Find a Job in IT:

Everything You Need to Find the RIGHT Job in Tech

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Why?

I have been in IT consulting and management for 15 years. I have done a LOT of hiring. I have done even more interviewing. Sometimes, it's fun. I love talking to excited people who want to make a difference. Other times, it makes me want to take a nail gun to my skull. Believe me; I know that finding a job is a hideously stressful process. I have felt these pains and suffered the anxiety personally. My purpose in creating this work is to help people to suck less at doing it and shorten the amount of time that they need to do it.

First, I think we need to dig into the "Why" a bit. My guess is that you fit into one of the following.

1. You work in IT and hate your current position for whatever reason

    Maybe you're underpaid. Maybe you hate your boss. Maybe you are stuck in a skills rut. Maybe people make microwave popcorn right next to your desk every afternoon and somehow manage to burn it every single time. You know that there are bigger, greener pastures out there and you are eager to go out and find them.

2. You *used* to work in IT and need to find a new gig

    Outsourced. Down-sized. Laid off. Or my personal favorite: De-layered. Whatever you call it, you used to be gainfully employed and now you've been left with nothing but a commemorative T-shirt and some stolen office supplies. Fear not, though. Follow-through with the plan that I will outline for you and you will be back in Monday morning staff meetings before you know it.

3. You'd *like* to work in IT, but haven't landed that magical first job yet

    You've heard that there is huge need for IT workers. You've looked at some of the salary surveys and been moonstruck by all of those zeroes. You love backpacks, World of Warcraft and 30 pound reference books. Clearly, you are a perfect fit for the industry. Watch out Steve Jobs, here you come.

So depending on which of these groups you fall into, you may have to adjust your approach slightly. I think that the general principles are sound and I'll point out any vast differences.

Your Online Persona

I think that the first thing most people think of when they are looking for a job is their resume. We'll get to that later on, but I want to start out with your online persona. After all, I'm not talking about finding work as a farmer here. If you are looking in the technology field, you darn well better take care of how you look in the technology landscape. Let's start with some simple questions.

1. Do you have a blog?
2. Do you have any sort of web site?
3. Do you belong to any online communities? If so are they tech related?
4. Have you ever posted anything (or had something posted about you) that would give reason for concern to a potential employer?

The answers to these questions are like the small bits in a mosaic. They will add up and create a larger picture for someone who has never met you before. What does that picture look like for you? Pretend that you are a technical or a hiring manager and you are deciding whether to hire you or not. You better believe that they will be plugging your name, email, and phone number into a search engine to see what they come up with. Don't forget that friends from high school aren't the only ones who can see those frat pictures you put up on that social media site.

A blog can be a great way to demonstrate what's important to you and what you are excited about. I recently hired a developer who had a fantastic, regularly updated blog. While I didn't make the decision to hire because of the blog, it did make my comfort level go way up. I think participation in open source projects and tech communities is another great way to show your stuff and make people take notice.

Let me get something straight here, I think it's a **bad** idea to try to be something you're not. If you have passionate opinions on some political issue, don't be afraid of the things you have posted about them. If the employer can't deal with that for some reason, that's not a place you will be happy or productive anyway. I think that being your true, best self is the most important thing to remember throughout the job hunt (within reason, mind you, please use common sense). You just have to be aware of what's out there and how people may react to it and be prepared to talk about it if you get the chance.

Networking – Online

Knowing that potential employers will be scoping you out online gives you the chance to stack the deck in your favor. Make sure that the important stuff is out there.   If you don't have a blog, you should start one. Talk about your job search, even!

LinkedIn has become a very useful tool. I typically will spend more time looking at a LinkedIn profile than I do at a resume. You should be using it to scope out employers also. Who works at your target company? What are their interests? Who are they in turn connected with and what connections do you share? The more specific details you can get, the better armed you will be for the interview.

Twitter can be a good resource for mapping out people's connections also. Once you've found people who work for the companies that you are targeting, find out who they talk to. Who do they re-tweet? What can you learn from what they say and link to?

In all of your networking, both virtual and in-person, remember to be genuine and look for ways to contribute. I think Keith Ferrazzi's *Never Eat Alone* (it's on the reading list at the end) does a great job of explaining this and you should definitely check it out.

Networking – For Real

You are **far** more likely to get a job that suits you through someone you know than any other way. Letting your network of friends, co-workers, vendors, customers (be careful of this one…) help you out in your search is essential to the happy ending that we both want for you. Leveraging and expanding that network should be in the back of your mind at all times, whether you're looking for a job or not.

Let's face it. All jokes aside, most people in the technology industry aren't natural networkers. If we were, we'd be in sales. (I couldn't resist.) Most folks that I have seen are fine once they get going, but they find it almost impossible to take that initial step to break the ice. Let me offer some suggestions that will help you to get in front of people and make some connections.

1. Get your elevator pitch down pat.
   Being able to tell someone what you are all about in a few short sentences is a simple way to avoid the "uhhh" moment that overcomes many of us when we're in an unfamiliar situation. Keep it natural, write it down, and then memorize it.
2. Go to technology oriented user group meetings.

This is your chance to connect with like-minded people. These are **your** people. They like the same things that you like. Trust me when I say that you will be amazed at how much you have in common. Don't be afraid to let them know that you are looking and that you'd appreciate any help that came your way.

3. Find a non-profit that needs help with whatever your field is.
   Non-profits **always** need help. They chronically are underfunded and understaffed. You will be their hero for helping them with technology. The boards of many non-profits are made up of leaders of other companies. When you make a positive impact on the non-profit, it will be felt at all levels. Make sure they know you're looking too.
4. Find an event where you can volunteer.
   Local technology and/or business events are a great place to pitch in and make some great connections. Like at a non-profit, you can come in and use technology to make a huge impact on the success of the event. The organizers will love you forever.

Recruiters

Over the course of my career, I have worked with some truly outstanding recruiters. I have also worked with some really awful ones. So trust me when I tell you that they are not all created equal. I pulled the information for this section together with the help of some of the great ones. Heed their words, grasshopper.

Recruiters are the second most likely way that you will find a position in technology. A good recruiter will know the job market for the area, have relationships with the employers, and will probably know of open positions for your specialty **right now**. Don't worry about an employer not being willing to hire through a recruiter. Trust me when I say that the placement fee is insignificant compared with finding the right person. Make use of this system!

Picking the right recruiter(s) is critical to your success. Remember that no one cares more about your career than you do, so do your homework. Research the recruiter's company and the recruiter personally. See if you can network with other job seekers and find out what their experiences with different recruiters has been. You should plan to actually interview *them* and find out what kind of employers they work with currently and what their process is like. As one recruiter said to me, "If I'm going to put my career in someone else's hands I'd want to know as much about the person representing me as I could."

From all of the feedback I got from recruiters out there (and a little of my own wisdom sprinkled in), here is a list of Do's and Don'ts when working with a recruiter.

Do's

1. If you're currently employed, make sure that you're actually really close to being ready to make a move. Don't waste everyone's time if you're still mulling it over.
2. Prepare your resume and references before you contact a recruiter.
3. Keep in mind that a good relationship with a recruiter is valuable even after you job hunt is over.
4. After you've done your homework and picked a recruiter, **trust them**. They are experts and you should treat them accordingly.
5. **Always** keep track of where the recruiter has submitted you. This was almost unanimous advice from the recruiters I spoke to, and I will add my own two cents that it won't help your cause in getting a job offer.
6. Keep the number of recruiters to a minimum. From the research you did, you should have a good idea of how well connected your recruiter is, how specialized they are in your field and what their reputation is. If you can get by with one, great, but don't try to juggle more than three.

Don'ts

1. Don't call a recruiter just because you're pissed that you didn't get the raise you wanted. (This one made me laugh because more than one person mentioned it!)
2. Don't pester these folks. They have more than just you to deal with and many times it's the employer that is dragging their feet. (I have been guilty of this.) Emailing and texting them 40 or 50 times a day won't help you.
3. Don't work with a recruiter that you feel is not being transparent and honest with you.
4. Don't hold anything back from the recruiter. If you have had negative experiences with employers in the past, they **need** to know about them.
5. Don't forget that ultimately the employer is the recruiter's customer. While I think that most recruiters are genuinely looking for a good situation for you, the employer is the one putting food on their tables.

Résumés

As I have already alluded to, the résumé is no longer the only tool in your job hunting toolbox. That doesn't mean that you can ignore it, though. A résumé is still the most common way for an employer to sort through candidates to fill a position. Knowing that the résumé serves primarily as a filter should give you your first clue as to how you should adjust your thinking about your résumé. It's a FILTER. The people looking at your résumé are looking for reasons (sometimes desperately) to make the pile of résumés smaller. Typos, inconsistent dates, and even clumsy sentence structure will stick out like a sore thumb. Guess what happens to the ones that stick out? Follow these steps (you'll find a worksheet at the end of this book) and you will end up with a résumé that will be sore-thumb resistant.

1. Write in the names of all of the companies you've ever worked for in reverse chronological order. Fill in the dates and positions.
2. For each of them, write down the things you learned from that position. Not only will this force you to think about the trajectory of your career skills development, it will also help you answer a very common interview question.
3. Next write down the value that you were able to create for that company. Those stories are going to be the meat of your new résumé. Here's a quick example: I recently interviewed someone (with a good résumé and everything) and it came out that this person was part of a team that took a project from being totally stalled for NINE YEARS and brought it to completion in twelve months. **That** is the kind of story that will virtually guarantee that you will at least get an interview. (And it wasn't even on the candidate's résumé!)
4. Now transfer this information into your favorite word processor, slap your personal and contact information on the top, and if you're feeling particularly saucy, some references at the bottom.

Some people might disagree with me, but I personally get absolutely no mileage from a page long list of every technology that you've ever touch in your life. So save us both some time and leave them out. I understand that in this world of search engine optimization we have to include such things in order to be found. How about you make a search version and then one that you'll actually give to an interviewer? Do, however, brush up on the latest and greatest in **your** specialization. If you are interviewing for a UI/UX design position and you can't tell me what the most progressive schools of thought in that arena are, it might not look very good. To help with that, check the worksheet in Appendix E.

Do not neglect to have someone proofread your résumé for you. At the end of the day, the résumé is the first marketing piece that people will see for your job search. Make sure that it's sending the right message.

Interviews

This is the section that I am most excited about. This is also the section I most dread. A good interview can be invigorating. It can be like a great conversation with an old friend. It can teach you things you have never thought about before. It can inform you of new ways of doing things.

A bad interview can be awkward and painful. A bad interview can exhaust you mentally and physically. It can shock and amaze you (and not in a good way). It can make you question your very faith in humankind. This is where the rubber meets the road. Don't let the interview be an obstacle to getting the job you want.

How about another numbered list to enlighten us?

1. **Preparation**
   It amazes me at how little some candidates seem to prepare for an interview. It seems to me that many of them think that all they need to know is the time and place. If that's all you got, you might as well not show up. A quick glance at the company's web site is not enough!

   The purpose of the interview is to show the potential employer that you can bring value to their company. How can you possibly do that if you have no idea what I value? Actually reading the company's site, finding press releases, checking SEC filings, looking up Better Business Bureau info are all great places to start. Take the next step by looking up personal and company blogs, check out profiles on LinkedIn and Twitter and Facebook and make note of who's connected to whom.

   All of this effort should arm you with a tremendous body of knowledge which will make for great conversation and intelligent questions. Even beyond that, you should now have a **very** clear idea as to whether this company is going to be a good fit for you or not.

   Your research hopefully has informed you somewhat about the culture and dress code and such. (This is where recruiters are invaluable because they will have all of that stuff mapped out for you.) Don't be afraid to call the receptionist and ask if you can't find out any other way. My rule of thumb has always been to err on the formal side. For example, if they are a business casual office, go with a shirt and tie. Do you really want to lose an opportunity because you didn't want to dress up for a couple of hours? This is your chance to sell yourself, so don't neglect the packaging.

One last thing: make sure you bring something to write on. I don't care if it's a legal pad, a tablet pc, your iphone/ipad/ipod (as long as they don't **ring** during the interview) just make sure you can make notes on the thing while still following along with the interview.

2. **In the Interview**

I don't know who gave me this advice or how old I was, but it must have been early, because it just strikes me as common sense. When you meet someone for the first time, give them a firm handshake, look them right in the eye and use their name. This is an important moment, as the first impression is going down right then. Limp handshakes are the worst. Practice if you need to. Get someone who will be brutally honest.

Once the interview starts, FOCUS!! I can't say that strongly enough. It is maddening to ask a question and have the candidate answer (or not) and then still be talking twenty minutes later. (It's happened, believe me.) This is where the legal pad comes into play. If you're the type of person that has a hard time staying on track because of nerves or whatever, I want you to do this. First, restate the question to make sure that you understand what they're asking. As you are doing this and as they react to your restatement, jot down a couple of words that are the gist of question. If you feel yourself wandering, look back at what you wrote and reel it back in. Also, you should be listening for things (and jotting them down) to follow up on when it's your turn to ask questions.

That's not to say that you have to sit there and speak only when spoken to. It's good to let your personality come out. I love to see the unique interests and passions come out in these cases. If I ask about something you get particularly excited about, let it out. Tell me why you love that thing and what you think about it and what your opinions are.   Once again, you must use common sense here. Your mom told you "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all". Do NOT badmouth former employers, bosses, etc. Also, don't answer the unasked question. Too much detail can kill you.

After the interviewer starts winding down, they will probably ask you at some point if you have questions for them. Don't miss this opportunity. The questions you ask at this point will absolutely be part of the evaluation process after you leave. You should have some very specific questions prepared (see the Interview Prep Worksheet) beforehand. This plus the things that you have jotted down during the interview should give a much better impression than the dreaded, "No, I don't really have any questions." (Don't forget to ask what comes next in the hiring process; it will save you some heartache down the road.)

3. **When It's Over**

Same things go as when you started. Firm handshake, look them in the eye and say "Thank you Mr. Jones". I personally don't mind when people ask for a card (I don't always give it, but asking doesn't bother me), and I'm generally in favor of a thank you email or something of the sort. Not a deal breaker, but it's a nice touch.

The most important thing to keep in mind is that (most) companies move slowly. Even if they love you to death, there are a certain number of process-type hurdles that have to be overcome before you can get a job offer. People get sick, go out of town, and generally have other things they have to accomplish, which sometimes makes the process drag even further. Pestering people is a bad idea. If you asked the "what are the next steps" question in the interview, you at least have an idea of what has to happen before they can make you an offer.

On Certifications

People who come and ask me for career advice almost always bring up certifications. I try hard to give them the pros and cons as I see them, but it boils down to this: Meh. If you have them, great, I assume that means you at least know the vocabulary of that subject and that you probably know how to find brain dumps on the internet. It's certainly not going to make me think you are an expert on that thing. Only experience is going to prove that.

If you don't have them, I'm not going to assume that you don't know it. There are plenty of SQL server **geniuses** running around out there who have no certs whatsoever. They're too busy **fixing stuff**! I recognize that there are plenty of job postings out there asking for them, but I don't know that many folks are actually getting the job because of them. If you have roughly two equal candidates, and you are debating between them, certifications are way down the list of deciding factors. Ability to communicate, focus on delivering value, team and culture fit, and even attitude are going to come up before certifications. Maybe if it was a tie in all of those areas, then it might come down to certs, but I've never seen that happen.

The bottom line is this. If you're in a position to get some certifications, I think it's a good idea to take advantage of it. I think a bad idea is to get into debt for them, to kill yourself taking them, or to think that after you have them you can get any job you want.

Wrap-up

We've covered a lot of ground in the preceding pages. I hope that you will be able to take these tools and ideas and apply them to your IT job search. Remember as you go through this process that being selective about where you want to work and putting in the time and figuring out which companies **deserve** you and your talents will produce a much more satisfying ending. There's no feeling in the world like the one you get when you're excited to get out of bed in the morning and dive in to that day's challenges of a job that suits you well. Good luck!

Appendix A: Reading List

Never Eat Alone by Keith Ferrazzi

How to Win Friends and Influence People by Dale Carnegie

A Whole New Mind by Daniel Pink

Smart and Gets Things Done by Joel Spolsky

Guerrilla Marketing for Job Hunters 2.0 by Jay Conrad Levinson

The Unwritten Rules of the Highly Effective Job Search by Orville Pierson

Appendix B: Résumé Worksheet

Company: _____   Position: _____

Dates: _____

Top Three Things I Learned:

_____

_____

_____

Top Three Things I Contributed:

_____

_____

_____

Company: _____   Position: _____

Dates: _____

Top Three Things I Learned:

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Top Three Things I Contributed:

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Company: _____   Position: _____

Dates: _____

Top Three Things I Learned:

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Top Three Things I Contributed:

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Company: _____   Position: _____

Dates: _____

Top Three Things I Learned:

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Top Three Things I Contributed:

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Company: _____   Position: _____

Dates: _____

Top Three Things I Learned:

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Top Three Things I Contributed:

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Appendix C: Interview Worksheet

Company: _____

Stock Symbol: _____

# of Employees: _____

Industry: _____

URL: _____

Web Site Notes: _____

_____

_____

_____

Key Employees: _____
(C-Levels, HR People, IT Managers)

_____

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_____

Technologies Used: _____
(Microsoft Stack, FOSS, Oracle, Java etc)

_____

_____

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LinkedIn Notes: _____

http://www.linkedin.com _____

BBB Notes: _____

http://www.bbb.org _____

Twitter Connections:

http://www.twitter.com

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Major Company Moves/Changes in the
last 3 years:

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Employee Blogs:

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Appendix D: Interview Checklist

☐ Something to write on and with

☐ Any notes from the Interview Worksheet

☐ List of interesting questions

☐ Memorized elevator pitch

☐ Double-checked time, date and address

☐ Confirmed dress code

☐ Leave your cell phone in your car (unless you have a REALLY good reason, and then make sure it's silenced)

☐ Breath mint (the stronger the better)

Appendix E: Cutting Edge in My Field

Specialization: _____

Thought Leaders: _____

Recent Changes: _____

New Products: _____

Books: _____

White Papers: _____

Videos: _____