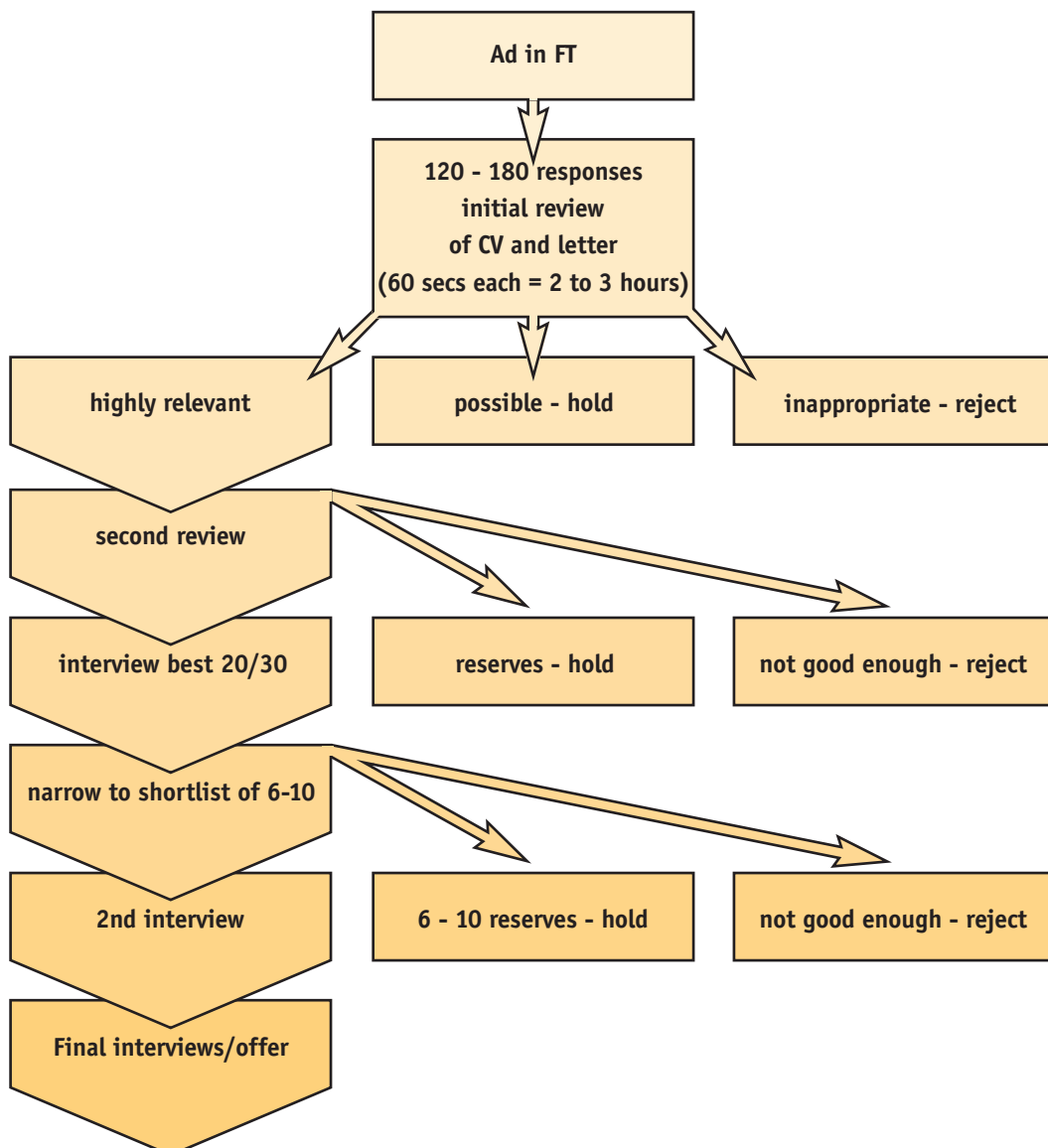
The objective of sending a CV and covering letter is to get an interview. It is not to get the job. Your CV and covering letter should present you so that recruitment consultancies and

prospective employers will want to meet you.

How your CV is received

Before considering how to present your CV, it is important to recognise how it will be received by a recruitment consultant or prospective employer.

In a nutshell, although you may have spent hours preparing and crafting your CV and covering letter, the person receiving it will usually only give it about 60 seconds. To understand why, look at this flow diagram:





Hopefully the implications of this are clear. Even at 60 seconds per CV, skim reading 180 CVs is three hours work. If something isn't clear, the reader won't struggle to work it out. Often, what makes one CV stand out from hundreds of others is simply clarity and sharp focus.

A good CV is punchy, simple and easy to read. That said, if you can write/add something interesting which makes the reader stop and take note, it can alleviate the boredom and make your CV more memorable. A good example of this came in a CV we recently received where the candidate explained that he had taken six months off work to build his own house: we saw this as interesting, honest, demonstrating good organisational and management skills, and evidence that the candidate accomplishes goals. Think about it.

Following the clues

Normally when you submit a CV, you are responding to an advertisement, mailshot or direct approach and that will always contain clues as to how to respond. For example, if an ad asks for strong negotiating skills, you should pick that up, play it back and evidence it. Here are a couple of ways in which this could be done:

1. Covering letter - "Ever since I assisted in organising XYZ's annual conference by identifying appropriate venues and facilities providers, I have always enjoyed the give and take of good negotiation."
2. CV - "The role depended on the successful negotiation of..."

If you get it right, the reader can tick the boxes. If you miss a clue, one box might go unticked, which could mean you get rejected. Don't miss the clues. And don't hide your light under a bushel - ensure that your CV and covering letter are written so even

a non-expert will recognise your appropriateness. If something is absolutely crucial, give more than one example so it can't be missed.

Finally, if you do not possess something positioned as crucial, you have two choices. You can either not bother applying, or you can tackle the issue directly, perhaps by saying in your letter that you recognise you don't currently have this skill but that you would devote time to acquiring it should they be positive about the rest of your application. You'd be surprised at how many points this approach might score.

All about rejecting rather than accepting candidates

It is important to understand that usually the task of selecting a shortlist for interviews is done by a process of elimination by rejecting rather than accepting CVs. People rule out what's inappropriate and then they worry about what's left. Bear that in mind when you put together your CV and covering letter. And remember that because many candidates might have similar skill sets, presentation and the quality of the communication may be the only differentiating factors.

Tone

With CVs and covering letters, the tone is crucial. You should come across as being polite and bright, not arrogant and smart, friendly not chummy, professional not stiff. If in doubt get someone you respect to give you an objective opinion.

Also, use words and phrases you feel comfortable with - it works against you if the interviewer expects to meet one type of person but meets another. Be yourself, and be honest. Your work history, qualifications and references may be thoroughly checked, so if you try to pull the wool over someone's eyes, you could get caught out and it could have serious repercussions.



A final thought

Preparing a CV can be a good idea even if you're not looking for a job, as it can help to crystalise whether or not your career is developing as it

should be. When you've drafted your CV, ask yourself if it is as impressive as you would wish, and if not, what you can do to strengthen it. Here's a checklist which might be of help:

CVs - a checklist

1.	Your CV should be typed and printed on good quality white paper, in a standard typeface, (size 10-12) with no boxes and no shading.
2.	Make sure your CV is up to date.
3.	Never write in the 1st or 3rd person - CVs should contain facts, not subjective opinions.
4.	Don't omit anything or try and hide anything as people will assume the worst. For example, if you don't mention your degree class, people may assume that you actually did less well than you did.
5.	Length should be 2-3 pages - neither too long nor too short. Every word must serve a purpose and it should appear short and sharp. Equally it shouldn't miss out any key skills or abilities that readers with a specific check list might be searching for, e.g. SAP, consolidations, activity based costing, etc. So trim harshly but within reason.
6.	Tailor your CV to the target you are sending it to. For example, send a full, general CV to a recruitment consultancy, so they understand all your skills and abilities, but focus on what is absolutely relevant when applying for a specific job directly.
7.	Make sure your CV is tailored to the position you are going for, not your current role.
8.	Remember a CV is a selling tool not a list and what sells you is quality recent experience. So make sure you focus on selling your achievements, not listing your duties.
9.	Be aware that achievements are about what you did - not about simply being part of a team.
10.	Concentrate on quality not quantity of achievements.
11.	List work experience in reverse chronological order, followed by academics in reverse chronological order.
12.	Remember superb academics are not necessarily a great differentiator amongst accountants.
13.	Always include years and months and explain any gaps.
14.	If you have frequently changed jobs, explain why.
15.	Include interests in the CV you send to an employer or recruitment consultancy - but be brief.
16.	Don't include anything contentious which could polarise opinion - people who read CVs often look for the 'but...'
17.	Don't include a photograph - it will not add anything to your CV.
18.	Don't include references, but do state that they are available on request.
19.	Reread your CV several times before sending it. Ask yourself how you can improve it still further. Get someone whose opinion you respect to review it.
20.	E-mail or post your CV to ensure quality, or if you must fax it, always send a hard copy to follow as well.
21.	Always type check your CV. Typographical errors will stand out like a beacon to an experienced reviewer.



And here's a similar checklist which covers the best way to handle covering letters, after which,

armed with CV and ready to tackle covering letters, we can set about sourcing opportunities:

Covering letters - a checklist

1.	Never underestimate the importance of the covering letter - it is part of your CV and will be circulated with it.
2.	Your covering letter should earn readership for your CV by reconciling it with the job in question i.e. it must always be personalised and enthuse the reader about you.
3.	It should be as factual as possible - subjective views on your own greatness count for nothing, whilst evidence of ability is everything.
4.	It should be no more than half a page long - ideally a dozen lines. Make it short, sharp and to the point, don't be tempted to say too much.
5.	Unless your handwriting is exceptional, type it, on quality paper with a good printer.
6.	Ensure the spelling of the names and the address are correct.
7.	If your CV isn't the strongest, the covering letter is an opportunity to lift it, e.g. "I recognise that my academic record leaves something to be desired but I do have x,y,z excellent experience and would relish the opportunity of telling you more about it face to face." This shows you are confident and know your strengths and weaknesses and it starts to give the reader the ammunition to sell you to others.
8.	Always conclude your letter with what you expect to happen next, e.g. in a letter to a recruitment consultancy: "I will call you in a couple of days so we can talk about any opportunities you have which you think might be suitable for me."
9.	Essentially a covering letter to a recruitment consultancy should present your CV, say what you are doing currently, and what you're looking to do, then prompt them to call.
10.	If you can evidence quickly and succinctly that you have done some research into either the job on offer or the company in question, that can really help, e.g. "As you mentioned on your website...".



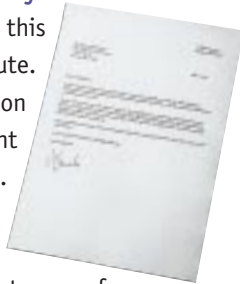
How to source opportunities

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So how do you set about looking for a job? Here are your five most likely options with a discussion of the pros and cons of each:

1. Contacting companies directly

Although it might seem ideal, this is by far the most difficult route. For a start, you are relying on sending your CV to just the right person at just the right time. What are the odds of that? Furthermore, most major companies realise the importance of effective, planned recruitment and either use recruitment consultancies or handle it internally, but in response to specific needs.



Even if your CV does reach the right person at the right time, you're still likely to be competing with candidates who have been personally recommended by a consultancy your potential employer trusts or by someone in the company. You can't base a serious job-hunting campaign on this strategy alone.

2. Surfing the net

The internet has an increasingly important part to play in helping job hunters source potential opportunities. How to use the internet to best effect as a part of your job hunting strategy, is an entire subject in itself, which has inspired the Executive Connections Group to produce *Mouse Hunting* - the definitive guide to recruitment on the web, which covers everything from how to source opportunities on the web to how to write a web CV.



For a free copy of *Mouse Hunting*, please email mousehunting-nsm@executive-connections.co.uk

With regard to sourcing opportunities, as *Mouse Hunting* explains, many of the best opportunities never get advertised on the web, so it would be dangerous to place all your eggs in one basket by relying on the web alone to source opportunities.

3. Advertising

Scanning financial job ads can be very effective. People don't pay money to advertise unless they are serious about recruiting, so it's well worth keeping an eye on the financial press. Generally advertisements for specific positions will fall into two categories - those where companies are advertising direct and those placed on behalf of an employer by a recruitment consultancy.



In addition you will also come across composite or showcase advertising by a recruitment consultant where they may detail a number of positions in one advertisement. Here it's worth remembering that the jobs a recruitment consultancy advertises will almost certainly be just a fraction of the jobs on their books, so you should take the advertised jobs as indicative of the types of jobs they have on offer and contact for more opportunities, even if you don't see exactly what you are after in their ads. But, as contacting a recruitment consultancy is covered in point 5 below, we will concentrate here on a direct response to an employer.

The benefit of contacting a potential employer directly is primarily speed, although this is often more a psychological phenomenon due to you handling things direct than the fact that things are actually moving faster. This needs to be weighed against a number of downsides:



- i As we said earlier, most finance jobs are never advertised - instead they are filled by using recruitment consultancies who can very quickly generate a shortlist of people with the right technical skills, as well as the personal attributes an employer is seeking. So if you rely on direct ads, you will severely limit the number of opportunities you will cover.
- ii Because a direct response only appears on paper and isn't presented or introduced via personal contact, responses to ads are 'cold' applications. This doesn't mean they will be less successful as a result, but they don't have the advantage of personal recommendation from an intermediary.
- iii If you respond to an ad, you take all responsibility for researching the opportunity yourself and it can be very hard to get information on things like the background of the person who will be interviewing you etc.

4. Mailshots

All of the above comments about responding to ads apply equally to mailshot responses, with one key difference - whereas ads are fairly easy to source, it's very hard to rely on finding the right kind of jobs via mailshots. If the right job suddenly materialises via this route, that's great, but you certainly wouldn't base your job search strategy on this route alone.

This also applies to approaches from headhunters - the ideal job certainly could come along this way, but if you have reached the point where you need to move to advance your career you can't simply wait for the phone to ring.



5. Contacting a recruitment consultancy

You may have a good, bad or indifferent view of recruitment consultancies, and there are certainly good, bad and indifferent consultancies out there, but the facts speak for themselves: In the financial marketplace, over 90% of vacancies are filled by recruitment consultancies. Working with a good recruitment consultancy is probably the best way to source the right kind of opportunities.



Before we talk about recruitment consultancies in more detail in the next section, let's quickly clear up one potential confusion - the way in which consultancies make money.

Because recruitment consultancies provide a service which saves their clients time and money they receive a fee (usually a pre-agreed percentage of starting salary). The money does not come out of the candidate's salary, nor is it linked to it in any way other than by amount. Normally a division's salary budget and recruitment budgets are entirely separate. There is no financial penalty to you as a candidate for using a recruitment consultancy.

Furthermore, because their fees are usually based on starting salaries agreed, it is in a consultancy's interest to get the candidate the best possible deal.

Consultancies can be very useful, but please note that your application can be significantly affected by the consultancy you use, both positively and negatively, so you really do need to choose your consultancy with care.

The next section looks at how to pick the right recruitment consultancy.



Picking the right recruitment consultancy

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The importance of your choice of recruitment consultancy cannot be over-emphasised - the consultancy you use may have an impact on your entire career. For example, imagine you are using a poor consultancy. A great role comes up and the employer picks up the phone to the consultancy he most respects and trusts, which isn't yours. They agree to send over CVs of a number of candidates they think would be ideal. Unless all of them fail and the employer eventually extends his resources to include the consultancy you are using, which is unlikely, you have no chance.

Even if your consultancy hears about the role and calls the client, whether or not the client will even look at your CV depends strongly on what he or she thinks of the consultancy and the consultant who calls them. If they don't rate them, they don't rate you. Simple as that.

In a nutshell, when you work with a consultancy, you're trusting them with your career - don't invest such trust lightly.

There are nearly 20,000 employment agencies in the UK and they vary from excellent to truly appalling. You, as an accountant, are trained to make decisions based on factual information, so apply this principle to your choice of consultancy. Find out as much about them as possible, interview them just as they interview you, then think carefully before agreeing to let them represent you.

Here are some tips on how to go about finding a consultancy worthy of your trust:

1. Never forget your recruitment consultancy represents you. If it doesn't present you well, you won't get interviews. Be extremely careful when choosing.

2. Before selecting a consultancy, find out who their clients are, talk to other candidates who have used them, and get as much information as you can.

3. Remember your first interview is with the recruitment consultancy, and it starts the moment you pick up the phone. So be prepared. Note how they deal with the initial contact. What are your first impressions of them?

4. Don't work with a consultant you haven't met unless circumstances make a meeting impossible. Insist on an interview and take the opportunity to interview them. Assess them, hard, and make sure you ask them how they can help you develop your career.

5. Don't be rushed into a decision. Make sure you're convinced of their commitment and capabilities.

6. Once you have agreed to let a consultancy represent you, note that there is no contractual obligation between a candidate and a consultancy. The contract is between the consultancy and the company recruiting, and only comes into force when an introduction is affected. And introduction means an interview, not the sending of a CV.

7. Once you've chosen your consultancy, consider giving them an exclusive period before approaching others. This will ensure that they devote maximum energy to your search, as well as avoiding the possibility a potential employer could receive your CV from more than one source. If you decide to use other consultancies after this exclusive period to increase the number of potential opportunities you are covering, three is an absolute maximum and two are better than three.



8. A good consultancy will always ask permission before sending your CV, so you can control where it goes. Insist on this control. Consultancies who are comfortable with such standards will probably be members of the REC (Recruitment and Employment Confederation) whose code of conduct specifically demands as much.

9. Once your CV has been sent out, hopefully interviews will follow. Now the consultancy can really make a difference. Those with the strongest client relationships will be able to brief you best. This will include verbal and written information, as well as advice on interview technique if appropriate. If you don't get a good briefing, demand one, or consider moving consultancies.

10. A good consultancy will have close working relationships with their clients so will be able to influence employers on your behalf.

11. A good consultancy will also help you handle negotiations with both your existing employer

and potential employers, to minimise the hassle involved in moving jobs.

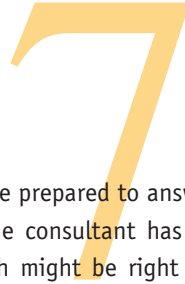
12. If the relationship isn't working, insist on a meeting to discuss the issues. Then do one of two things: either stop working with them, or offer them the chance to make the necessary changes to make it work.

Follow these guidelines and you should end up working with an excellent consultancy. If you do, don't lose them, keep in contact even after you've happily settled into your new job. A good consultancy will always be looking to build long term relationships - today's candidates are tomorrow's clients - and will be more than happy to continue offering you career advice and information, irrespective of whether or not you have any intention of moving. This will ensure you're always up to date with the job market, i.e. in a position of strength.

Right, now the background work is done, you need to start presenting yourself.



Presenting yourself



Presenting yourself is not only about face to face contact. You present yourself every time you pick up the phone, put pen to paper, send an e-mail or meet someone. You present yourself every time you communicate, which has a number of implications for the recruitment process.

For a start, you must take every piece of communication seriously - from sending back a reply card to picking up the phone - as it makes a statement about you. For example, consider the recruitment consultant wading through all sorts of reply cards responding to a mailshot. Suddenly he or she comes across one which, unlike the others is neatly written, easy to read and bears a few words... "Dear X, I'm very keen on this particular opportunity and hope to hear from you soon." Immediately it goes to the top of the pile as it shows you are definitely interested, polite and not shy about communicating.



That said, you also need to be prepared to answer some initial questions. If the consultant has an immediate opportunity which might be right for you, they may wish to ask some questions before seeing your CV. So be prepared to explain your background and experience concisely and know why you are leaving your current job, and what you are looking for.

Too many candidates are unclear about their reasons for wanting to change jobs. When asked the question, instead of saying something like:

"I've now got to a point where I've developed x,y,z, skills, but need to broaden the application of those skills or acquire new skills and it's very difficult to do that at Company X."

They simply say:

"It's time to move on."

Equally, your first telephone call to a recruitment consultancy is key. So many candidates think all they have to do is pick up the phone and ask what jobs are on offer, but put yourself in the recruitment consultant's position. He or she may have hundreds of vacancies on the database. In order to work out which might be suitable for you, amongst other things they need know about your career history to date, i.e. they need to have a look at your CV, so you shouldn't be surprised that they start by asking for a copy. It's not because they are immediately going to send it out left, right and centre, they simply need to see it to be able to help you.

If you anticipate this, offer to send your CV and suggest calling back to discuss it, you will get off to a really good start.

The impression is that they haven't given the matter much thought and may not be serious about moving. Consequently, they shouldn't be surprised that they are not a high priority for a consultant who has a lot of clear thinking candidates who are serious about moving.

If you are not sure why you want to leave and what you are looking for, call a consultancy for a general chat. Tell them what you want in your career, then ask for their perspective. Ask them what they would be thinking if they were in your position etc., but then put the phone down and work out what it is you want to do before taking things to the next stage.

The point is, the first telephone conversation is



very important, so be aware. If you do work with the consultant you are speaking to, they will need to sell you, so you need to sell yourself to them - the more enthused they are the better.

Too many candidates under-prepare for the initial contact with a recruitment consultancy and consequently come across poorly. Often they fail to provide the information as requested or don't appear interested. You never get a second chance to make a first impression, so think carefully about how you want to come across.

Following the telephone conversation, if a good consultant feels they can help you and it is practical, they will want to meet you. Never forget that this is now your first interview and it is as important as any interview with a potential employer, so treat it just the same. Dress and

approach the interview with the recruitment consultancy as if they were a potential employer. Think about how it is likely to go, prepare and plan to make the best impression. Get ready for an interview, not the chance to present a wish list.

Now you understand that you need to present yourself at all stages, and appear committed to developing your career, you should also bear in mind that the way you deal with the consultant is important. They will be doing a lot of work on your behalf and the more confidence they have in you, the more energy they are likely to spend marketing you to their clients. Saying thanks when appropriate or just being friendly when they ring, really can make a difference.

Let's now concentrate on how to get the best from your consultancy.



Getting the best out of your recruitment consultancy



Working with a recruitment consultancy is about managing a relationship, but a relationship with whom? One consultant, a number of consultants or a whole company? Let's deal with this issue first.

Consultancy v consultant - the difference between an individual and an organisation

When you choose who to work with, your decision will be based on a mixture of company factors and people factors. The following are **company factors**, i.e. reflective of the overall consultancy, not just an individual consultant:

Reputation
Profile
Client list
Literature
Offices
Procedures
Company history
Organisational structure

Without this infrastructure, no individual consultant can operate effectively. Never forget that a consultant can only be as good as the consultancy they are working for.

However, recruitment is a people business and a first class consultancy can only be created by top quality personal contact with clients and candidates alike. In other words, company factors are absolutely dependent on and interlinked to **people factors**.

But always remember that a consultancy is more than just one consultant, so if you do find it difficult to work with one particular consultant, consider seeing if there is someone else who might be able to help you.

One consultant or more than one consultant

Most candidates, when asked, say they like to deal with just one consultant with whom they can build up a really good relationship. This might seem perfectly reasonable, but let's take a closer look.

Consider this: the consultants who will be the most useful to you in securing a key appointment are those who have close working relationships with their clients.

They visit them frequently, receive regular internal and external literature from them, go to internal presentations, get involved in internal recruitment strategy meetings, meet and socialise with nearly all the people you are likely to meet at interview, etc..

Now consider where your ideal job might be. If your answer names more than a few organisations, ask yourself how likely it is that one consultant, no matter how good he or she is, could possibly have close working relationships with all of them. It's impossible.

So what do you do? You could talk to only one consultant and hope that his or her small number of clients happen to have the best job for you. Or you could be open to discussing opportunities with more than one consultant.

An accountant, is an accountant, is an accountant - and all finance jobs are the same, right? Wrong. Although all accountants share a similar, broad base of technical skills their roles are very different, which is why professionals tend to specialise in a particular sector or area as their career develops and also why recruitment consultants do the same. If you're still in the earlier stages of developing your career and are considering options in more than



one sector, or if you're further on but considering changing sectors, you will definitely need to work with more than one consultant.

The value of specialisation

Specialisation is crucial. Be extremely wary of consultancies which don't have specialist divisions. No one consultant could possibly ever be expert in all areas or cover the whole market place effectively.

The relationship

Now let's assume you are happy with both the consultancy and the consultants(s) you deal with. This being so, treat them as business partners/advisors and consider carefully the options they put forward. Take advantage of their expertise. Many top consultants in financial recruitment trained as accountants, and even those who haven't probably have several years experience in understanding the financial job market - if you have chosen well, your consultant will be worth listening to.

Choosing a good consultancy should ensure that you avoid working with someone who appears very short-term focused, as a good consultancy has little to gain and much to lose by placing a candidate in a role that is not right for him or her. The candidate would be unhappy and either underachieve or leave - either of which would damage the consultancy's relationships with both employer and candidate. Therefore, a good consultancy genuinely will be trying to find you a role which you will find rewarding and in which you can develop.

If you doubt their expertise or disagree with options they put forward, challenge them. Listen carefully to their explanation and try to understand their point of view. Of course opinions differ and you may still disagree. Ultimately if you continue to feel

uncomfortable with their ideas you may want to re-consider your choice of consultancy.

Normally, problems which arise between a consultant/consultancy, and a candidate stem from a lack of communication - one side or the other doesn't listen. The best thing you can do is discuss the situation - don't start by blaming, just raise the issue. Ask the consultant why he or she isn't able to find what you are looking for. Is it a problem with your experience? The competition? The market? Ask them what you can do to help resolve the situation. A good consultancy will be happy to discuss your strategy with you, which should result in a better understanding on both sides and which may or may not involve modifying that strategy.

Don't assume that a consultant who doesn't bombard you with options is doing nothing. Good consultants will be selective about the options they present to you. They won't falsely raise your hopes by telling you all about all sorts of jobs you realistically have no chance of getting (like the estate agent who values your house way over the odds to get your business then advises you to drop the price) or approach you with numerous options that don't meet your criteria (like the estate agent who sends you details of every property on his books, hoping that one of them will be right). Good consultants will investigate a number of opportunities and do some initial research, perhaps involving direct discussions with clients. Be wary of consultants who want to widely circulate your CV and seem to have a myriad of amazing opportunities which are just right for you.

Consultants need to communicate with you regularly and if a long period goes by without you hearing from them don't be afraid to contact them. You will need to strike a balance



between too little and too much contact. Be sure to show you are keen and serious about looking at opportunities, but be careful not to pester.

When the consultant does come up with opportunities in which you might be interested, look beyond the job title and examine what the role really involves. Bear in mind how keen companies are to sell certain roles. For example, a role described as:

**“PA to Chairman:
Business focused, impacting on bottom line
and involving lots of travel...”**

might interest you, whereas an role described as:

**“Audit:
A head office based position
requiring extensive travel...”**

might not. Be careful - these two could be the same job. Don't be too quick to write something off because the job doesn't sound glamorous enough. Presentation is not everything - look for the substance.

When the consultant has found an opportunity in which you are interested, he or she will submit your CV. Most consultancies will reformat your

CV, so don't be afraid to ask to see a copy of the CV they are using. You don't want to be taken by surprise. Make sure no consultancy ever sends out your CV without your permission - this will avoid different consultancies sending your CV to the same client. The one exception to this is if you are only working with one consultancy and wish to optimise the speed at which they can respond on your behalf. Then you may wish to outline the circumstances in which they can submit your CV, provided they advise you of their actions. (As mentioned in section 6, any recruitment consultancy which is a member of the REC should automatically ask your permission before sending out your CV as it is part of the REC code of conduct).

As a final thought in this section, please appreciate that consultants are not magicians and it can take weeks or even months to find the right opportunity. It's better to be patient than to make the wrong move. Don't underestimate the value of a good consultancy - take the relationship seriously and once you find a consultancy/consultant you can work with effectively, don't lose them - thank them for their effort, recommend them to others and stay in touch.

Right, now opportunities are materialising, let's look at how to prepare for interviews with a prospective employer.



9 Interview preparation

Interview preparation is probably the single most important differentiator between good candidates - the one who is best prepared invariably gets the job. Let's take a look at why:

Think about it from the perspective of the potential employer. Preparation is evidence of professionalism, interest in and commitment to their company, but above all, it is indicative of the way a candidate is likely to work. If someone doesn't prepare properly for an interview which may have an impact on their entire career, what kind of an employee are they likely to be? How well are they likely to prepare for their daily meetings?

Preparation is crucial. So what exactly do we mean by preparation? We can break it down into three different areas: research, planning and rehearsal:

1. Research

Research involves finding out as much as you possibly can about the company, the people you will be meeting and the role in question.

Without exception, you will need to do the following:

- Regularly monitor the financial press
- Read the company's annual report and accounts, and corporate brochure
- Ask for and read divisional brochures and further literature if available
- Review the job and person specifications and as much information about the role as available
- Gain a general understanding of the business the company is in, who their competitors are and where they are positioned in the market
- Visit the company's website if they have one

Anyone who hasn't gathered such basic information prior to an interview is likely to be

exposed, putting themselves at a severe disadvantage to other candidates, whatever their ability. If you haven't 'done your homework', the employer will question your sincerity in wanting to work for the company. A good recruitment consultancy should be able to assist you in this process.

So what more can you do which might set you apart? Here are a few ideas:

- Go through all recent press cuttings in which the company is featured. One of the easiest ways to do this is via the internet. If you go to websites like www.electronic-telegraph.co.uk or www.the-times.co.uk or www.ft.com, go to the city pages and do a word search with the company's name, you can quickly access recent press coverage
- Really pump the recruitment consultancy for as much detail as possible. Find out about the company's track record for advancement from this particular role, what they consider the pros and cons of the role to be etc.
- Talk with contacts you may have who work there or who know someone who works there

You may not be the only candidate to have "done your homework", but it will still differentiate you from the many who haven't and give you a real advantage. Also the benefits of really good research are twofold. Not only does it give you a better chance of excelling at interview, but it also puts you in a stronger position to make the right decision about the opportunity when the time comes.

2. Planning

Having done your research, you can now use it to develop questions and points of view. Simply saying: "I noticed from a recent article in the FT that you are expanding into this or that new market," begs the answer, "So what?" Whereas if



you were to ask what the implications of this expansion are for the business unit for which you are interviewing, it's likely to provoke a much better reaction.

Use the information you have gathered to arrive at a clear picture of where you think the company is going as well as to make a list of questions which demonstrate your research and allow you to gain further important information at interview.

So what kind of questions are good ones to ask? The company's current activities are always a good area for discussion, so any questions you pick up from the press or their website or literature could be good. Equally, if they haven't received any press coverage in the last few months you could ask them why not? Don't be afraid to ask challenging questions. Alternatively, you could ask: "What do you think are the things the company should be saying about itself?"

You should also plan answers to certain questions they are likely to ask. Typically these will include an assessment of your strengths and weaknesses, your reasons for moving and an examination of any gaps in your CV. Think it through.

3. Rehearsal

The final stage of preparation is rehearsal. Having collected your information and thought about it, you need to practice delivering it. The best way to do this is to arrange a mock interview with the recruitment consultancy or another trained interviewer. At this session you can also ask their opinion about how the people you are meeting might react to various things. Then you can anticipate their likely responses and prepare for them.

Preparation done, it's now time to talk about the real thing, the first interview with the prospective employer.



10

First interviews

Your first interview is absolutely crucial! Too many candidates underestimate its importance and perform poorly. What can you do to ensure you don't fail at this stage? Let's start by considering the context in which the interview will take place. You need to understand the following:

1. You've already made it through one screening process; your CV has passed the test. Therefore, although the interviewer may have some questions, you may assume there is no fundamental problem with your CV. What they are looking to explore is the person behind it.

2. Face to face interviews are unlike the CV filtering stage in that people will be looking for positive points rather than reasons to reject you. Most interviewers want to be impressed with the people they are interviewing. It confirms that they've made a good decision in selecting their shortlist and indicates that they are on the way to resolving their recruitment needs. Be confident. Believe in yourself.

3. Remember this is only the first interview so the appointment won't be resolved today. Many topics may remain uncovered but don't worry about it. *Your goal at this stage is to gather information and get another interview.*

4. The interviewer may decide the tone of the interview even before it takes place and continue with it irrespective of anything you say or do, in order to assess how you respond in certain circumstances. Don't be fazed by an approach you don't expect such as aggressive or confrontational and remember that the other candidates for the job will almost certainly be put through exactly the same test.

5. Most important of all, be mindful of the key questions the interviewer is trying to answer,

whether or not they will actually be working alongside you. These include "Can this person do the job? Will this person fit in? Would I like to work with this person?" etc..

The interview itself

First impressions are crucial. Statistics show that most interviewers make a decision within the first few minutes of meeting someone as to whether or not they like that person and consequently would want to work with them. Think about it, what do you need to do in the first few minutes to make the interviewer feel good about you? Here are the most important things:

- Be on time
- Be polite to the receptionists and support staff - they can be very influential
- Dress smartly and professionally
- Smile and give a confident handshake
- Thank the interviewer for taking the time to meet with you - polite but not obsequious
- Have an easy topic of non-work conversation ready as an ice breaker
- If they don't take the initiative immediately, open the conversation
- Listen as well as talk
- Be friendly and appear enthused

It's best to think of a non-work subject to talk about beforehand as initial nervousness may make it more difficult to do so at the time.

Once the interview begins, pay attention to body language. Here are a few useful pointers:

- Be relaxed - sit neither too formally (i.e. stiffly) nor too informally
- Position yourself so your body is facing the other person, don't angle yourself away
- Make regular eye contact, though don't hold it for too long



- **Don't cross your arms - crossing your arms is considered defensive**
- **Avoid touching your ears or nose - this indicates you might be lying**
- **Smile - not as much as a game show host, but try to come across as friendly**
- **Lean slightly forward to show interest**
- **Use hand motions to emphasise your points, but do so sparingly**
- **Above all model your own body language after that of the interviewer - research indicates that interviewers favour candidates whose body language is similar to their own**

When the interview gets under way, let the interviewer lead, as they may well have a series of topics they need to cover and a set time limit.

Conversation flow is crucial. Avoid giving one word replies to questions or the conversation will never get going. Equally, don't overelaborate, go off on a tangent or monopolise the conversation.

Also, keep your replies simple. Many candidates fall into the trap of trying too hard to impress.

Here are some other tips on how to conduct a good interview.

Do

1. Be enthusiastic.
2. Ask questions throughout the interview (not just at the end).
3. Know your CV inside out and anticipate the questions it may prompt.
4. Be absolutely clear of your reasons for wanting to leave your current employer.
5. Know exactly why you're interested in the company.
6. Keep the information positive - don't give bad news unasked.
7. Concentrate on selling yourself and pick up and

- respond to signals the interviewer is giving.
8. Evidence your abilities by discussing them, particularly in response to questions.
9. Leave on a high note - e.g. Thank the interviewer for his/her time, reiterate your interest in the position and say that you hope to hear from them again soon (firm handshake and eye contact).

Don't

1. Interrupt the interviewer.
2. Answer a question with a question.
3. Try and be clever or smart.
4. Criticise your current or previous employers.
5. Suggest personality clashes.
6. Be too laid back, over casual or over friendly.
7. Avoid eye contact.
8. Give short, clipped answers or waffle.
9. Breach confidentiality.

If you have prepared well, you will have thought about what the interviewer will be trying to do and will help them do it. For example, they probably have a list of things to evaluate, such as motivations, thought processes, technical skills, personality traits, etc.. Give them what they need to tick each box as it comes up. For instance, if you are asked about how you handled a difficult situation, have an example ready or think one up on the spot.

So what should you do if the interviewer doesn't come across well and you, as a candidate, don't like him/her? If this situation occurs, it may be because the interviewer is inexperienced or simply isn't at their best that day, but whatever the reasons, the best thing you can do is to ignore the fact that you are unsure and still concentrate on impressing them. Here's why:

1. **One person alone may not be indicative of a company's culture. Before you make decisions**



about a company, you need to meet more than one person who works there. Getting another interview will allow you to do this.

- 2. You may not end up working with the interviewer at all. First interviews are often conducted by Human Resources rather than line managers. Department personalities may be very different.**
- 3. Winning the next interview doesn't commit you. Having achieved your initial goal, you can reflect on the situation in your own time and then make a decision. You are in the position of strength.**

Even if you ultimately decide not to attend the next interview, having won it is good practice and a great confidence builder.

- 4. Winning the next interview also aids your search generally. Failing to impress can undermine a consultancy's confidence in you and may even make them hesitate to put you forward to their best clients in future. The consultant may even be able to use your success in this interview situation to persuade another potential employer to meet you.**

Remember, the interview is a two way process. You should be interviewing the potential employer just as they are interviewing you. Consequently, just like the interviewer, you need to prepare a list of questions you would like to ask ahead of the interview.

Questions

NB: Please also refer to the section on planning in chapter 9 - interview preparation

Asking questions

Good questions present you in the best possible light by demonstrating that you have done your

research and have come up with some intelligent thoughts based on it. They can be challenging, but must be appropriate to the person interviewing. For instance, ask an HR manager how careers are managed and assessed, and save your questions about financial strategy for the line managers. Also feel free to ask interviewers about themselves.

Don't save all of your questions for the end of the interview. You should ask them as they seem appropriate throughout the course of the meeting.

However, there are certain questions which you should avoid asking such as those regarding sick pay, holiday entitlement, etc., or indeed any other part of the package. This not only comes later but should be handled by the recruitment consultant if you are using one.

Answering questions

It's much harder to give detailed guidelines on answering questions as the response will inevitably be dictated by the question itself, but there are a few things to bear in mind:

- 1. Don't be afraid of taking a moment to think about your answer before plunging in. Indeed, demonstrating the fact that you are thinking is often respected.**
- 2. When asked a technical question, sometimes getting the right answer is less important than your thought process, so be prepared to think out loud.**
- 3. Don't be fazed by difficult technical questions. If you aren't certain of your reply, say something like: "Please bear in mind I haven't worked on this particular subject for a while, but if memory serves me right (give what you believe is the best answer). If you'd like me to I can check for next time."**



4. **One of the most important questions you are likely to be asked is why you want to work for the company and perform that particular job. In answering you need to evidence that you have done your research. Pick an area of the job which particularly interests you and explain why; use the opportunity to convince the interviewer that your experience makes you ideal for the role.**
5. **If asked for your strengths and weaknesses, always start with your strengths, and only offer one weakness (unless specifically asked for more) and position that weakness such that it could also be considered a strength. For example, to the question: "What's your biggest weakness?" the following is a good answer: "If a task is repetitive I get bored. However, I know that some tasks will be boring so I knuckle down and get them done so that I can move on to more interesting work."**
6. **Equally, if the interviewer highlights a weakness in general questioning, don't be afraid to highlight a compensating strength, e.g. Interviewer: "Can you write macros in Lotus?" Candidate: "No, but I can in Excel and the two are very similar. I learn quickly and would be happy to put time aside to study it so that it didn't impact on my work."**

Before concluding this section let's consider two particular types of interviews.

Panel interviews

A panel interview is one where you are interviewed by more than one person. This generally means two or three but can mean as many as five. The key here is to treat the interview just as if it were a one on one, except when it comes to eye contact which should be spread across all those present.

Don't be concerned if one or more of the panel says little or nothing - each of the panel will have a specific job to do and they might be along to watch. Again, remember they will be doing exactly the same for all the other candidates, so relax.

Competency based interviews

Competency based interviewing is becoming more and more common. In a nutshell, core competencies are the traits of behaviour an employer considers desirable. An organisation, in effect, draws up a tick-list of characteristics it is looking for in its staff.

These competencies include things like interpersonal skills, team-building skills, attention to detail, decision making and reasoning powers, confidence and self motivation.

Normally these interviews will be conducted by a trained HR specialist. The structure of the interview will be explained to you and each competency being assessed will be highlighted when it arises.

The best way to respond to each competency assessment is to describe a situation in which you demonstrated the desired competency, what your objective was in this particular situation, what actions you took and what results you achieved. This is known as following the SOAR (Situation, Objective, Action, Results) pattern.

Competency based interviews are designed to drill through a CV to the substance behind it. They are designed to be thorough, to verify that you can answer multiple questions and also that you have been honest about the information on your CV.

Having covered the first interview, let's now consider the next stage - feedback.



11 Feedback

Hopefully the interview has been a resounding success and you are already well on your way to the next stage of the process. However, the reality of the situation is that you are unlikely to know what the interviewer is thinking and are no longer able to influence the situation. At least, you're not, although, if you are working with a good recruitment consultancy, they might be able to.

It is imperative that you provide feedback to your consultancy at the earliest possible opportunity. By fully appreciating your views and concerns the consultancy can liaise with the recruiter and try to ensure that the process continues. If nerves got the better of you, or you simply didn't perform at your best and your consultancy knows this, they may be able to persuade the recruiter to give you further consideration.

Alternatively there may be specific issues which you would like discussed before wishing to progress to the next stage.

Prompt and considered feedback is essential if the consultancy is to be able to act in your best interests.

Once you have provided your consultant with feedback, he or she can speak with the client and secure their feedback. Be aware that some clients

like to see all candidates for a given position before offering any feedback, so be patient. It can be frustrating, but the consultant will be on top of it and will certainly tell you as soon as they have a response.

If the employer's feedback is positive and you are interested in the opportunity you can continue with the interview process, taking note of any relevant observations from the feedback which may help you with the subsequent interviews.

However, it is possible that your interview was unsuccessful in which case it is important to get honest feedback from the consultant, as, acted on correctly, it should stand you in far better stead for next time.

If the reasons for rejection aren't clear, dig deeper; read between the lines and if necessary, ask the consultant to go back for more details. It won't change the interview but might make a difference in future interviews so you need to know.

Hopefully it won't be long before you are moving on to the second interview. But before we consider second interviews, let's talk briefly about developing a number of options.



Developing a number of options

12

If you are interested in a number of different opportunities, then, like cooking a meal, bringing them all to the boil at the same time is very important. Here are some tips on how to ensure they all hit the same time-frame.

The moment you are lined up for any second interview, you need to think about timing. If the second interview is definitely your first choice position, then no problem, continue to develop other options but allow this one to lead and do all you can to get an offer. However, if there are other opportunities which you would either prefer or would like to compare, then you need to talk with your recruitment consultant and get him or her to do two things:

- 1. Swiftly develop the other options.**
- 2. Control the speed at which the first opportunity progresses.**

A good consultant should know how to avoid progressing too quickly without prejudicing your

position and at the same time use that situation to encourage other employers to move more quickly. It's amazing how fast big companies can move when they have to in order to avoid missing out on a good candidate, namely you.

If you highlight the issue early enough, good time management will enable you to develop more than one opportunity at the same time. However, you will need to arrange and prepare for interviews at short notice, so do your research in advance and be prepared to take a day or two of holiday if necessary.

As a final word of warning it may not always be possible to develop a number of comparable options and in such circumstances you will need to consider the merits of a given opportunity in isolation. If it matches your search criteria it may be that the first option is the right one for you.

Now it's time to prepare for second and subsequent interviews.





13

Second and subsequent interviews

The biggest problem most candidates face with second and subsequent interviews is that, on a wave of confidence following the successful first interview, they fail to treat these next stage interviews with the rigour they deserve.

You should expect the process to get tougher not easier. At the second interview you will meet new people, generally more senior and with higher expectations, and will be interviewed in much more depth and detail now that the list has been narrowed down.

So how do you prepare for this?

The most important thing to do is to prepare just as thoroughly as you did for the first interview (as described in section 10) but to take your research and thinking one step further. For example, although searching press cuttings on a company maybe the icing on the cake at the first interview, it's a basic requirement for the second interview. You really need to do your homework.

Think hard about what you are likely to be asked. The first interview is largely about your general background and the impression you create. The second interview focuses on depth of experience and close analysis of technical capabilities. Be prepared. Anticipate questions, work out the best way to answer them, then learn and practice delivering the answers.

The competition is tougher at second interviews. At this stage all the candidates can do the job, so you need to convince the employer you can do it better than the other candidates. Never underestimate the calibre of the competition. Equally, don't be put off by it - use it as inspiration to give your best.

At this stage you also need to interview the

prospective employer as thoroughly as they are interviewing you. Before you make a crucial career move, you must be sure that it is the right company and the right opportunity for you.

You might not get another chance, so think through the issues and prepare your questions. Don't be afraid to ask to meet the people you will be working with, or to talk with someone else who has recently been recruited. A good company will respect the professionalism with which you are investigating the opportunity.

Second and subsequent interviews can also include various other elements you need to prepare for.

For example, assessment days are becoming more and more common where candidates are put through a series of evaluation techniques such as psychometric assessments, tests of verbal and numerical reasoning, group exercises designed to see how people operate within a team, exercises where you are given an in-tray of items which you have to prioritise and deal with etc..

Such sessions give companies the best chance of discovering how you are likely to perform in the job in question should they employ you.

Preparation for these kind of exercises constitutes an entire subject in itself.

If you would like specific information on any of these tests, contact Jeff Wheeler at Executive Connections on +44 (0)20 7304 9000 or email jeff.wheeler@executive-connections.co.uk. In addition to being head of the Public Practice Division, Jeff is a member of the IPD (Institute of Personnel & Development) and an accredited psychometric assessor.



So to the final interview. The final interview could be your second or your sixth, you might know beforehand that it will be the last, or you might not. Whatever the situation, even if you know it's the final interview, approach it just like any second or subsequent interview. Never treat it as a simple formality like a rubber stamp of approval - carry on winning the job.

The biggest danger is complacency - don't forget the company might still be speaking to other candidates, so never stop presenting and selling yourself. And always be prepared for anything - a

final interview can suddenly become a grilling when you least expect it if the employer decides to give a potential employee the final once over. Remember, no interview is ever a formality. Never assume you've got the job before you see it in writing.

As we've been saying, winning the job is all about coming across as the best of the candidates a company has seen. Let's now focus on just what it is that makes the difference between the candidate who gets the job and the ones who don't.



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What makes the difference

Clearly any prospective employer is looking for the best candidate to do the job. However once they have satisfied themselves that a candidate has the necessary skills and experience, what differentiates one candidate from another is the simple answer to the key question all prospective employers will ask themselves:

***Which of these candidates
would I rather work with?
(or which of these candidates
would fit in best?)***

In other words personality is paramount.

1. How much they like you as a person, how interesting they find you and how they think you will fit in with the other members of the department are key.
2. Your personality will affect the work you do. For example, two candidates could have exactly the same technical skills, yet one might be a much better worker than the other because he or she has more energy, uses more initiative, is more prepared to question things and has better attention to detail.

We've talked about many ways in which you can demonstrate personality, by "doing your homework" through to handling the interview process adeptly, but the most important indicator of your personality is the way you come across.

Anything you can do to improve your presentation skills is invaluable. Go on as many training courses as you can and take every opportunity to practise your presentation skills.

At the final hurdle, it is not first time passes, or academics, or technical skills which make the difference, it's you as a person.

So be enthusiastic, show a genuine interest in the company, come across as interesting and energetic and you will put yourself ahead of most of the competition.

This being the case, you may well end up with a number of different options to choose from. Let's now look at how you pick which one is best for you.



Choosing the right option

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When assessing different options, start by referring back to your long term strategy, as discussed in section 2, and evaluate each option against it. An opportunity which looks good in isolation might not be constructive to your overall career development: some moves can be one step forward and two steps back in overall career terms - whereas a rather unusual looking move could be an extremely good stepping stone, even a short cut toward your long term goals.

Once you have done this, make a list of the pros and cons of each route. Alternatively, you might wish to rank different factors and score them, factors varying from how challenging the role is, to prospects, to money (be careful if money is too big a factor).

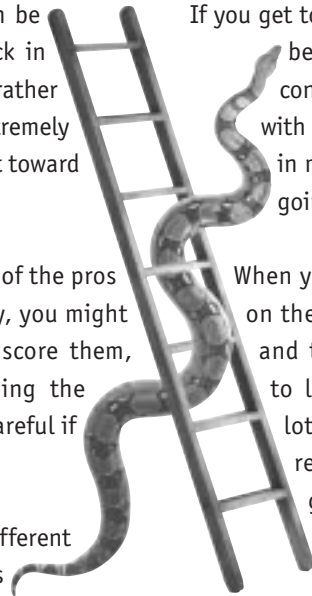
Such exercises help you to assess different opportunities rationally as well as emotionally and can help you avoid any bad moves. Once you're down to a shortlist of good options, trust your intuition - which one feels right? If you are more inspired by one role

and company than another, you are likely to function much better in that role and thus progress your career faster than you might in a role which inspires you less.

If you get to a point where you really can't decide between two different opportunities, consider asking to have a further meeting with both companies to discuss key issues in more detail. Like when buying a house, going back for a final look is no bad idea.

When you turn offers down, do it graciously on the phone and in writing. Take the time and trouble to explain your reasons and to let companies, who have invested a lot of time and money in trying to recruit you, down nicely. Not only is it good manners, it will also leave doors open later in your career, or even sooner if anything goes wrong with the offer you initially accept.

Now let's look at negotiating the contract and closing the deal.





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Negotiating the contract and closing the deal

If you are using a recruitment consultant, they should handle all negotiations. Never negotiate directly with the employer. There are a number of reasons for this, most importantly the fact that having an intermediary gives both parties much greater flexibility. Also, a good consultant conducts such negotiations on an almost daily basis and their expertise can really make a difference.

Ensure that you arm your consultant with all the necessary information to enable him or her to negotiate effectively on your behalf. If you are expecting a pay review or a bonus from your present employer make sure that your consultant is aware of the details.

Clearly, the way you handle the money issue is very important. Demand too much and you might not get the job, or you might make things difficult for yourself by overinflating your new employers expectations of you or even making yourself look too mercenary, thereby calling into question your interest in and enthusiasm for the job itself. Being greedy at this stage could work against you - how your salary develops is much

more important than where it starts. Getting a written commitment to review your salary within certain time scales not only achieves the same end if you have demonstrated just how effective and valuable you are, it also outlines your confidence that you will do so.

Also consider what your salary expectations are based on. Make sure you are not being unrealistic.

That said, it is also important not to settle for too little - the salary level you go in at is an important indication as to how you are viewed and how well you are likely to do. Finding the correct level can be tricky, but a good recruitment consultant will be able to advise you.

The key to good negotiation is striking the right balance so both sides feel pleased with the outcome, and handling the process well - raise all of your points together rather than going back and forth to avoid the appearance of bickering or changing goal posts.

Once the deal is struck, it's time to resign. Let's now look at the process of resignation.



The process of resignation

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The process of resignation involves two things - writing a letter and breaking the news. The letter is easy. A written letter of resignation is a short, functional piece of communication, required by employment law as formal notification of your intention to leave. You don't need to give any reasons. Breaking the news can be harder.

Having written the letter, you will need to give it to your boss and explain your reasons for leaving. At this point your current employers may try to persuade you to stay. This is referred to as a "buyback" and is a common occurrence, so you need to be prepared for it.

Buybacks

Faced with the possibility of losing an employee and the time, cost and trouble of recruiting a replacement, many companies will try relentlessly to persuade their employees not to move on.

There are many ways they can do this. They can offer you more money or additional benefits, they can promote you, change your reporting lines, working environment or working conditions or even offer to move you into a new role. They might try any or all of these incentives in a number of different combinations, but never forget, the reason they are doing this is for their own benefit, not yours. A company who gives their employees due consideration does not wait for a resignation to prompt them to pay someone what they are worth.

Indeed your first reaction to a buyback attempt should be to view it negatively. If a company has been undervaluing you or underutilising you for a significant period of time, how good an employer are they? They are unlikely to change.

Also consider that they now know that you are not committed to them long-term and will remember

this when they are making decisions about promotions into key long term roles. Buybacks are panic solutions to short term problems and should be recognised as such.

Furthermore, if you are known to have resigned and been bought back this could encourage negative reactions from colleagues who are either resentful, or dismissive of your integrity. Some of your colleagues might even venture onto the market with the hidden aim of getting buyback offers of their own. If your co-workers start leaving or demanding more money, management may resent you.

For these reasons, if there is something your company could do to keep you from leaving, raise these issues with the appropriate people at the company before you start looking for another job. Being aggressive about your career progression demonstrates ambition but using a job offer as leverage is likely to backfire.

As a final word on buybacks, nearly 90% fail within 12 months, because although a company will often say almost anything to hang on to someone while they put in place contingency staffing plans, fundamentally nothing changes.

So, after you have accepted an offer, resigned and resisted the buyback, what happens next? Most candidates think the answer is nothing until they start work at the new company. However, you really need to maintain the goodwill you have created and continue to show your interest in the new company by staying in touch with your new employer prior to starting. This will make a difference as to how favourably you are received when you do start work.

Let's now look at what happens when you start work at the new company.



18

What happens when you start work

The task isn't over when you start your new job. The impression you make in the first few weeks will be very hard to shake and will almost certainly influence how high and how fast you can climb within your new company.

One of the best ways to approach your new job is to remember that:

***Before you can stand out,
you have to fit in.***

So don't try and be the life and soul of the party from day one - it's very hard to recover from a bad start and you could easily tread on people's toes without realising it. Impress by being friendly, professional and enjoyable to work with.

You also need to agree with your boss your objectives for your first three months and focus on achieving them.

Once you're up and running, delivering what is

expected and being appreciated by the people you work with, then you can let your hair down a little if you so wish.

Now that you've got the job and made a good start, you can sit back and relax, right? Wrong. Career planning never stops. As we discussed in the opening section, you need to continually monitor your career. It will put you in a stronger position when it comes to your reviews and will help you make decisions about how you would like both your role and your career to develop.

Never take career progression for granted. Continue to regularly review what you are doing. If things aren't going the way you'd like them to, don't just ignore the problem and hope that it will go away, confront it, take action. That way, like a regular health check, your career has the best possible chance of staying in great shape.

So as the process ends it begins again. The wheel has come full circle.



Conclusions

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Winning top jobs is a competition in which there are no silver medals. You either win the job or you don't. In any competition, training and preparation are key. No Silver Medals is a

winner's guide. Following the process it describes, you will give yourself the best possible chance of winning the gold. Remember, there are:

NO SILVER MEDALS



20 Appendices

1. A good CV
2. A good covering letter

Appendix 1 - A good CV

CURRICULUM VITAE	
NAME:	Sample Person
ADDRESS:	51 The Street The Town Countyshire CL1 2EU (will relocate freely)
CONTACT DETAILS	1234 5678910 (Telephone & facsimile) 9876 54321 (Mobile & voicemail) abc@defghi.co.uk (e-mail)
DATE OF BIRTH:	1.2.69
LANGUAGES:	Spanish (Formerly fluent, now rusty) French (Basic)
QUALIFICATIONS:	BSc (Hons) Civil Engineering ACA (First Time Passes)
EMPLOYMENT HISTORY:	
6.97 -present:	ABC PLC, Location ABC is a £100m turnover business with four main operating divisions: House construction (t/o c£45m), Steel fabrication (t/o c£15m), Architectural Consultancy (t/o £5m), Shopfitting (t/o c£35m).
1.01 -present:	Group Financial Director : Group Finance - ABC Holdings, Reading Reporting to the Chairman and the Board I have direct responsibility for the ABC Holdings Group Finance team, in addition to overseeing the activities of the four divisional Finance Directors. Achievements and responsibilities have included: <ul style="list-style-type: none">● The identification and subsequent acquisition of XYZ Ltd. XYZ was a small steel fabricators (t/o £2m) which was based in Watford. Liaison with corporate advisors and vendors to negotiate and secure transaction. Subsequently worked with divisional FD to integrate business realising economies of scale of c£500,000 p.a.● Overall project responsibility for installation of c200 user Windows NT Network. Sole responsibility for definition of new Sage package.



CURRICULUM VITAE

- Part of a four person executive committee defining 5 year strategic plan.

6.99 - 1.01: **Financial Director, ABC Shopfitters, Croydon**

- Major contribution in delivery of profit budget of £10.5m and exceeded ROCE of 17.4% by 10%. Reviewed critically and upgraded calibre of finance personnel.
- Set up systems department of 19 (previously outsourced) to provide greater control over deployment of IT resources.
- Improved quality and timeliness of management information e.g. business profitability by director responsibility/geographic region. Analysis of delivered contribution by product and customer.

6.97 - 6.99: **Financial Controller, ABC Shopfitters, Croydon:**

- Introduction of comprehensive cash control, budgeting and forecasting systems, proposal and implementation of first IT strategy.
- Co-author of the first 'Company Mission' incorporating strategic planning.
- With an operational colleague, reviewed and updated the corporate pricing systems which ultimately led to corporate restructuring.

10.95 - 6.97: **BIG FIRM CAs, London**

Manager (Grade 1)

Delivered audit and advisory services to a wide range of clients including listed Plc in the hi-tech leisure and service sectors.

Examples of projects undertaken include:

- Being part of the retained financial adviser team on DEF's acquisition of Big House Nursing Homes from XYW plc.
- Deal managing a joint venture between an Australian Utility corporation and an IT company in respect of a software development project.



CURRICULUM VITAE

9.90 - 9.95:	<p>MEDIUM FIRM CAs, Bristol</p> <p>Audit Manager</p> <p>Trained and qualified as an ACA gaining audit and accounting experience on a variety of clients with turnovers up to £50m. Progressed to Audit Manager with responsibility for a client portfolio with GRF £200,000 and specialised in corporate advisory work for medium sized businesses in addition to standard audit activity.</p>
COMPUTER SKILLS:	<p>Main Systems used - Excel (V7); creation and use of complex spreadsheets and work books, capable of writing modest macros. Lotus; similar capability to Excel. Sage; experienced at use, setup and definition of the system. Other packages used; Symphony, Pegasus, Powerpoint, Word, Wordperfect.</p>
PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS & EDUCATION:	
9.93:	<p>ACA - First time passes at all exams, no referrals</p>
9.87 - 6.90:	<p>UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER, Manchester BSc (Hons) Civil Engineering, Class 2:ii</p>
To 6.87:	<p>HIGHGROVE SCHOOL, Newtown 3 'A' Levels (Physics B, Chemistry C, Mathematics B) 1 'AO' Levels: (Mathematics) 9 'O' Levels</p>
INTERESTS:	<p>I am an avid watersports enthusiast and am a qualified dinghy and powerboat instructor. My interests in watersports is combined with a penchant for annual holidays in unusual and stimulating places.</p>



Appendix 2 - A good covering letter

27 The Road
Small Village
Nr. Large Town
Countyshire
AB1 2CD

date XX Y ZZ

Dear...

Re: Group Accountant, Property Group - ad in FT

Please find enclosed my CV for your consideration in respect of the above.

As you will see from my CV, I have extensive experience managing special projects and I am now keen to utilise this experience in a smaller company where I can be directly involved with corporate strategy.

My time at (X, Y or Z) has exposed me to a variety of companies, many of which have extensive property/construction interests. This has helped me to appreciate the need to evidence my ability to deal as effectively at board level as on the 'shop floor'. To this end I would welcome the opportunity to meet both you and in due course, your client.

I very much look forward to hearing from you further.

Yours sincerely,

A. Candidate

A Candidate (Mr)

*Friendly but not
too familiar.
Professional.
clearly headed.
Refers to CV.
No putting on own
ability*



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Executive Connections Limited
43 Eagle Street
London WC1R 4AP
Tel: +44 (0)20 7304 9000
Fax: +44 (0)20 7304 9001
Email: nsm@executive-connections.co.uk
www.executive-connections.co.uk



Accountancy Connections Limited
43 Eagle Street
London WC1R 4AP
Tel: +44 (0)20 7304 6400
Fax: +44 (0)20 7304 6422
Email: nsm@accountancy-connections.co.uk
www.accountancy-connections.co.uk



Accountancy Connections Limited
126 Lower Baggot Street
Dublin 2
Tel: +353 (0)1 639 1199
Fax: +353 (0)1 639 1166
Email: nsm@accountancy-connections.ie
www.accountancy-connections.ie

www.nosilvermedals.com