



AEC Job Search Tips for the New Economy

Things are looking up. Fuel your confidence, then let it shine!

By Anne Scarlett, Printed in *Modern Steel Construction*

Many of us, especially in fragile economic times, look at the process of job searching with worry, even dread. Yet, we ultimately reach a point where we are “uber”-motivated to make a career change. Various actions can drive us to reach that point: unemployment; an inevitable downfall of our current company beyond repair; inability to grow in our role; and lack of job satisfaction, to name just a few.

But when we wait until we are 110% motivated, then we have done ourselves a disservice. Now is the time to position yourself toward greater success. And in fact, with rumblings of potential economic upswing in the AEC industry and beyond, you should give yourself no choice but to get it together, right now.

Some of you clearly know your professional identity, the value you add, and what you want. In your case, skip on to Step 2. For the rest of you...

STEP 1: GET FOCUSED

Paint a picture of what you want to do next. Set a timer, and give yourself no less than 30 minutes to draft a stream-of-consciousness essay that describes your perfect job. What are your responsibilities: both strategic and tactical? What are the growth opportunities? In this position, what might your days look like? What is the company mission, culture, and size? Where’s your place on the organization chart? How might you describe your “perfect” colleagues, bosses, and direct reports? A condensed, clean version of this ideal vision will help you to best describe what you are looking for when you are networking with others.

Consider the flip side. You’ve envisioned your ideal position. Now identify the challenges that could be a part of that very same position. Some of those challenges might be exciting and keep you on your toes. Other challenges might be around maintaining a positive attitude while attending to less desirable tasks. Still others might be “givens” beyond your control, such as internal politics or market conditions. Give yourself at least 15 more minutes to write down potential challenges.

Compare credentials to position. How well do your credentials fit into this imaginary job position that you have created? If this position really existed, how might you prove that you have what it takes to fit right in? Make a list of skill sets and attributes specific to this position. (A more exhaustive list comes later). Next to each one, write down at least one proof statement. For example, write “Team player,” then jot down one phrase that signifies a specific instance where you demonstrated professional “good sportsmanship.”

STEP 2: FUEL YOUR CONFIDENCE

Whatever your current state of confidence, build it even higher. How? Reflect upon what others have respected about your performance. There is nothing more rewarding (and, ultimately, more credible) than referrals and testimonials.

Collect existing testimonials. Hopefully, over the years, you’ve saved any specific correspondence, such as letters and email, praising your work. These will have come from clients, co-workers, organizations, business colleagues, and formal company reviews. If you work in a larger firm, take a look at the company’s marketing materials that include your resume, awards,

submissions, etc. You may identify additional testimonials relating to your work.

Uncover new testimonials. Round out your existing testimonials with those that might be buried within your email inbox, project files, your voicemail, or even your brain. Collect every appreciative comment about your work, and put them all in one electronic file. If you have absolutely nothing in writing, think back to when you had voice conversations where people were complimentary about something specific that you did. Be brave; call those people to reflect upon those conversations. Or, take them to coffee to get their honest feedback. In either case, be direct and clear about your intentions to obtain:

1. Constructive feedback for kicking off 2011.
2. Positive feedback for inspiration and support so you can build upon your strengths in 2011.

Combine, and bask. Now that you have a set of positive things others have said about you and your work, take a moment to enjoy them and acknowledge that you offer value; recognized, real value.

STEP 3: LOOK OUTWARD

You've identified what you want, what you're valued for, and some initial relevant skills. Now, it's time to get real and look at what's out there. The economy shows signs of improvement; don't let it be a crutch or an excuse for inaction.

Network and find the opportunities. Tap into your network; spread the word of your search and your vision. Plus, realize that your network is your best source for candid information. Don't just inquire about positions or contact names. Instead, find out about goals, challenges, and activity. Your network is where you'll find out non-published intelligence on your target companies and beyond. It's where the lowest hanging fruit can be most easily picked. I promise.

What positions are advertised? Start by targeting your top 10 most desirable companies to work for; check their websites for postings, but be mindful that some postings are just wish lists, rather than active, urgent searches. As well, feel free to check out job boards, especially from industry associations. Pick apart the job descriptions that you see to get a comprehensive grasp of what firms are seeking.

What are you worth? For salary numbers most specific to our industry, check out the Salary Survey of Architecture, Interior Design & Landscape Architecture Firms, 2011. It was published by Zweig White in November, 2010, and is available for purchase at <http://bit.ly/g483oK>. One less relevant (but free) option would be to check out www.glassdoor.com, which shows actual job opportunities in your geographic area, plus company reviews and broad salary ranges for the position.

STEP 4: CHECK YOUR ALIGNMENT

Identify and rate your skills. Now, expand your list from the last item in Step 1. Make it comprehensive; include all of your skills and attributes in your professional and private life. Your research in Step 3 likely uncovered patterns and themes for what employers are looking for today, so highlight the skills/attributes that are most relevant. Then, be honest with yourself. For each skill and attribute, would you say you are an expert, proficient, or still learning? Know that most employers in this economy are looking for people that will fit the position well, without a learning curve. This means you should take it upon yourself to over-compensate in other areas, or go get the training on your own time to bring yourself up to speed.

Put your money where your mouth is. Remember Step 2 where you gathered all your kudos and acknowledgements? See how many of those comments help to support (prove!) your self-identified skills and attributes. As you go through the interview process, have those comments -- and the stories behind them -- handy, so you can underscore your assertions with real examples.

STEP 5: BE VISIBLE ONLINE

Google yourself (a vanity search). Well, what do you see? You know what to do if personal information comes up; make it private, pronto! As for the professional items, do they put you in the most favorable light possible? If yes, fantastic. If no, then

what actions can you take to counteract less-favorable information? For example, if you are named within a lawsuit involving your company, you will not be able to make that private; however, you will need to be ready with a message that honestly and directly explains your involvement.

Do the requisite -- LinkedIn. From a social networking perspective, it's now essential that you are active on LinkedIn. There are many sites that list all the steps to maximize your LinkedIn experience. It's important to set up a robust -- not halfhearted -- profile. Consider it your online resume, and use keywords within the language (reflect upon the job postings you've researched) to make it more likely for your resume to stand out in searches. Opportunities are abundant to add dynamic elements such as slide presentations and blog feeds.

Once you are connected to everyone you trust, you can dig through their contacts to see if there's anyone with whom you'd like to request an introduction. Joining groups on LinkedIn is a fantastic way to expand your network, and to join online conversations about topics relating to our industry. These few suggestions really just scrape the surface as to the power of LinkedIn. If none of the above motivates you, just remember that employers will look you up online. Send them the message that you are progressive, or at least keeping up with the online "program."

In addition to LinkedIn, you may opt to create a graphic resume that you can store online as well as sending links by email to prospective employers. The output in our industry is very visual, and this is a great platform for showcasing your work. One formidable source is www.visualcv.com. Be sure to check out their examples, too.

STEP 6: JUST DO IT

You are a talented professional, and your common sense already knows what to do. But here's a final checklist with a few reminders:

- Use a separate, private email account for the job search. Period. No exceptions.
- Be organized in your search. Keep every step of your search in one place, from messages to correspondence to intelligence gathered.
- Keep a narrow focus. This is not the economic climate to respond willy-nilly to positions where you don't know someone and/or where you are not fully qualified. Be precise with your job search activities.
- Stay on target with what's most valuable to potential employers. Employers will consider you valuable if you either (1) make them money or (2) solve their problems, in order to save them money.
- Follow up. This is where your competitors will fall short. But not you! You will follow up by phone and email. You won't just check in to learn of an employer's progress in the hiring process. Instead, you will ask an intelligent question to start a dialogue; reiterate your value to the specific position/company; and expand upon why you want to work with them.

Job searching is no easy task, but you deserve a change to better your career. I read this astute statement in a recent article, and it fits:

If you are interested in achieving something, you will do what is convenient. If you are committed to achieving something, you'll do whatever it takes.

Best of luck. I'm rooting for you.