TITLE

It's Not You, It's Your Strategy:
The HIAPy Guide to Finding Work in a Tough Job Market
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AUTHORSHIP

This book is by Hillary Rettig, whose other books include *The Lifelong Activist: How to Change the World Without Losing Your Way* (Lantern Books, 2006) and *The Little Guide To Beating Procrastination, Perfectionism, Fears and Blocks: A Guide for Artists, Academics, Activists, Entrepreneurs and Other Ambitious Dreamers* (downloadable for free at www.hillaryrettig.com). I am a Boston-based coach who has helped hundreds of people around the country use their time better; overcome procrastination, perfectionism and blocks; and create more satisfying careers. For more information on me and my work, please visit my Website or email me at hillaryrettig@yahoo.com.

PREFACE – IT'S NOT YOU, IT'S YOUR STRATEGY

Recently, a coffee date with a friend took a serious turn as he despondently narrated the saga of his latest failure to get hired, and then the whole story of his past two years of unemployment. It was a familiar story of resumes not acknowledged, telephone calls not returned, and some excruciating near misses where he had gotten to the final round of interviews but wasn't hired.

"I need you to tell me what's wrong with me," he finally said, his face strained. "Why I'm not getting hired."

It was a brave request. Not many of us are willing to lay our failures out on the table for someone else to inspect and critique.

So I grilled him on the details: what jobs he had applied for, how he had found out about them, what process he had used to apply, whom he had he used as references, etc.

And this is what I concluded: there was nothing wrong with my friend. Nothing. There was, in fact, a lot right with him. He was a presentable, personable individual with solid

credentials and a lot of interesting work experience.

What was wrong was his strategy. He wasn't applying for jobs effectively.

He was making, in fact, a lot of the mistakes I discuss in this ebook. If he corrects those, and follows the strategy I outline in Part II, he should have a much better chance of getting hired moving forward.

The odds are that, if you've been unemployed a while, you're also walking around wondering what's wrong with you – but there's a good chance that, the same as with my friend, the problem isn't with you, but your strategy. Strategies can be changed, so take heart and keep reading.

This ebook focuses on the foundational activities and strategies underlying a successful job search, but does not include information on tactics (e.g., how to interview or write a resume), partly because that information is widely available elsewhere. If there's sufficient interest, however, I'll write the tactics book later on.

Because a lot of this book focuses on mistakes you yourself might be making – on the premise that that is the most fruitful area of discussion, since your own performance is something you can control and improve – I want to be very clear that I do understand that the U.S. economy is in a very bad state and good jobs can be hard to find. And yet, the good jobs are often out there, but people sabotage their efforts to win them. That is the problem I focus on in this book, and that I hope to help you solve, but please do not think I underestimate the difficulties and pain of finding work in a weak economy.

I wrote this ebook to help people, and also to promote my coaching and workshop business. If, after reading it, you believe you or someone else could benefit from my coaching, or you know of an organization that could host one of my workshops on, (1) finding work, (2) time management, (3) overcoming procrastination, or (4) entrepreneurship, please email me at hillaryrettig@yahoo.com and I'll send you more information. And thanks!

I welcome all comments on this book, and especially suggestions for improving the next edition. Please email them to me at hillaryrettig@yahoo.com .

Hillary

TEXT NOTES

I use the words "candidate," "applicant" and "job searcher" interchangeably to refer to the person looking for work.

I use the word "hirer" mainly to refer to the person making the immediate decision on the

candidate's application – i.e., the person screening resumes, interviewing, or making the final hiring decision. And I use the word "employer" mainly to refer to the organization doing the hiring. Sometimes, however, I use the words "company" or "organization" to refer to the organization. Please note that, even when I use the word "company," I am always referring to all types of employers, including small businesses, large businesses, nonprofit organizations and government agencies, unless I specify otherwise.

I use the word "application" sometimes to refer to the form the hirer wants filled out, but more often to refer to the entire job-application process.

I use the gender pronouns interchangeably and randomly.

Footnotes and citations will be found at the end of each chapter.

All personal and company names used in this book are fictitious, and I have changed identifying details on some case studies.

WARRANTY

The information in this book is presented without warranty of any kind. It has helped many people, and it is my sincere wish that it help you, but I obviously can't accept responsibility for any negative result you feel you may have obtained from using it. If you are suffering from anxiety, depression, addiction or any other psychological or physical condition, please seek professional help before following the advice herein.

LICENSE

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And away we go...

PART I. FOUNDATIONAL ACTIVITIES

1. How Unemployment Stinks: Let Me Count the Ways…

Unemployment is almost always a horrible experience: demoralizing, depressing and disorienting. We tend to punish ourselves harshly for our "failure," feeling lots of shame and

guilt, and sometimes others – even family and friends – punish us as well.

G.J. Meyer's fantastic book *Executive Blues: Down and Out in Corporate America* (Franklin Square Press, 1995) offers the best narrative I've read of what it's like to be unemployed and struggling to find work. He says he experienced shock, resentment, fear, envy, self-pity and shame during a several-year span of intermittent unemployment: a dreadful list. Here's what he says about the shock, envy and shame:

Shock. "Bone-rattling shock at finding myself, for the first time since the week I graduated from grade school, without a place in the world of work...I walked the streets in an almost trancelike state, feeling like I was walking on the bottom of the sea, cut off from everything around me and not like other people any more."

Envy. "If envy caused cancer I'd be dead by Sunday."

Shame. "I'm ashamed in two ways. On a simple level I'm ashamed of myself for being out of work, for getting my family into such a fix...I'm ashamed of myself for losing. When I hear the guy next door start his car in the morning and drive away, I'm ashamed to still be in bed. I'm ashamed to rake leaves on weekday afternoons because everyone in the neighborhood will see – as if they didn't already know – that I don't have an office to go to anymore.

"The other shame is deeper, and, I think, more important...In some ways this second shame comes perilously close to self-loathing. Ask yourself: how are we supposed to react when bad things happen? Everybody knows the answer. The good and the strong react calmly, cheerfully, confidently, bravely...so, what's wrong with me?"

Adding to the burden of Meyer and other unemployed people is the fact that – due to overwork, or plain old uncaring or incivility – lots of hirers treat unemployed people badly. Meyer describes the garden-variety snubs, like not getting calls returned or resumes acknowledged, which individually may not be so significant but which really wear you down after dozens or hundreds of repetitions. And he also describes some truly callous and hurtful behavior, such as the time a hirer had him fly out to New York for a job interview, then stood him up. Writes Meyer: "In Edvard Munch's painting The Scream, a solitary, empty-eyed figure stands in a roadway clutching its head, mouth open wide. I hope that's not what I look like as I walk the streets of Manhattan during the next several hours, seeing and hearing nothing, waiting for it to be time to return to LaGuardia. But it's how I feel. Without making a sound I scream all the way back to Wisconsin."

*****Your first job as an unemployed person is not to look for work, but to learn to cope with unemployment.***** That's because: (1) you deserve to feel peace and self-respect even when unemployed; and (2) depression, discouragement, anger, anxiety, fear, shame, guilt and other negative emotions can undermine your job search. If unemployment is bringing you down, even way down, don't waste time feeling bad about that – such feelings are entirely understandable – but follow the advice offered in Chapters 2 – 13 about seeking help and taking care of yourself.

It's also important to understand *all* the causes of your unemployment so you don't feel undeserved shame or guilt. In my experience, few people get laid off or fired entirely, or even largely, due to their own fault. As I write this, the government has finally acknowledged – at least a year late – that the U.S. economy is in a recession.1 In such an economy you could

be a fabulous worker and still lose your job.

Even assuming you were laid off or fired for more personal reasons, however, you still need to go easy on yourself. Sure, you may have screwed up: that's part of being human and fallible. If you're like many good people, however, you're probably taking way too much of the blame on yourself. Chances are, there were elements in your work situation that were beyond your control and made success difficult, if not impossible. Chapter 2 discusses those, and the proper course of action.

NOTE
1. http://www.epi.org/content.cfm/webfeatures_econindicators_jobspict_20081205

2. If You Need Help, Get Help

As G.J. Meyer eloquently expresses, unemployment is a hugely stressful and demoralizing experience that can undermine even strong and confident people. If you're experiencing depression or serious discouragement, anger, fear or another debilitating emotion, or if your unemployment is damaging your relationships or encouraging an addiction, please seek prompt help from a therapist, counselor or other trained mental health professional. It is not a sign of weakness to do so, but a sign of strength and wisdom.

If you need help, get help – as quickly as possible. (Why put off feeling better?) And if you're "on the fence" about whether to go to therapy, you probably need it. Go out and get a few sessions.

If the first (or second or third...) therapist you consult is a dud, keep looking until you find one who's a good fit. A good therapist can make all the difference not just in your mood, but in your ability to find work, so it's worth working to find one.

If you can't afford a therapist, ask about a sliding scale discount or cheaper group sessions. (If you have health insurance, remember that many policies do now cover some therapy.) If not, call some nonprofit agencies and see if they offer free or cheap counseling.

Generally speaking, however, I would suggest cutting back on other things if at all possible and seeing the best therapist you can.

About Abusive Workplaces

Also seek prompt help if your last work situation ended badly. One thing I've learned from years of coaching is that even many ordinary-looking work environments are psychologically damaging, and even traumatizing. Having to tolerate stress, pressure, chaos, disempowerment, or harsh or unfair treatment for 40 hours (or even 30 or 20 or 10) each week can really undermine you, particularly if the situation goes on for years. Ditto for routinely having your important needs ignored: "Sorry your kid is sick, but we still need you to come in today." We tend to discount these stressors because they are so common and seem intrinsic to worklife, but we shouldn't. (And, by the way, there are plenty of workplaces that aren't stressful, pressured, chaotic, uncaring, etc.)

Many people carry around a huge burden of shame about some incident in their work history. Maybe they didn't finish a project, didn't handle a conflict well, missed an opportunity, or were fired. Often the shame and guilt persist years and even decades after the incident itself, eroding the person's self-confidence and compromising his ability to build a strong career. When I review and analyze such negative experiences with people, however, it almost always becomes clear that they struggled heroically to succeed in a situation where success was impossible. Maybe they weren't given the resources they needed, or there were conflicting goals, or there was chaos, or their work and home responsibilities were incompatible. But the failure was inevitably blamed on them: "inevitably" because abusive workplaces almost always blame the victim.

If such a bad episode is haunting your work history and eroding your self-confidence, please work to analyze it objectively and compassionately. Possibly you didn't do your very best, but are you exaggerating your role in the failure? (And perhaps the scope and seriousness of the failure itself?) Did others assign you more blame than you really deserve? You may be able to do this analysis yourself via journaling, but it is better to do it with an objective and compassionate therapist, mentor or friend.

Of course, if you've been in a really abusive workplace, with emotional abuse, verbal abuse, sexual harassment, discrimination, etc., then you really need to seek therapy as soon as possible. (And maybe legal help.)

I'm not saying all workplaces are harmful or abusive – only that many more are than people think. *****And it's often the best people – those who care most, try hardest to maintain an ethical standard, and work hardest to balance their work and home responsibilities – who wind up suffering and blaming themselves most.*****

So, please: if you think you need to see a therapist or counselor, do so.

This advice also applies to other relevant professionals. If you need a career coach or resume writer – or even if you think you do – then please see one. If you can't afford one, see if you qualify for free or cheap services via a local nonprofit, or try bartering. (If you don't have anyone to barter with, try advertising on craigslist.org or timebanks.org.)

Whether you pay, barter or receive free services, please work to find the best help you can. As I mentioned in Preface 2, there's a lot of bad advice out there, and that bad advice can really screw you up. Top quality advice and support, in contrast, can often help you get a good job faster and more easily than you might have believed possible.

3. Practice Optimism

I know I'm asking a lot, especially if you've been a "glass half empty" person your whole life. But pessimism is going to hurt your chances of getting a job.

A pessimist encounters an obstacle during his job search and immediately thinks: "This can't be solved."

An optimist encounters an obstacle and immediately thinks, "There must be a solution. Let's look for it."

The problem with the pessimist's attitude is that there are usually lots of obstacles – lots of confusion, false leads, discouragement, rejection, etc. – in a job search. If you overreact to them, you really diminish your odds of success.

Another way to put it is that pessimists turns molehills into mountains, while optimists turn molehills into anthills. And, guess what: the optimist is almost always right, in a job-search context and many others. If you can avoid panicking, the molehills often do reveal themselves to be small and easily overcome. As my teacher Jerry Weinberg says, "The problem isn't the problem. The problem is your reaction to the problem."

Pessimism and optimism tend to be self-fulfilling prophecies. Pessimists not only assume problems are unsolvable; they tend to see the world as a harsh place devoid of help, and thus they don't seek help. Optimists, on the other hand, know that problems are solvable and that people generally want to help. And so they go out looking for help – on Websites, at meetings, through relatives, or while on line at the supermarket – and often find it.

The pessimist learns of someone who might help him in his job search and thinks, "Why would that person talk to me? What do I have to offer her?" And, "She probably doesn't have the information I need, anyway: it would be a waste of time to contact her."

The optimist assumes that, not only is there a good chance that the person will help him, but that she also has at least some useful information to share – which, again, is usually the case.

In the last chapter, I advised you to get therapy if you need it to cope with the stresses of unemployment. A pessimist might read that chapter and say, "I have no money, and therapy is just a waste of time, anyway." An optimist, in contrast, might say, "Well, I have no money, and I'm a bit skeptical, but what do I have to lose? Besides, my friend Tom said that therapy really helped him when he was unemployed. Okay, I guess I'll call up Tom's therapist and see if he offers a sliding scale or can recommend someone who does."

Even if you're not by nature an optimistic person, at least try to act optimistically during your job search. By doing so, you might even start to feel optimistic, especially once you learn that many people really are willing to help.

Here, from a fantastic *New York Times* article entitled The Language of Loss for the Jobless2, is optimism in practice:

"'I understand you're sorry, so am I, but that doesn't do me any good,' Mr. Adler, who starts paying college tuition this fall, is telling those offering condolences. 'If you really want to help, tell me what you think I do well, who you know, and where you think my skills fit best. And they were grateful for being given that option and I was glad I could redirect the nature of the conversation pretty much on a dime.'"

Pessimists often think they are being realistic and grounded in their world view, but they're not: they're being too negative. Many are also unconsciously acting out their own fears and insecurities: they're afraid to ask for help, and so they don't, using the excuse that asking is futile. Some think it's a sign of weakness to ask for help, but optimists know it's a sign of strength and wisdom, and they also know that many people in the business world and elsewhere subscribe to the laws of reciprocity and karma: I help you today; you (or someone

else) helps me tomorrow.

So, please cultivate an optimistic attitude, or at least some optimistic behaviors. And please try to hang around mainly, or entirely, with optimistic people, since doing so will catalyze your own optimism and make your job search easier and pleasanter. You should also severely limit your interactions with pessimists, even if they happen to be related to you. Pessimists can drag you down and reinforce your pessimistic attitudes.

Does it make sense to be optimistic even in the face of the awful economy we're in? Absolutely – as I discuss in the next chapter.

NOTE
2. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/18/fashion/18layoff.html?scp=1&sq=language%20of%20loss&st=cse

4. Yes, There are Good (or, At Least, Okay) Jobs Out There

I want to caution you against one form of pessimism in particular: the idea that "there are no good jobs out there."

Yes, I know: the economy is terrible. There are many areas of the country where the job pool has been devastated, and also many industries that have been devastated, including automobiles, manufacturing, textiles, airlines, media and information technology. I also know that many of the jobs that have been created in recent years are much worse than those that have been lost, offering lower pay, less security and fewer (or no) benefits.[3]

And so I know that there are people out there who can legitimately claim that, "there are no good jobs out there."

I would be very remiss, however, if I didn't point out that every time someone has ever said that to me, he or she was wrong.

Every time.

This is probably at least partly due to the fact that I live in a big city and have mainly coached other big-city residents. In a big city, if one employer or industry dries up, there are usually others. That may not be the case in rural areas, or towns with one dominant employer.

But I also think many people believe that "there are no good jobs out there" when it simply isn't true. If you are one of them, we need to correct that misperception fast, because there is no faster way to torpedo a job search, or any other search, than to say that the thing you're looking for doesn't exist. Even if the difficult truth is that there are FEW good jobs out there, that's a far cry from there being NO good jobs.

In my experience, there are three main reasons people say "there are no good jobs out there" when it isn't true:

1) They are using a flawed job-search strategy, so the jobs are out there, but they're not finding them.

2) They are being too picky or biased. And,

3) They are discouraged and/or demoralized, and want to take a break from job

hunting, but can't admit that to themselves or others, so instead claim it's useless to look.

I examine those reasons individually in this and the following chapters. Let's begin with "flawed strategy."

Many people look for work ineffectively. As I discuss in Chapter 24, for instance, if you're over-relying on postings on the big job boards, or even on company Websites, that's an ineffective strategy. Many people submit dozens or hundreds or resumes that way, with little result – and then, instead of questioning their strategy, conclude that "there are no good jobs out there."

Relying on "help wanted" ads in local newspapers can be similarly futile – your resume is likely to sit, unread, in a stack. Plus, there's an additional problem, as this article entitled "The Invisible Job Market" in *The Berkshire Eagle*4 discusses:

"Only 32% of the population of Berkshire County has earned a post secondary degree or higher...The most recent Job Vacancy Report shows that of the nearly 2200 current vacant jobs, 48% require a post secondary degree and advanced training. This means that much of the local talent base does not have the education level and/or training that many employers seek. Because of this disconnect, employers are going outside the area to recruit. They use national job boards, industry publications or recruiters (or a combination thereof) to find their new employees. Jobs with less education and training requirements tend to be advertised locally, while those requiring more education tend to not be. So when a resident looks at the area websites and classified ads, they see only a part of the picture and the most robust portion of the job market is then fairly 'invisible.'"

This mismatch between employer needs and the local labor pool is actually pretty common. The article's author, Tyler Fairbank, recommends that job seekers in this situation get more education – and I totally agree. But education takes time, and in the meantime I suggest you go after some likely-looking jobs even if you don't happen to meet every single requirement listed in the ad. Obviously, this won't work if a requirement is essential, but many aren't, and many are more negotiable than you might think, as I discuss in the next chapter.

NOTES
3. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/31/business/economy/31jobs.html?scp=1&sq=part%20time%20employment&st=cse
4. http://www.berkshireeagle.com/ci_4373562

5. Negotiable and Optional Job "Requirements"

A common, serious mistake many job searchers make is to assume that the requirements posted in job ads or job descriptions are set in stone. Believing that, they don't apply for jobs that aren't a "100% fit ," or apply only half-heartedly because they think their application is doomed. Either way, they are severely limiting their options – which can, of

course, contribute to the "there are no good jobs out there" mindset.

As it turns out, however, many "requirements" are negotiable or even entirely optional; and, if you lack them, many hirers will be satisfied if you can show equivalent experience or skills.

A college degree is often such an optional requirement, for example. Employers ask for it because, in theory, it shows you have a breadth of knowledge and can finish big projects. (I say "in theory" because, (a) we all know people whose college major was brewskies, and (b) many employers ask for it reflexively, without really knowing why.) If you lack a degree, however, you can always show how you obtained equivalent or even better knowledge and experience elsewhere – say, through your work history or foreign travel. For many employers, that will be just fine. In fact, if you're a good "framer" (see Chapter 27), you can probably even show how your "real-world" experience beats classroom experience hands down.

As I explain in Chapter 7, the core problem is often not how hirers see your qualifications and credentials, but how you yourself see them. I know plenty of dynamic, energetic and accomplished people whose lack of a college degree hasn't held them back one bit – and I know plenty of others who are so ashamed of their lack of a degree that it's hard for them to sell themselves effectively despite their many other accomplishments.

Another example is how people react to a firing or other career "failure." Some people keep it in perspective (as discussed in Chapter 2) and don't let it define them, while others see it as a fatal blot. Either way, your perspective will probably color the way you present yourself, and the way hirers see you. That's why, although it may not be easy to change your perspective on such incidents, you should work hard, and seek out help, to do so.

This kind of negativity is a self-esteem issue, usually, and there's usually also a perfectionist element to it. Perfectionists tend to overestimate their challenges while underestimating their abilities to meet those challenges: a pernicious combination.5 Talk to your mentors to make sure you're not doing this, and also remember that there is no such thing as a "perfect" job candidate, and that every candidate has strong and weak points relative to any given job. Although smart candidates do work hard to mitigate their shortcomings by taking classes, reading books, doing strategic volunteer work, etc., they try not to worry too much about those shortcomings when applying for work. Instead, they focus more productively on how to present their strengths, skills and experience in the strongest possible way. (That framing thing, again.) They also work to come up with effective "equivalents" for their weak areas:

Someone lacking an MBA: "I ran my own business for several years and have taken several professional development courses in management and finance."

Someone whose current position is not supervisory: "I have supervised people in the past, and currently supervise a dozen people for a volunteer community project I'm involved with."

Someone lacking experience in telephone customer support: "When I did retail sales, we were very busy, but were expected to treat every customer with great patience and respect – and we also took a lot of telephone orders."

Smart candidates also don't assume a job requirement is vital, or rigorous, without asking. Candidate (nervously): "How much Excel experience are you looking for?" Hirer (blithely): "Oh, just someone who can create a simple spreadsheet. No complex formulas or anything." Candidate (thinking, relieved): "Whew!"

The Emotional Component to Hiring

Candidates who see job requirements as rigid also often don't understand that there's a large emotional component to most hiring decisions, even if those decisions seem purely rational. As I'll discuss in Chapter 18, if a hirer feels safe hiring you, he will probably be less rigid about his requirements. Two of the best ways to elicit that feeling of safety are to: (1) have someone he trusts recommend you (hence, the vital role of networking in getting a job); and (2) convince him that you really, really want the particular job in question. Many people who transition to new fields do this: they often lack many of the credentials and experience that someone already in that field has, but more than make up for it with their recommendations and enthusiasm – and so hirers are inclined to give them benefit of the doubt.

Sure, many requirements are non-negotiable, and for good reason: you don't want an unqualified doctor or engineer, for instance. And, of course, some employers are more "sticklers" than others. But a good rule of thumb is that if there's a job you really want, you should go for it even if you're not a 100% fit, unless you know for a fact that a requirement is actually required. Of course, you have to do a fabulous job with your application: if you don't, then that combined with your weak areas will mean that there's little reason a hirer should consider you.

Note:
5. For more on perfectionism, negativity, and other fear-based antiproductive habits, download my free ebook *The Little Guide To Beating Procrastination, Perfectionism, Fears and Blocks* at www.hillaryrettig.com.

6. On Pickiness and Biases

If there's only one salary, job title, type of organization, benefits package, location, commute, office setup, etc., that will make you happy, the problem may not be that "there are no good jobs out there," but that you are being too picky. That's a bad idea in any job market, but particularly a weak one. You need to choose the two or three criteria that are most important, and relax as much as possible on all the others.

Prioritizing can be difficult, so it's helpful to examine the thoughts and feelings underlying your choices. Do you need a certain title or salary because you really need it, or because you would feel like a failure without it, or because someone else will be disappointed if you don't get it, or for another reason? Often, just characterizing a need is enough to defuse it: "I want my own office because I had one in my last job, and because it seems right

for someone at my career stage. And, of course, the privacy is great. But still, I guess it's not as important as a good salary and benefits package, and a short commute."

Know thyself, Socrates said, and that's particularly good advice for job searchers. By knowing yourself, you create options (see Chapter 8), make better choices, and can achieve the best possible outcome even from a difficult situation.

Ask yourself whether you are biased against certain types of employers. Many people who have worked in big companies are often biased against smaller ones – and vice versa! And many who have built careers in government, business or the nonprofit sector are biased against the other two sectors. You could, in fact, have a perfectly good reason for your bias, but if your reasons aren't solid, then it would be better to keep an open mind. One thing that almost always helps is information: there's an enormous diversity in most fields or industries, and so if one type of job or employer doesn't suit you, there could well be another that does.

I saw such an example of bias in a client with a background in advertising. After having been unemployed for a long time, she was finally offered a good job in her field – but the catch, from her standpoint, was that it was with the federal government. She had a very negative bias against government work that almost kept her from taking the job, but she did take it and it worked out much better than she had anticipated.

Also think about whether you are biased against yourself – or, to put it another way, whether you may be underestimating your hireability. I discuss this common problem at length in Chapter 9, but let me just say now that if there's a job you'd like but don't think you're qualified for, reread the previous chapter on negotiable "requirements" and then ask someone knowledgeable if you really are underqualified – or just go out and apply. Often, we underestimate our worth on the job market, or our hireability in a new field. Recently, for instance, I worked with a salesperson whose career selling expensive jewelry faltered after 9/11. She wanted to start a new career in the nonprofit world, but thought her experience wasn't transferable. In fact, her sales background and expertise selling to the affluent made her an ideal candidate for a development job (i.e., raising money), which is one of the best nonprofit fields of all.

Two common biases against self are, by the way:

(1) Thinking the competition are all better than you, so that you don't stand a chance. The reality, as I discuss in Chapter 14, is that the competition are often much weaker than you realize. And,

(2) Thinking you're better than all the competition. People often think this because they overvalue one skill (say, a technical skill like programming) and undervalue others (say, teamwork or communications). This bias is dangerous because it can lead to arrogance and sloppiness when applying, as discussed in Chapter 25.

When job hunting, you want as clear and objective a vision of yourself, your competition, and the job market as possible. That's not always easy to attain, which is a key reason you should work hard to examine your priorities and biases, and also seek feedback from others.

I know, I know: all this prioritization and self-analysis sounds like a lot of work – and don't you have enough to do already? But it's vital work, because, ***in many cases of

long-term unemployment I've seen, the person was being too picky, biased or narrowly focused.*** Of course, they *thought* they were being flexible – and, perhaps pre-recession they would have been flexible enough. But these days you have to be extra-flexible.

Please note that, in advising you to broaden the range of positions you consider acceptable, I am NOT telling you to settle for a bad job. I would never say that, partly because it's horrible to spend eight hours a day in a bad situation, but also because it's not a good strategy, since it's hard to succeed in those circumstances. Our goal is not to get you a job, any job, but to get you a job you can be reasonably happy at, succeed at, and use to help build a strong and fulfilling career.

*****The bottom line is that, in a tight job market, you might have to cast your net a little wider than you would ordinarily, look for work a little more creatively than you would ordinarily, and "push" a little harder for a job than you would ordinarily – oh, and take a few more risks. That all may not add up to your ideal situation, but it's a far cry from, and a far better situation than, "there are no good jobs out there."*****

7. On Fear, Procrastination and Not Getting Stuck

People procrastinate, usually, because they're afraid of the consequences of moving forward. Someone might be desperate to get a new job, but if she is more desperate to avoid rejection, or winding up in a bad job, then she may procrastinate to avoid those outcomes. More specifically, someone could truly believe that "there are no good jobs out there," or she could be telling herself that to excuse herself from looking and facing the worse outcome.

People tend to procrastinate in three ways:

1) Escapist activities such as mindless television, Web surfing, shopping or video games.

2) Good works for family, friends or the community. I am not against good works! But you have to set a limit on it and make sure it doesn't interfere with your other important goals, including finding work. See Chapter 12 for more on this topic. And, finally,

3) Activities that seem like productive work, but aren't. This is the sneakiest and most insidious form of procrastination because often we're not even aware that we're procrastinating. It's exemplified by the many people trying to write a book or thesis who do endless research but never get around to actually writing; or the many people who compulsively houseclean instead of using their time to pursue goals they hold meaningful, such as relationships, art, activism or professional success. (See the blog at www.hillaryrettig.com for an article on how to minimize housework without living like a slob.)

In a job search, this form of procrastination often entails submitting endless resumes online, but never getting around to the much more effective tactic of networking. Or, it could prevent you from consulting experts or others who could tell you how to improve your strategy: you just stubbornly, and ineffectually, keep plugging along.

Don't be ashamed of your procrastination problem, and don't be afraid to tackle it, either: procrastination is not a character flaw or moral shortcoming, but merely a bad habit and understandable response to fear. A little procrastination can be okay, if it helps you get through a bad day. A lot of procrastination, however, will eventually leave you unhappy and bitter at lost possibilities. Better to tackle your fears, if only a little at a time.

For more information on procrastination and how to overcome it, check out Appendix III of this ebook, and also my OTHER free ebook *The Little Guide To Beating Procrastination, Perfectionism, Fears and Blocks* at www.hillaryrettig.com .

8. When You Don't Like Your Options

People also often procrastinate when they're not happy with their perceived options. Someone who really wants a particular type of job but doesn't think he can get it, for instance, might procrastinate on looking for any new job.

I'm talking about something different, here, than the pickiness problem discussed in Chapter 6. The problem there was having too long a list of requirements; here, it's having contradictory requirements, or a conflict between your work requirements and other areas of your life. Some examples:

*Someone who wants a high-paying job that's also easy and low stress. (A rare combination.)

*Someone who wants to get paid to do his passion – for instance, art or activism – but is unwilling to compromise on the job's location (paid jobs in these fields tend to be few and far between) or other factors (e.g., salary).

*Someone who wants to live in a certain region – perhaps because she grew up there, has family there, or feels another deep connection to it – but doesn't think she can find work there.

*Someone who wants to spend a lot of time with his children, or on another important priority, but needs to work full-time.

The main things to do, in such situations, are:

1) Journal around your thoughts and feelings to get as clear a view as possible of them. Many people aren't fully aware they have a conflict, and so it just stays in the back of their thoughts, muddying everything and causing fear and procrastination. Making your conflict explicit may, however, be all it takes for you to prioritize and get moving again.

2) Talk with friends, mentors or others. This is important because it's hard to see ourselves objectively, particularly when under stress. As I discuss in Chapter 11, the best problem-solving is done in community.

3) Consult coaches or other experts to make sure you're really seeing all your options. Your friends can help you understand yourself, but unless they are well informed and savvy about the job market and career strategy, they can't give you the best strategic advice.

All of this advice is particularly important if you've mainly held one kind of job, or worked for one employer. In that case, you might have a kind of "tunnel vision," and really need to consult people outside your field. Remember: information frequently leads to

employment.

4) Go for it! Even if none of the currently available jobs is your dream job, don't wait around for one of those dream jobs to open up: instead, go ahead and apply for whichever of the available jobs best meet your needs. Waiting around for a dream job is often a form of procrastination, but if you focus on doing well at whatever job you're doing, and building a good career over the long term, the dream jobs often come to you – and quicker than you might imagine.

5) Work to create more options for yourself for the future. If you want to spend more time at home with your kids, for instance, start researching family-friendly companies – and start building your credentials and network so you can get hired by one of them as soon as possible. And if you want to move to a different region, start making plans for that.

Whenever you think you have no options, or only one or two bad ones, in your job search or elsewhere, you're probably wrong. Fear tends to cause us to see things in black-and-white, all-or-nothing terms, but few situations in life are really that way. Most of the time, the situation has shades of gray, and the best outcomes can usually be found in that gray area.

So, the person who wants to spend more time at home with his kids, or live in a certain region of the country, might find that telecommuting, flex-time or job-sharing helps him achieve at least part of that goal. If someone else came to him with that problem, he'd no doubt come up with those solutions in a snap. But we typically have a greater level of fear when facing our own problems, and that fear impedes our problem solving.

How to Change Fields

Perhaps the most frightening "bad option" situation is when you are employed in a declining field or industry. Then you face the choice of either staying and watching your job prospects dwindle, or taking the difficult and scary step of moving to a new field. That decision can be particularly tough if you've been in your current field a long time, and/or have a large investment in education or tools. But staying could ultimately lead to a dead end. (Chances are it will, or you wouldn't seriously be considering leaving.)

While transitioning is difficult, it is usually not as difficult as people imagine it will be, and nearly every transitioner, in my experience, eventually winds up being very happy he or she made the change. But no one really knows whether that will be their outcome – and it's hard to envision, in any case – so it's hard to overcome the fear and get started.

The keys to successfully changing fields are to: (1) resist the (understandable) urge to procrastinate, and (2) have loads of support and mentors. Also, recognize that most people, these days, will be called on to transition at some point in their careers. This isn't our granddad's job market, where you could get a job at IBM, Kodak or another big corporation and be set for life.

The good news is that, whereas a couple of generations ago switching fields was considered weird, nowadays it's normal and even hip. (The *New York Times* recently reported that, "more than five million Americans who are 44 to 70 are already engaged in a stage of work after their first careers that has a social impact, mainly in education, health care,

government and other nonprofit organizations."6) You may even find that your skills and experience are more valued in your new field than they were in the old one. In fact, many people discover that starting a second or third career is not just fascinating and rewarding, but rejuvenating – even if they initially went into that new career reluctantly. (That includes me, by the way.) It makes sense, after all, that moving from a declining industry filled with frightened people, to a growing one filled with more secure and optimistic ones, will improve your outlook, especially if your new colleagues appreciate you more than your old ones did.

NOTE
6. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/13/business/13next.html?em=&pagewanted=all

9. Yes, You're Employable

Another form of pessimism I frequently encounter is the idea that many job seekers have that, due to some gap or weakness in their background or skills, no employer will ever hire them.

People who think they're unemployable are almost always wrong. I say "almost" because there are definitely people out there who face serious discrimination. Most people are not in that situation, however, and so we're back to that self-esteem/perfectionism problem I discussed in Chapter 5. Part II will teach you simple things you can do that should significantly boost your odds of getting hired – and not only SHOULD you do those things, you MUST do them. If you don't, then the reason you're not getting offers is probably not that you're unemployable or being discriminated against, but that you are screwing up the search and application process.

There are several specific groups of applicants who are prone to feeling unhireable, including:

Artists who are broke or burned out and need to get a "mainstream" job.

Activists in the same situation.

Anyone switching industries or jobs, including veterans trying to transition into civilian jobs; government workers trying to transition into the private sector (or vice versa); corporate workers seeking nonprofit work (or vice versa); and people from downsized industries seeking to make a fresh start.

Entrepreneurs whose businesses have "failed"7 and now need to get a job.

Homemakers reentering the workforce, and others with gaps in their professional history.

People with one or two weaknesses – for instance, someone who doesn't speak or write perfect English, or who doesn't know how to use a popular software program.

People whose recent job experiences undermined their self-esteem and self-confidence, as discussed in Chapter 2.

Most of these people's concerns can be traced to either: (1) the perfectionist misconception that having one or two weak elements in your background, skills or experience will doom your application; and (2) an inability or unwillingness to picture

oneself in a new line of work.

The "one negative thing dooms my application" mistake often happens when you compare yourself to an illusory ideal candidate with no weaknesses or gaps in her resume. In real life, however, no such candidate exists. As discussed in Chapter 5, the proper response to one's weaknesses is not to give up hope, but to frame your experience and skills so that you're the strongest possible candidate, and so that your strengths compensate for – or, better yet, render meaningless – your weaknesses. See Chapter 27 for more on framing.

The "inability to visualize oneself in a new type of work" problem isn't a shortcoming so much as a common human trait. Some people are just naturally better visualizers than others, and most of us aren't very good at it, especially when we're scared and/or overwhelmed. The trick to overcoming this problem is to stop seeing yourself as a role (an "artist," "entrepreneur," or "reentering homemaker"), and start seeing yourself as a collection of talents, skills and experiences that can be flexibly deployed in many work situations. Then, you should work with a really sharp coach, mentor or colleague to match your skills and experience against the current job market and figure out which jobs to apply for. (Then you need to frame.)

It's important to do this work with another person because most of us have trouble viewing ourselves objectively, and tend, in fact, to devalue ourselves and our accomplishments.

As it happens, many hirers value the kinds of candidates mentioned above:

They value entrepreneurs (including professional artists) for their market savvy, operations savvy, customer relations skills, creativity, and abilities to manage, problem-solve and take risks.

They value veterans for their discipline and leadership.

They value activists and community organizers for their knowledge of the local community, organizational skills, managerial skills, and communications skills.

The core problem, as stated in Chapter 5, is often not how hirers see your qualifications and credentials, but how YOU see them. If you start from the standpoint that you're deficient, it's going to be hard to convince an employer otherwise. But if you start from the standpoint that your skills and experience are valuable, then you're going to be much more likely to convince an employer of the same.

Of course, you should do what you can to bolster your credentials and fill in the gaps in your experience and skills. (A meaningful volunteer gig in your new field can work wonders.) And, of course, there will probably always be candidates out there who are objectively more qualified than you. But, as I discuss in Part II, there are powerful, relatively easy techniques you can use to compete against even more qualified applicants.

And frame, baby, frame.

NOTE

7. I put the word "failed" in quotes because there's rarely such a thing as a total failure. This is yet another topic I discuss in my companion ebook, *The Little Guide To Beating Procrastination, Perfectionism, Fears and Blocks*, downloadable at www.hillaryrettig.com.

10. Invest in Lavish Self-Care

Looking for work is not for the faint-hearted. You've got to stay strong, focused and resilient in a process that is practically designed to undermine you. So it's not simply feel-good advice to tell you to take care of yourself: it is very pragmatic advice.

So, eat well and make sure you get plenty of sleep. Exercise, and also take time for recreation. Try to relax in ways that engage and fulfill you – as opposed to, say, escapist television that ultimately winds up boring or depressing you. Find heroes (personal, contemporary, historical, and even fictional) whose courage in the face of adversity inspires and strengthens you, and spend time pondering their example.

Resist any temptation you might have to think, "I don't deserve leisure or self-care because I'm unemployed." That's an irrational, not to mention inhumane, viewpoint. And any time you've been rejected, or feel like you've been diminished by the process, take quick steps to bolster your ego and self-confidence. See Appendix I for some ideas.

Give yourself treats – lavish ones, if possible. Money is probably tight, right now, but try not to eliminate all pleasures. And you can always treat yourself lavishly in free or cheap ways, like sitting with a fragrant cup of tea, or listening to some nice music, or going on a fun walk with your kids or dogs.

It is very easy, while job searching, to descend into a shame spiral where you feel bad, stop taking care of yourself, and then feel worse...and it keeps going. It may be too much to ask for a reverse "pride spiral," but it is quite possible to at least keep things on a relatively even keel. When you do something nice for yourself after you've been rejected or ignored, it sends a powerful message to your subconscious that, "This rejection happened to me, but it doesn't diminish me as a person, or make me any less worthy of love and respect."

It's a message most of us can't hear often enough, in or out of work.

11. Build a Supportive Community

Many of us tend to isolate ourselves when we have a problem, but that's exactly the wrong approach, since most problems are best solved in community. Just as it takes a village to raise a child, it takes one to help you find a new job. In fact, the more help you enlist for this difficult project, the faster you'll probably succeed.

Your supportive "village" should include:

*Professionals, including not just job coaches, headhunters and resume writers, but therapists, doctors, nutritionists and others as needed.

*Mentors who can advise you on different aspects of your career and search. Preferably lots of them. Some mentors are strategic mentors who are in your field and can give advice regarding the opportunities that are out there and how to get them. These mentors also often have connections, which can actually be more important than the information itself. (Some mentors can get you a job with a single phone call.)

There are also tactical mentors who can advise you on some element of the process:

resume writing, interviewing, what to wear to interviews, how to use the Internet, etc.

Appendix II tells you how to find and keep mentors.

*You also want at least one job-search "buddy" – an understanding person whom you can call up when you're having a bad (or good!) day, and just talk. Often, it's another unemployed person – you serve as buddies for each other – and, of course, you can have more than one.

A buddy should be a thoughtful, honest and optimistic person who will listen patiently to your thoughts, ideas and feelings, and offer not just friendship and empathy, but constructive and compassionate feedback. In other words, he should be neither a harsh judge nor an enabler who will agree with all your darkest thoughts about how the world sucks and the odds are stacked against you. The best buddies are optimistic realists.

Sometimes a mentor can be a buddy, but be careful about mixing those roles. Many mentors don't see it as their role to support you emotionally, and may feel uncomfortable with being asked to do so. That doesn't mean you should deny your feelings or pretend that everything is hunky-dory; it just means you should keep the conversation focused on getting work, rather than on how miserable unemployment is making you feel.

You can use a family member as a buddy, but since one of things you will probably need support around is the impact of your unemployment on your family, it's a good idea to have some non-family members as buddies as well.

Buddies can also serve as document proofreaders and interview rehearsal partners, key support roles.

*Networking contacts. As I'll discuss in Chapter 24, most experts believe that networking is key to getting a job. One of your most important tasks will therefore be to build as big a network as possible, and use it effectively. How big? Naïve or unsuccessful candidates frequently think they're networking like mad when they've contacted a dozen people. Successful candidates, in contrast, often contact dozens or even hundreds of people. Although that's a lot of work – and hard work, too, particularly if you're an introvert – it's a much better use of your time than sending out hundreds of "cold" resumes to strangers, particularly if you combine it with an effective strategy like the one I offer in Part II.

One trick successful candidates use, of course, is that they don't wait until they're unemployed to network, but network constantly, as part of their daily routine, even while they're happily employed. There's lots of benefits to that approach, including that it's relatively low stress; you learn about opportunities early on; and that you're saved from having to apply "cold," without a personal contact. (See Chapter 23 for more on the importance of that kind of speed and proactivity.)

Regarding the correct use of networks, the example I cited in Chapter 3 is worth repeating:

"'I understand you're sorry, so am I, but that doesn't do me any good,' Mr. Adler, who starts paying college tuition this fall, is telling those offering condolences. 'If you really want to help, tell me what you think I do well, who you know, and where you think my skills fit best. And they were grateful for being given that option and I was glad I could redirect the nature of the conversation pretty much on a dime.'"

Note the specificity of Adler's instructions. People often really want to help you, but don't know how: if you tell them precisely what you need, you'll often get a much better result.

You can also join networking groups, both online and in the "real world." Just remember not to over-rely on the online stuff: you've got to get out and actually meet people, and (more importantly) let them meet you. Also, try to avoid a key mistake many unemployed people make: spending too much time around other unemployed people. The way to find a job is to network with employed people.

When networking, remember that people are more willing and able to help if they can easily visualize you in the role to which you aspire. So, dress appropriately, have your 2 minute "elevator speech" and other dialog well rehearsed, and have copies of your business card and resume available to hand out. Be professional and prepared, in other words.

12. Create Time

It's a full-time job to find work.

Okay, that's a cliché. But it also happens to be true. Are you on board with that? And, just as importantly, are your family and friends?

It means that you should be spending around 40 hours a week looking for work. And that means you probably shouldn't be doing any more housework, chores or favors than you did when you were employed – ideally, in fact, you should be doing less, since looking for work is usually harder and more stressful than holding down a job, and so you need more recuperation time.

Often, it doesn't work that way, though. People see that you're unemployed and assume you're free for extra childcare, household chores and even volunteer work. And, let's face it: it's tempting to do those things, just to help people out and feel productive and keep your mind off your troubles. But you need to be careful not to let random activities – even kind ones – distract you from your mission, or deplete your energies so that you can't do it effectively.

I don't want you to skimp on your self-care, either. I'd like to see a minimum of an hour a day of "me" time and recreation, and two hours is better. In fact, if you only have 40 hours total to spend on both looking for work and self-care, I'd rather see 30 looking and 10 self-care than 40 looking and 0 self-care. As discussed in Chapter 10, self-care strengthens and supports you so that you can get more done in the 30 hours: it's a good investment.

The best way to manage your time is to create a weekly schedule in which looking for work and self-care are the centerpiece of your days the way working will be once you're employed again. If possible, share that schedule with your family and friends, and ask for their support and cooperation in sticking to it. Too often, we make the mistake of assuming no one will help us – that pessimism thing, again! – when the reality is that our loved ones would love to help us, but don't know how. Tell them how – and also tell them why, so that they understand the context behind your needs and requests. That will help them feel more

involved and committed, and they may also have some useful feedback.

Of course, there's always the chance that your family and friends won't be supportive. That's a bitter pill, but in that case, it's up to you to protect and defend your schedule. And lack of support at home makes it all the more crucial that you follow the advice in the previous chapter and create a supportive, success-focused community around yourself.

13. Be Frugal

Why a chapter on frugality in a book on how to get a job? Because frugality creates freedom – for instance, the freedom to choose an interesting job that pays less over a boring one that pays more.

Or, the freedom of not having to remain in a crappy or abusive job just for the paycheck. Or, of not having to endure a long, expensive, stressful commute for that same paycheck. Or, of not having to work 40 or more hours a week when you'd rather spend some of that time with your loved ones, art, activism, or another important priority.

Frugality = freedom.

Some people remember when our society was much less commercial than it is now. They can remember, for instance, when non-toy companies did not advertise directly to children, the way Gap, Nike, Apple and many others do now, on Nickelodeon and elsewhere. When there weren't advertisements on schoolbooks, toll booths, and just about everywhere else.

The pressure to consume begins early, and it is intense.

Resist it.

Start downsizing your lifestyle even if you don't feel the immediate need to do so. Google "living simply" and "frugality" for some tips, or take out a book on those topics from the library. (Don't buy it!) You'll find a whole, hip community out there to support you, as well as services such as craigslist.org and freecycle.org (for cheap or free furniture and housewares), timebanks.org (for barter services), goloco.org (for ride-sharing), and even globalfreeloaders.com (for free accommodations when traveling!).

"Be frugal" is not new or radical advice, of course. Nearly 2,500 years ago, the Spartan king Agesilaus said, "By sowing frugality we reap liberty, a golden harvest."

It was good advice then, and remains so.

Okay, we're done with the Part I. Now onto your job search strategy!

PART II. A JOB-SEARCH STRATEGY THAT WORKS

14. 85%!

85% of people screw up their job applications.

85%.

85%!

Holy cow! It seems incredible, and yet that's the number most often quoted. Here are two examples:

In an article in the April 6, 2004 *Wall Street Journal*, a human resources manager says that about 85% of the cover letters she receives have typos, misspellings (including the recipient's name), or other errors.

Scott Bennett, author of the popular *The Elements of Résumé Style* (American Management Association, 2005) says: "If you've hired people yourself, you'll know the following to be true: As an employer, if you receive 200 résumés for an open position, maybe 10 are error-free (if you're lucky)."8

That's *95%*, folks!

Many hirers report the same results. And it's not just resumes and cover letters, either. People screw up all kinds of things in their applications:

They apply for the wrong jobs.

They show up late or badly groomed for interviews. In a 6/1/04 *Wall Street Journal* article entitled "Dated Suit, Dirty Nails Can Tip the Balance If You're Job Hunting," writer Joann S. Lublin discusses the myriad grooming mistakes hirers report having seen in candidates. The list is incredible, actually, and includes: wearing inappropriate clothing; wearing dirty or wrinkled clothing; wearing clothes that fit badly or are years out of style; showing up with hair not cut or combed; showing up with bad breath or body odor; wearing obnoxious perfume or aftershave; and wearing too much makeup or makeup badly applied.

They show up unprepared or unrehearsed for interviews.

They don't send thank you notes.

They use the wrong people for references, and/or don't coach their references on the important points they need to make.

Etc.

That 85% is both good and bad news, as we'll see below.

NOTE

8. Mr. Bennett and I obviously disagree on whether to write the word "resume" with accent marks. I say no, not just because the accents look outdated and fussy, but because accented characters can get garbled during emails and file sends, creating a typo. If your name or another important word contains an accent or other diacritical mark, okay, you might want to take the chance – but why do so unnecessarily?

15. Competing With the "Fab 15%"

The fact that 85% of your competition screws up is good news, since it means you're only really competing against the remaining 15%. The bad news, however, is that that 15% is playing at the top of their game – and the only way to compete is to do the same: to complete

every step of the application process as close to perfectly as possible. That takes a lot of time and effort, as these examples of what you should do ***for each and every important job opening*** illustrate:

*Research: You should conduct extensive research, not just about the company and its products or services, but its customers and competition, and trends in its industry and customers' industries. Oh, and relevant overall economic and political trends.

*Editing: Edit your already-edited resume and cover letter so that they are targeted precisely at this particular opening. (It often takes hours, if not a day or more.) Then, show the documents to your mentors and edit some more based on their feedback.

*Rehearse: Rehearse ten or more times for your interview. Not five or eight, but ten. Go over every question you are likely to be asked, and practice, practice, practice until you can deliver your answers smoothly and concisely.

*Grooming: Show up for interviews immaculately groomed, with no detail amiss.

*References: Carefully select the people whom you want to serve as references for this particular opening, and then advise them on the specific things they could say about you that would be most helpful. Also, present their complete contact information to the hirer in an attractive format.

*Thank you notes: Send meaningful thank you notes, and otherwise stay in careful touch with the hirer.

If these examples seem to represent an extreme amount of time and effort to devote to one open position, then that may be why you haven't been getting offers. It does take a lot of time and effort to compete with the "Fab 15%." Maybe it didn't take so much effort to get a job a couple of generations ago, but these days it often does, especially if you have any weaknesses in your background or skills, which we pretty much all do.

Please don't get scared off by all the work, though. As you'll learn in the next chapter, my suggestion is that you apply with great intensity for a small number of jobs. That keeps the workload manageable.

All this work, by the way, is similar to what anyone does who competes in a highly competitive field. Think, for example, of elite athletes, who aim to perfect every aspect of what they are doing and try never to cut corners. Famed UCLA basketball coach John Wooden once said: "I did talk about perfection [to my players]. I said it was not possible. But I said it's not impossible to try for it. That's what we did in every practice and game."

16. HIAP vs. Willy-Nilly

I'm not a sports fan, but I'm guessing that Wooden's team didn't play against every Tom, Dick and Harry basketball team that was out there. No, I'm pretty sure they were selective, playing only against other NBA teams, and at some special events, and on a schedule that allowed them plenty of time for rest and practice in between games. Otherwise, how could they possibly be expected to do their best?

And how can YOU be expected to do your best, if you're busy applying willy-nilly to all kinds of second- and third-rate opportunities?

Near-perfection, as discussed above, takes a lot of time and effort. If you're going to aim for it in your job search, it almost certainly means applying for just a few jobs at a time. While that may sound like you're scarily limiting your options, it actually improves your odds of getting hired because each application is really strong and hopefully devoid of the kinds of problems mentioned in Chapters 14 and 15. (Remember: I use the word "application" to refer not just to the paper application you fill out, but the entire application process.)

I call the strategy of applying for a few jobs in a highly customized way, and with great intensity and focus, the High-Intensity Application Process (HIAP). HIAP increases the chances, at each stage of the application process, that you will be moved to the next stage, so…

HIAPy research and networking should increase the chances that your resume will be seriously considered.

A HIAPy resume and cover letter should increase the chances that you land a phone interview.

A HIAPy phone interview should increase your chances of landing an in-person one.

A HIAPy in-person interview should increase the chances of your being short-listed for the position.

And all of these plus your HIAPy references should greatly increase your chances of getting an offer.

Sometimes, people ask what's the harm in applying for a few jobs using HIAP, and bunches of "secondary jobs" using standard, low-intensity techniques like shooting off a quick resume in response to an ad. The harm is that the willy-nilly "shooting" approach usually winds up taking way more time and energy than we predict, and distracts us from our HIAP effort.

Another problem with willy-nilly is that you may decide, one day, that one of your secondary choices is worthy of a HIAP effort, but now you've compromised the result by having previously sent in a lame resume and cover letter.

If you can spend a few hours posting a strong, generalized resume on an Internet job board, I don't have a problem with that. But any job you really want is worth applying for using HIAP.

Another advantage of HIAP over willy-nilly is that with HIAP you are using your brain throughout the application process, so that your job application skills, and chances of being hired, should improve over time. Given this, as well as the improved odds of getting hired, all the supposedly "extra" work you are putting in with HIAP should, in the end, save you loads of time and grief.

Let's discuss some more of the fundamental concepts underlying HIAP.

17. Do it Like Dudley

Say two men both want to marry a woman named Nell Fenwick. The first is named Snidely Whiplash, and here is his proposal: "Baby, I'm telling ya, I would be so good for you. I'm fantastic, aren't I? I'm quite the looker, aren't I? I dress sharp, and I tell a good joke, and

I'm a great dancer. I earn a great living, and everyone loves me...you would be so lucky to have me...So how about it, baby?"

The second suitor is Dudley Do-Right, and here is his proposal: "Nell, my darling, I love you. You are so fantastic; I love how kind you are, and how creative, and funny. I love your sparkling blue eyes, and the shine of your curly blonde hair. I just love everything about you! So, please marry me, Nell, and make me the happiest man in the whole world. If you do, I will do everything I can to make you happy."

Who is Nell more likely to accept: Snidely, who appears to be thinking mainly of how great he is, or Dudley, who appears to be thinking mainly of how great she is – not to mention, how hard he will work to make her happy?

Due to his egomania or, perhaps, simple ignorance, Snidely hasn't yet learned the elemental truth that, in a persuasive endeavor, it's the customer's feelings, needs and goals that count, and not yours. Just as Nell will wisely choose to go with Dudley, a wise hirer will go with the candidate who demonstrates that he, (1) understands the hirer's needs, (2) will work hard to meet those needs, and (3) will be thrilled to have the opportunity to do so because the job in question is just so amazing. The better you are able to convey this triple-threat message, the more you will set yourself ahead of the many confused Snidelys out there who will insist on blathering on and on about how great they are.

What are the hirer's needs? Glad you asked! An article entitled, "10 Resume Mistakes That Turn Off Employers" (*Boston Globe*, 7/20/08)9 by outplacement specialist Randolph L. Stevens summarizes them neatly: "Your resume should – in 20 seconds or less – show how you'll make or save money, generate new business, resurrect and retain existing clients or customers, expand and build relationships, and just make their world a safer and more pleasant place." I'll just add that you don't address these needs just in your resume and cover letter, but throughout the application process.

NOTE
9. http://www.boston.com/jobs/galleries/10_resume_mistakes/

18. HIAP + Enthusiasm = Safety

I particularly like that Stevens, in his quote, mentions safety, so let's talk more about that. Whereas in Part I, I wrote a lot about your reasonable fears as a job applicant, now let's talk about the hirer's reasonable fear of making a bad hire, which can be a catastrophic or even career-ending mistake. At the very least, it can lead to weeks or months of headache, followed by the pain and bitterness of someone's being fired or having to leave semi-voluntarily.

Most hirers are highly motivated to avoid those outcomes, and so one of your primary goals must be to eliminate any fear a hirer has over you and your application. You've got to take this goal very seriously, because even a tiny amount of fear is often enough to kill your chances of being hired. The hirer will probably have some fear even if your background and skills seem perfect for the job in question. If they're not – if there's even a small gap or

mismatch – the hirer will probably be still more afraid.

The opposite of fear, in this context, is a feeling of safety. A prime example of how eliciting a safe feeling can help close a deal is IBM. "You'll never lose your job going with IBM," corporate information technology (IT) people have been telling each other for decades. They mean that, even though IBM may not sell the best or flashiest computers and consulting services, their offerings are acceptable AND if they somehow do screw up your project, they have such a strong record that no one could possibly blame you for having hired them in the first place. So IBM is perceived as a safe choice, and prospers as a result.

If you can similarly convince hirers that you are a safe choice, then you should similarly prosper. Remember how Dudley does it: by professing, (1) a deep understanding of his beloved's needs; (2) a strong willingness to meet those needs; and (3) the idea that he would be thrilled to have the opportunity to do so. In job-search terms, this comes down to: (1) HIAP and (2) telling (and showing) the hirer that you really, really want the particular job she's offering. As you will see, "HIAP + Enthusiasm" are a powerful double-punch that ensures that you are the strongest possible job candidate.

HIAP works, in this context, by making sure that you never submit a resume "cold" if you can help it – that you always have someone the hirer trusts (ideally, one of her superiors or mentors) referring you or otherwise supporting your application. That alone greatly diminishes the hirer's fears and increases her sense of safety.

HIAP also helps the hirer feel safe because a HIAPy application aims to get all the details right – which, as I'll discuss in Chapter 22, is fundamental to success. Every time you make a mistake, even a tiny one, it creates fear in the hirer and undermines your application. But if you follow HIAP, mistakes will be kept to a minimum.

As for the second tactic – indicating real enthusiasm for the job in question – it works in at least three different ways:

1) It is deeply flattering to the hirer (strictly speaking, it's flattering to her employer, although she gets to bask in the reflected glory);

2) It invokes the psychological "reciprocity" principle that we tend to like those who show liking and appreciation for us. That's part of what Dudley is doing in his proposal, and it's also what babies, puppies and kittens do to killer effect. But job applicants can do it, too, even if they're not cute as a puppy.

3) On a more pragmatic level, the hirer can reasonably assume that if you're truly enthusiastic about a job, you're likely to do well at it.

You can't beat around the bush about your enthusiasm, by the way. You can't hint at it, or imply it, or assume that the hirer will get it from your enthusiastic-seeming manner. You have to state it outright and convincingly. Sometime during your application process – and, preferably, early on – you have to explicitly say something like this: "This position would really be an amazing opportunity for me – it's the kind of opportunity I've been hoping for and planning for for years, actually. The reason I got my certificate in XYZ and took the job with ABC Corp. was so that I could one day qualify for a position like this." And you probably should say it more than once – without slipping into repetition or empty flattery, of course. And you can't just say it: your resume, references and other application elements should demonstrate it.

19. HIAP + Enthusiasm = a Few Good LAFS

The best outcome, when you are first brought to a hirer's attention, is that he reflexively thinks, "This person would be PERFECT for our job, and our job would be PERFECT for him."

Please note that word "reflexively." Ideally, we don't want the hirer to have to ponder how good you might be. We don't want him to have to make a checklist of your pluses and minuses. And we certainly don't want him to reach his conclusion after having had to hunt for the important pieces of information that you inadvertently buried amidst piles of less important stuff in your resume.

It is possible that your application could survive all of those activities. But a far better situation is when the hirer glances at your resume, or meets you in person, and thinks, "YES! This is the one."

That's the professional equivalent of "love at first sight" (LAFS), and if you can elicit that reaction in the hirer, then (in Snidely-talk) you've got it made, baby. To understand why, think back to a time when you were head-over-heels in love with someone. Chances are, you probably thought everything that that person was and did was fabulous. Even things you didn't normally like in other people – like whistling, or eating peas with a knife, or doing both at once – were adorable in your loved one.

It's the same thing with job applications. If you can elicit LAFS in a hirer, then psychologically he will be predisposed to not only pay more attention to your good points and less to your weak ones, but even to see some of your weaknesses as strengths. So, for example, a middle-aged candidate who can elicit LAFS in a hirer is more likely to be seen as having valuable wisdom and experience, as opposed to simply being old. And a LAFS-inducing immigrant who speaks English with an accent is more likely to be seen as having valuable bilingual and multicultural skills, as opposed to simply being "different" and therefore risky. This magical shift happens because the hirer is now oriented toward collecting data to support his initial positive emotional reaction to you, instead of data that supports his fears about hiring you.

LAFS requires, first of all, as little fear as possible on the part of the hirer. Since HIAP + Enthusiasm helps minimize fear, it is definitely the way to go. HIAP + Enthusiasm can lead to LAFS, in other words.

By the way, the converse to everything I've been discussing is also true: that not using HIAP and not showing enthusiasm are great ways to tank your application. The latter, in particular, can be a problem for people who are shy or have trouble expressing their feelings. The solution is: (1) not to apply for jobs you don't really want; and (2) practice interviewing with coaches, mentors, friends or others – keeping in mind that the goal is not to get all super-emotive, but simply to be able to state and show your enthusiasm.

20. HIAP + Enthusiasm = The "Magic Wand"

HIAP + Enthusiasm is as close to a magic wand as you're going to get during your job search. Here's a real-life example of how it can help get you hired even against great odds:

Years ago, I volunteered to help a group of teenage refugees get jobs. These guys had a lot of marks against them as job applicants: they were new to the U.S. and largely unfamiliar with our culture; their English was iffy; and, beyond all that, they weren't even familiar with most of what we see around us every day. Try getting someone even an entry-level shelf-stocking job in a supermarket when he doesn't recognize the milk or orange juice, or has never seen strawberries before.

And has never interviewed for a job before.

What these refugee teens did have going for them was, (1) me, using HIAP, and (2) bright, engaging personalities and terrific attitudes. They were grateful to be in the U.S. and grateful for whatever opportunities were offered to them. They really wanted those shelf-stocking jobs, and displayed a level of enthusiasm that employers told me was both unusual and hard to resist – and so they got hired despite their considerable weaknesses.

Do you remember Chapter 5's discussion of how many job requirements and credentials are more negotiable than they seem, and how framing can be used to highlight your strengths and draw attention away from your weaknesses? Add to that technique the awesome power of HIAP + Enthusiasm. It won't work in every situation, of course, but it happens all the time that a wise and creative hirer overlooks gaps in the background of a bright, personable, detail-oriented, highly-motivated candidate who has put together a terrific HIAP job application and shows that she really, really wants the job in question.

21. Do it Like Dudley (Part II)

Did you notice how, in his proposal, Snidely uses the words "I," "I'm" and "me" twelve times – and "you" (referring to Nell) only three? Dudley, in contrast, uses "I" and "me" eight times, and "you" and "your" ten times. Nell could reasonably conclude that Snidely is thinking primarily of himself, while Dudley is thinking a lot about her.

And did you notice how Dudley addresses Nell by name – versus Snidely, who calls her "baby"? In *How to Win Friends and Influence People* – which you should definitely read to support your job search – Dale Carnegie says, "A person's name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language."

And did you notice how, in Dudley's proposal, he provides specific reasons why he loves Nell? Just saying, "I love you," isn't enough: if you can't provide reasons, the listener is naturally going to suspect you're blowing smoke. Moreover, you have to offer reasons that jibe with the listener's self-image. If Dudley told Nell he valued her for her bubbly personality and zany sense of humor when she sees herself as a serious person, she'd have good reason to be skeptical, if not suspicious.

It's all exactly the same when you're applying for work. As discussed earlier, you can't just blather on about yourself and how wonderful you are; and you can't get away with referring to the company generically. You need to call the company, and the hirer, by name –

and their proper, precise names, by the way. Referring to the company called "Spacely Space Sprockets" as "Spacely Sprockets," "Spacely" or (worst) "Spaceley" in your cover letter can doom your application.

You should also use the full, formal company name during interviews and other conversations, at least once – not just to show enthusiasm, but a proper respect for the hiring process.

You also can't just say that you would like to work for the company; you have to say why AND your reasons must jibe with the company's self-image. Telling a hirer at a bank, "I really like the idea of working for an organization grounded on traditional values," when the bank pictures itself as a cutting-edge, forward-looking organization, is yet another fatal mistake.

How do you find out a company's self-image? By thorough research. For starters, read every page of its Website and (if a public company) financial statements, paying close attention to subtleties of wording, tone and pictures. Also, read the business and trade publications. Most important of all, however, is to ask someone knowledgeable.

You will also, of course, need to know how others view the company. This includes its employees, customers, competitors, the trade press and perhaps even local politicians. Discrepancies between a company's self-image and the way it is perceived could indicate a problem (sometimes serious), an opportunity for you to make a contribution, or...both!

Some more tips:

1) Don't ever simply repeat the company's own words to itself – that's too obvious and many hirers will interpret it as laziness or a lack of real interest. Instead, use the company's words as a starting point for your own ideas and enthusiasm, as in: "I really like that ABC Company's mission includes, 'a global outlook,' because that's so important, these days – and even the U.S. market itself is increasingly diverse. I have always really enjoyed working with customers and colleagues from different backgrounds. My job at ABC Corp. was a good example..."

2) Talk about how you really like the company's products, and why you think they are important and valuable, not just to the company's customers, but society at large. Be prepared to discuss how they differ from, and are better than, competing products. (But never badmouth anyone – not even the company's competition – during an interview!) As an example: "I've tried out a lot of different widgets, but XYZ Company's really are the best and most reliable. It's wonderful that you can build that level of quality into products that the average American can buy."

3) Praise the company's culture. That's a great tactic, both because many companies work hard to establish a certain culture, and because the hirer will naturally assume that if you like his company's culture you'll fit in well with it. "SuperCorp is well known to be a very results-focused and accountability-focused organization, and one that also places a strong emphasis on teamwork and intergroup communications. That's the kind of work culture I like best, and that I've always done really well as part of."

By the way, telling a hirer you want to work at his company because "the salary and benefits are great" is like telling someone you want to marry her for her money. Not a great idea.

22. Details Count – Incredibly!

When I was growing up in the 1960s, the United States was sending men into space and to the moon. Every space mission was an incredibly complex project involving tens of thousands of people, some of whom designed and built the spacecraft, while others designed the life support and other systems, plotted the craft's trajectory, trained the astronauts, or handled some other task. Everyone working on those projects – all the NASA and other government people, and all the private contractors – knew that the astronauts' lives literally depended on their doing their jobs perfectly, and so there was a general ethic across the entire space program of zero tolerance for errors. No matter how trivial your job seemed, or how tiny a part of the overall project, you aimed to do it 100% right.

Even though a job search is not literally a life-and-death struggle, it has some important similarities to a space launch. In both cases, you must do many things right to get to your destination (in the case of the job search, an offer), and even a single mistake – even a "trivial" one – can doom your endeavor. So I would like you to take an Apollo-like "zero error" approach to your job search.

Zero error means many things, including:

1) Including the right information in your application. This is usually HIAPy information that shows the hirer not just generically what a great candidate you are, but why you would be terrific for her specific job, and also how extraordinarily happy you would be to get it. Let's suppose you are seeking a purchasing job at a medium-sized high tech company. A HIAPy resume would emphasize experience you've had in medium-sized and high tech companies, as well as your extensive experience with the particular purchasing software that this company uses (a fact you uncovered through diligent research). And perhaps your personal email address would be something like purchasingpro@ISP.com, and your references, when they are called, would talk specifically about how well you fit into medium-sized companies and tech culture, along with your broader points of excellence.

Your goal, by the way, is not simply to pitch a lot of details at the hirer, but to create a compelling narrative or frame (see Chapter 27) that help her reflexively feel that you would be perfect for the job. And what do I mean by "compelling"? HIAP + Enthusiasm, of course!

2) Deemphasizing information that undermines your narrative. If our applicant had spent much of his time in the Fortune 500, he would include that information, of course, but possibly deemphasize it compared with his medium-sized business experience. (Many smaller companies are not necessarily impressed with Fortune 500 experience – it raises the questions of whether you would be happy in a smaller setting, and whether you can function without a big-corporation infrastructure. Many would rather see lots of experience at similarly-sized, or somewhat larger, companies.)

3) Omitting unnecessary, distracting or harmful information such as the year of your college degree, which will simply be used to date you. Or, that weird temp job you took when you were desperate for funds. Or, that you took a remedial writing or math course. (Many people include that last bit of information to show their commitment to education, but it can

easily backfire!)

4) And, of course, zero error means no errors! No typos, misspellings, bad grammar, incorrect/inconsistent punctuation, funky formatting, or other errors. It also means that all your words are carefully chosen and accurate: that you don't, for instance, use "purchasing" when you really mean "procurement."

What's the opposite of HIAP and zero-error? Generic and sloppy. A non-HIAPy resume might not contain the right job-specific details, or, if it does, they will be buried under a slew of less-important information. If the hirer is very motivated and/or nice, she might do the work of picking out the important nuggets, but there's a good chance she won't – and why take that chance? A non-HIAPy resume will also likely contain errors, or simply be less than it could be – less well written, less well formatted, less readable, less compelling.

And while the above examples pertain specifically to your resume, you need to aim for zero errors throughout the entire application process. A zero-error interview, for instance, requires that you be immaculately groomed, intensively rehearsed, punctual (or early), properly HIAPy and enthusiastic, etc.

The difference in result you'll get from a HIAPy, zero-error application versus a generic and sloppy one is profound. A HIAPy application should, as discussed in Chapter 15, increase the odds that you'll progress to the next stage of the application process. In contrast, a generic one will not only not decrease those odds, but do so dramatically – so that you will probably be rejected fairly early on, and with the hirer having taken no more than a cursory look at your resume.

The bottom line is that there are NO unimportant details in a job search: even a single error can kill your chances of getting hired. If you've been getting the details wrong, well, welcome to the 85% club. I can't count the number of people I've met who have sworn up and down that they're not getting hired because of a bad job market, discrimination, etc. – when their documents and presentation contain obvious errors. There may or may not have been a bad market or discrimination, but one thing is for sure: these people were sabotaging their chances.

If you have told yourself things like, "Who really cares if I put a comma in the wrong place?" or "No one writes thank you notes any more," or "No one expects engineers to be fancy dressers," you're both wrong and missing the point. Most hirers do indeed pay close attention to those kinds of details, seeing them as reflective of your professionalism, judgment and eagerness to land the job; and you also don't know which particular details a given hirer will consider especially important. (Some care more about clothing, some about your references, some about the excellence of your documents, etc.) So you have to get them all right.

Of course, HIAPy means different things in different industries and different contexts: the engineer probably doesn't need to look as slick as a banker or as snazzy as an advertising executive. He shouldn't show up looking like a rumpled nerd, though: as discussed in Chapter 25, the days when rumpled nerdiness was overlooked, or even considered an asset, are long past. Check with your mentors on what's right for your industry and the kinds of jobs you're applying for.

There are two important techniques for getting the details right, by the way:

proofreading and rehearsing. You need to proofread all your documents incredibly carefully, and have others proofread them as well – and you need to proofread again after even minor changes. And, as I mentioned in Chapter 14, you need to rehearse interviews, phone calls, networking pitches and other communications at least ten times.

HIAP is not rocket science – it's easy enough to understand how it work. The hard part about it is disciplining yourself not to cut corners!

23. Zip to It!

Remember how, in his article on resume mistakes, outplacement specialist Randolph Stevens said you have 20 seconds to get your selling points across in your resume? Well, speed is important in other ways, too.

It's a good idea, in many cases, to respond to a job ad or listing within 24 hours of its appearance. Doing so, particularly with a fabulous, customized HIAPy resume and cover letter – not to mention a personal call from an influential person on your behalf - tells the hirer both that you're both on the ball and really, really want the job. (The hirer doesn't need to know you stayed up all night editing your documents, and if he guesses as much, no problem: it makes you look extra-motivated.) On the other hand, waiting even a single extra day to apply makes you look less on the ball and less motivated, especially compared with all the people who got their stuff in quicker. And waiting a few days will probably leave you out of the running.

Of course, you can't respond to an ad within a day if you don't even find it for several days or weeks. That's an easy mistake to make in non-HIAPy job searches, which typically involve haphazardly checking many newspapers and Web sites. In HIAP, in contrast, you identify five to ten key employers you really want to work for, and keep a close eye on them, and network intensively around them. You can even – and should – prepare parts of your applications for them in advance of a job opening up. All this makes it much easier to respond with a fantastic resume and cover letter within 24 hours.

There are two other reasons to respond to postings very quickly:

1) With so many candidates applying for each job, many hirers don't even bother looking at resumes beyond the first thirty or forty they receive – and it often only takes a day to get to that number. Might they miss a fantastic candidate who happens to come in at number 45? Of course: but there's no guarantee of that, and many hirers are not really trying to hire the "ultimate" candidate so much as a competent and safe one as quickly and easily as possible so they can get back to all their other work.

2) Additionally, many hirers are taught that it's important to treat every candidate exactly the same way, as a protection against accusations of discrimination. ("Get the same number of references from every candidate," a human resources person once drummed into me. "Don't give one person a writing test without giving everyone else one." "Make sure you describe the job in exactly the same way to everyone." Etc.) Deciding to ignore all resumes received after the first thirty or forty is one way to quickly eliminate many candidates, including presumably many less-motivated or less-savvy ones, without being discriminatory.

What if a company announces it will be collecting resumes over a period of time – say, a month? In that case, it's okay if you want to take a few extra days to prepare your resume and cover letter. I would still try to apply early, however, and I would also take the extra step of emailing the hirer toward the end of the month and reminding her that you are still very interested in the position (and, Dudley-like, listing the specific reasons why). Doing so helps you not get lost in the pile, while you still retain credit for being an enthusiastic early applicant. If you can mention some new achievement of yours or some useful new tidbit of information, that will make your reminder email even more valuable and memorable.

Faster Than a Speeding Advertisement

A much better strategy than responding to an ad within one day is to respond in -1, -10 or -100 days: meaning, before the job is even advertised! You do this not by spinning the world backwards to reverse time like Superman, but by identifying places you want to work and cultivating a relationship with them even before they have an opening. The basic plan is to locate someone in the organization – sometimes an HR person, but a departmental manager or senior executive is usually better – and contact them with a message similar to this: "Your company is really a leader in our field, and you are also a highly regarded leader in our field. You don't appear to have any job openings right now, but I would really like to work for your company/with you one day. I know you must be very busy, but if you have a few minutes to discuss the kinds of qualifications you look for in new hires, I'd be grateful." You can email them that message "cold," but it's much better if you meet that person at a networking event and deliver it in person, or have a mentor or other contact make an introduction.

This process, which I call proactive job development, can result in what is called an informational interview, a relatively relaxed, low-stress event in which everyone feels good (you, because you're talking to a potential hirer without the stress of actually being interviewed; the hirer, because your zeal to work in his organization, or for him, is flattering). Information interviews can take place on the telephone, although, of course, an in person meeting is better: either way, if you make a good impression, and continue to maintain the relationship, the hirer will likely contact you when there's an opening – or even before the opening actually exists. Moreover, your application will likely not be buried in a stack of dozens, but placed in the short pile to be called in for an interview – and that interview itself could even be a formality, since the hirer, or someone he trusts or is answerable to, already knows you and feels safe hiring you.

Proactive job development is the way to go, and savvy people do it even while happily employed, so that they've always got some strong irons in the fire and don't risk not hearing about good opportunities. Yes, it's work, but the bottom line is that, *****in a lean job market, the traditional strategy of passively waiting for a job to be advertised before applying no longer works. What does work is proactively going after jobs before they are even open by cultivating positive relationships with employers whom you wish to work for.***** The only exceptions are fields where there are loads of open jobs relative to the number of qualified applicants

(e.g., nursing) – and even in those cases the top jobs will probably go to those who went after them proactively.

If you wait until a job is advertised, someone else will have almost certainly beaten you to the punch – and even if they haven't, your application is likely to languish in a stack with dozens or hundreds of others. True, you might get lucky and have a diligent screener uncover it, but do you really want to trust your job prospects so much to luck?

More on the perils of just answering ads in the next chapter...

24. Scanners (and Emailers and Faxers) Live in Vain: Why Technology Isn't Necessarily Your Friend

Machines don't hire you, people do. So, when a hirer calls you in for an interview and asks you to submit your resume via his company's website, that's a good thing. When you submit that same resume to the same website without the personal connection...not so good, since your resume is likely to languish unread in an inbox alongside hundreds of others.

Many people don't get this. They submit their resumes to dozens or hundreds of websites, without any personal contact, and then get frustrated when they never hear back. "But I've worked so hard to get a job!" they say. "It isn't fair!" But merely repeating a low-probability activity does not increase your odds of success: if you submit 100 resumes, each with a 0% (or close to it) chance of even being read, your odds of success are still around 0%.

A 2008 *Wall Street Journal* article by Joann Lublin confirms this. In the article, How to Hunt for Jobs As Time Out of Work Drags On and On, she writes: "...long-term unemployed people frequently waste too much time looking online. 'Posting resumes on job sites should be the smallest part of your search,' because you rarely land positions that way, says Annie Stevens, a managing partner at ClearRock, a Boston outplacement and executive-coaching firm. Nearly two-thirds of applicants find work through networking, ExecuNet surveys show."

Massachusetts-based author Tyler Fairbank, whom I first quoted way back in Chapter 4, agrees: "Classified ads, web boards, and careers fairs are necessary parts of the puzzle, but are not sufficient. You have to go way above and beyond and start digging. Chances are there are multiple employers...for the type of work you want to do. Start to get to know those companies and keep yourself (and your resume) in front of them. Be creative and do not limit yourself." (Fairbank is obviously also suggesting taking a proactive approach, as I suggested in the previous chapter.)

Here's one more, from John Challenger, CEO of the executive search firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas: "The key for most people to realize is that you can't conduct your search from your computer. You have to get in front of prospective bosses to get an offer." He adds that, "It is too easy...to spend hours trolling job sites instead of doing the harder work of calling and meeting people....You have to do a performance check on yourself. I've spent so much time on the computer, and how many times did I get to the person I'd be working for, not just H.R. or a recruiter?"10

***Over-reliance on online job boards and Website postings is one of the

key reasons people remain unemployed for long periods of time. Due to confusion, or perhaps a reluctance to network, many people stubbornly rely on this fundamentally weak strategy despite an abundance of evidence that it doesn't work.***

There are other problems with submitting a resume online. First, certain strengths and skills – such as great people or presentation skills – don't come across nearly so well on paper as they do in person.

Second, if you're not good with computers, or your Internet connection (or the company's website) is flaky, then you might not do such a good job of submitting. (One point of web submissions, by the way, is to filter out candidates who aren't good with computers.)

Third, technology doesn't give you any feedback, so you have no idea what your odds of success are and what you can do to improve them. Only humans can give you that feedback, and often a sentence or two is all it takes to give you a real edge: "Wow, it's great you're fluent in Spanish. We're working to open some new Hispanic markets, so be sure to mention that to Mr. Jones when he talks to you."

When In Doubt, Delete!

An exception to the "technology is not your friend" rule are those sites specifically designed to facilitate professional interaction, such as LinkedIn.com and Plaxo.com. Some job seekers find them valuable, but I think they're not as useful as in-person networking, and thus perhaps not the best use of your time. If you do use them, you want to use them actively to reach out and forge new contacts and alliances, not just wait for people to find you. You also want to use them as a complement to your in-person networking, not a replacement. In-person networking should always remain your key strategy.

What about having your own website, with your resume and other information posted on it? It's essential for some fields, and a good idea for others – ask your mentors – but proceed cautiously and remember that an amateurish or inept site could easily hurt rather than help your job prospects. Better no site at all than a bad one, or one containing inappropriate information.

What's inappropriate? That's a tricky question. Leaving aside obvious stuff like pictures from your last beer bash, my feeling is that you should include no personal information on your website, just as you would have no personal information on your resume. That's because you never know what will turn an employer off, and because even stuff that you see as positive could backfire. Love to post pictures of your kids? The employer might admire your devotion to your family – or wonder, especially if you're a woman, if you're going to need to take a lot of time off for childcare. Like to skydive? The employer might admire your guts, or wonder if you'll get injured and raise her group insurance costs. Heavily involved in some kind of community or political group? She might admire your commitment, or wonder if your involvement will interfere with your work duties or reflect badly on her company.

Given that you don't know how the hirer will react, why introduce these potentially sabotaging pieces of information into your application process?

When in doubt, delete.

These days, of course, you should also assume that prospective employers are Googling you and checking up on you on Facebook, MySpace and other social networking sites. You should visit those pages yourself, first, and preemptively delete anything potentially damaging or distracting, and also ask others to delete potentially damaging information about you from their sites.

Please remember, however, that even with a fabulous website or other online presence, "in person" networking is where it's at.

NOTE:
10. Alina Tugend, "Job Hunting isn't What it Used to Be," New York Times, 9/27/08. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/27/business/yourmoney/27shortcuts.html? em=&pagewanted=all . The article also points out that because so many top-quality job seekers are staying away from job boards like Monster.com, many hirers are starting to stay away from them, too, and are looking elsewhere to find good candidates.

25. "Technical Skills" <= "Soft Skills" + Business Savvy

If you're a computer geek, scientist, technician or other techie, you probably understood the chapter title to mean that, in a job search, your technical skills are less important than – or, at best, equally important to – your so-called "soft skills" (e.g., communication, teamwork, leadership) and your understanding of, and ability to support, the overall business environment in which your skills are used.

And that probably made you mad.

(If you're not a techie, keep reading – this chapter is for you, too.)

Dilberts of the world, listen closely: I know you have spent years developing your technical skills, and are proud of them. But those skills should not be the be-all and end-all of your application, for two very good reasons:

First, there are probably many candidates out there with skills equal to yours, or even – gasp! – a little better. In fact, the hirer will probably only be considering people with great technical skills, so technical skills alone will not be a strong competitive differentiator for you or any other candidate.

Second, most employers want to hire well-rounded employees. Sure, they'll welcome technical brilliance, but only if it's part of a strong overall package. (Many have had the experience of hiring an over-focused "genius," with bad results.) Who would *you* hire, for instance, given the choice between these two candidates:

The first has exceptional technical skills but interviews poorly, seems like a loner, is poorly groomed, and has lukewarm references. He also seems arrogant, is ambivalent or naïve about the business context in which his work takes place ("I just code and let the marketers do their job."), AND he lacks enthusiasm for the job being offered.

The second has strong, although perhaps not exceptional, technical skills. He also has a terrific personality, loves working as part of a team, has a track record of working on

projects that boosted company revenues, and also terrific references. Oh, and he really, really wants this particular job.

You'd hire the second guy? I thought so. (And, by the way, those examples are not really far fetched.)

It's a common human foible, incidentally, to overestimate the value of assets we own just because we happen to own them. There's even a name for it, the "endowment effect fallacy." In a job search, the EEF tends to make you overvalue the skills you think you're good at (often, your technical skills), while undervaluing others.11 This can not only cause you to misread the hirer's needs, but make you arrogant and complacent.

This problem is not limited to "techie" techies, either. Every job includes a technical component – be it hair styling, carpentry, accounting or cooking – and thus any applicant is at potential risk for overvaluing his technical skills relative to other job requirements. ***In practice, this frequently results in an "upside-down" resume and interview in which the candidate emphasizes his least-important qualifications (the technical ones), while neglecting or omitting his most-important ones.*** I see this mistake *all the time,* and discuss it further in the next chapter.

Whether you're a techie-techie or some other kind of techie, if this discussion is hitting home, I recommend Dr. Lois Frankel's fabulous book *Stop Sabotaging Your Career: 8 Proven Strategies to Succeed – in Spite of Yourself* (Business Plus, 2007. ISBN: 0-44669785-0), in which she discusses how over-relying on one or two key strengths can derail your career. "There is no substitute for technical competence…" she writes. "Without [it] you build a career on quicksand. The problem is that most people who derail rely on technical competence to the exclusion of all other necessary behaviors. They think that expertise in their field should be enough to maintain their careers. This may have been true in 1960 or 1970, but it is far from true in today's competitive workplace."

The typical mistakes over-focused techies make, according to Frankel, include: overlooking the importance of people; not functioning effectively as part of a team; not focusing on image and communication; insensitivity to the effect they have on others; difficulty working with authority; too broad or too narrow a vision; indifference to customer or client needs; and a propensity for working in isolation.

Most of us are good at certain things, and because we're good at them we like doing them – and because we like doing them we do them a lot and get better at them. It's a cycle – and not a bad one, either – except when you get so caught up in it that you ignore other important tasks or characteristics. To avoid that problem, devote at least a third of your professional development time (classes, independent study, mentoring, etc.) to shoring up your weaknesses, as opposed to building on your strengths. Instead of taking yet another programming or hair styling class, for instance, take one on communications, presentation skills or accounting. And don't just guess at what your weak areas are – ask trusted advisors and mentors.

Often, by the way, our weaknesses are weaknesses not because we're really bad at the tasks in question, but because we haven't devoted enough time to learning and practicing them. This can happen out of fear – for instance, when you avoid math because you were told as a kid you were bad at it – or just because you were busy with other stuff during your

career. Sometimes, in other words, only a small effort is needed to turn a weakness into a strength, or at least a neutral quality.

It's also a good strategy to assume that your competition is at least good as you are, technically. That will keep you humble and encourage you to do your best at all aspects of the application process, instead of over-relying on your technical skills. Just don't go overboard and devalue yourself.

NOTE
11. Another example of the EEF is when we try to sell a car or house for more than we ourselves would be willing to pay if someone else were selling it to us.

26. Don't Commoditize Yourself

No matter how great your technical skills are, they should really be the starting point of your application, not the end. A programmer who relies solely on his alphabet-soup list of languages and certifications (Java, XML, CSS, Perl, Ajax, etc.) has pretty much ensured that his resume will be placed in the "nothing special" pile along with those of many other alphabet-soup applicants. What he's done, in sales terms, is turn himself into a commodity, which is a product or service that the customer (in this case, hirer) feels she can obtain from many sources, and therefore devalues.

But the programmer who can convey the following message is anything but a commodity:

"Well, yes, I've been doing Java programming for fifteen years, and am Sun certified. And I'm also highly experienced in XML, HTML, Perl and Ajax. But what I'm really good at is leading teams that deliver high-reliability, low-maintenance code, and applications that are really intuitive and easy to use. We did a giant customer service application, last year, and it was so easy to use that there were practically no training costs. It got written up in ComputerWorld, and led to our company getting three new accounts in one month."

Ditto if you're a hair stylist, carpenter, accountant, cook or anyone else. A good message for a short-order cook to convey, for instance, might be something like this:

"Well, yes, I can pretty much prepare anything that comes off a grill, and for two out of the last three years I've gotten a Best Chef award from the local newspaper. But what I'm really good at is building kitchen teams that work together well and can handle really high volumes. In my current job, we've got five people doing 150 lunches an hour, from 11 till 2:30 every weekday. And they've all been with me for at least two years. Before I came on board, the restaurant were only doing 80 lunches an hour with three employees, and the turnover was huge…"

Please note that, in both examples, the candidate is "doing it like Dudley" (see Chapter

17): speaking to the hirer's needs and goals. That's reduced code maintenance and training costs, and increased revenues, in the case of the programmer; and reduced operational costs and increased revenues, in the case of the cook. (See a pattern?) It's definitely important to mention your certifications and awards, since they may be a required "checkmark," and also because they might distinguish you from other candidates and help the hirer feel safe hiring you. But they probably won't be the deciding factor that lands you the job. Rather, it will be your ability to listen to, understand, and speak to, the hirer's important needs or values.

This balancing of your technical and non-technical qualifications should occur throughout the application process. It should be very obvious in your resume, interview, thank you notes, and the things your references say about you. Please note that it's not simply a matter of saying a few buzzwords, like "I like to work as part of a team," but showing, through careful framing of your experience and qualifications that these are central, important values in your work life.

27. The Crucial Importance of Framing

Framing is the art of deciding what "story" you want to tell a hirer, and then telling it effectively. More specifically, it's about which details you include or emphasize in your application, and which you deemphasize or omit.

Naïve candidates think all they have to do is cough up a list of their experience and qualifications, and they're done. Smart candidates, in contrast, know that that list is merely the beginning: once you have it, you pick and choose, arrange and rearrange, emphasize and deemphasize, until those experiences and qualifications add up to the strongest possible story for the employer it is aimed at. ("Strongest possible," by the way, means HIAPiest and most enthusiastic.)

Smart HIAPy candidates never stop tweaking their applications so that the framing is as powerful as possible.

Framing is so powerful that it can, and often does, spell the difference between being hired and being passed over early in the process. It is so powerful that you can even use it to turn negatives into positives. As mentioned in Chapter 9, when working with immigrants, for example, I often have them emphasize their bilingualism and comfort with diverse cultures – strong advantages for many jobs. I also often have them discuss the strong tradition of hospitality in their homelands – another extremely attractive quality to hirers, especially in fields such as retail and tourism. Thus, framing causes their "foreignness," which normally would be neutral or a drawback, to magically become a strong asset.

In Chapter 9, I mentioned how many job searchers believe that having one or two weaknesses will doom their application. In some cases, this may be true, but there are many cases when it isn't true, and the applicant is being too pessimistic. The strategy, in such a situation, is not to give up, but frame like mad. For nearly every weakness you can think of, there's probably an alternative explanation or compensating factor that you can emphasize as part of your frame:

For the "weakness" of being middle aged, there's the compensation of wisdom and

judgment (something that, if they thought about it, employers should value highly in a struggling economy where there's not much room for error).

For the weakness of being just out of school (not much work experience), there's the compensation of enthusiasm, energy and a willingness to learn.

For the weakness of not knowing a certain skills, there's the compensation that you know all of these other important skills, and are a fast learner besides.

For the weakness of having switched jobs a little too frequently, there's the compensation of having diverse experience and many contacts.

Etc.

Along with minimizing your professional "zits," framing will also help you decommoditize yourself (see previous chapter) and present yourself as someone as close to ideal as possible for the job in question.

Here's how one candidate I know did an excellent job of framing. As a middle-aged, reentering homemaker who was also trying to switch from banking to nonprofit work, in theory she had three strikes against her – although her application was framed so well you wouldn't say she had any.

Here's an excerpt from her cover letter: "After nearly twenty years in banking, and taking some time to raise my daughters, I decided that I was ready to explore the next phase of my career. This time I felt very strongly about helping people in need." Notice how she mentions her time off early on and very matter-of-factly. She's conveying the message, "I don't think it's a big deal that I'm on my second career, and also took time off to raise my kids - and you shouldn't either." I think she's persuasive on that point.

She then goes on to describe courses she has taken in human services work, and also the logic underlying her career shift: "I began to think about combining my financial knowledge and skills with my interest in social services. Financial literacy is one of the areas that immediately came to mind." By connecting the dots for the hirer, she makes her transition seem very logical, and her atypical background an asset.

She continues the framing in her resume, which begins with her recent human services coursework, and then provides a list of personal qualities and competencies that would be useful in a human services organization. Often, competencies lists are generic and boring, but hers is quite specific and interesting. The first three entries are:

*Ability to understand others' experiences and perspectives;

*Ability to understand and interpret interpersonal data and use it to access situations and strategize appropriate responses; and

*Ability to move from expert to non-expert role with genuine openness to being influenced by and learning from others.

These demonstrate not just personality traits that would aid in human services work, but wisdom and maturity. As such, they are also powerfully persuasive.

Only after outlining her human services qualifications does she list her banking jobs – the information most naïve candidates would start with. And even in that section, she's careful to avoid jargon, and to list successes – new accounts won, awards received, etc. – that a hirer in a non-banking field would relate to.

It should go without saying that, with HIAP, you frame your application not once, but

for each individual job you apply for. Even if you're applying for work at five small accounting firms that superficially look identical, there will be differences in their history, culture, approach, client base, work methods, etc. Some of these differences might be dramatic, while others might be subtle, but if you can identify them through research and networking, and then speak to each firm's individual needs via framing, you will send a very powerful HIAP + Enthusiasm message.

Yes, framing can take some time, but it's yet another one of those seemingly time-consuming HIAP tasks that is, in reality, a shortcut to getting hired.

Epilogue

At this point, most job search books would include many chapters on tactics, including how to network, how to write a resume and cover letter, how to interview, etc. I don't, so I know I'm kind of leaving you hanging (except don't forget to read the three Appendices, below.)

I'm not including those chapters partly because it's a lot of work to write a free book, and so I need to stop at a reasonable place, and also partly because that kind of information is already available from many other sources. The thing you should do is follow the instructions in those other sources while applying the principles and strategy discussed in this ebook. This means applying HIAP + Enthusiasm to all phases of the application process, while also applying for jobs quickly, getting the details right, not overrelying on technology, not commoditizing yourself, aggressively framing yourself, etc. Oh, and also following the crucial advice in Part I: seeking help if you need it, cultivating optimism, not being rigid or picky, investing in self-care, managing your time, being frugal, etc.

If enough people tell me they find this ebook useful, I may write the tactics part. Let me know, and in any case, I welcome your comments and feedback.

I won't wish you good luck on your job search, but something much more valuable – good skills!

Hillary Rettig
Boston, MA – December, 2008
hillaryrettig@yahoo.com

APPENDIX I. Coping with Rejection and Other Setbacks by Hillary Rettig
(source: http://lifelongactivist.com/blog/241/coping-with-rejection-and-other-setbacks)

1. A Serious Rejection

I've been a professional writer for decades, and while editors sometimes send my work back for revision, it's been a long time since a piece was rejected outright. Well, recently it happened, and big time. The rejection itself was cruel – the editor not only critiqued the

article itself, but the ideas underlying it, and in pretty harsh language – and, moreover, the essay in question was one I was really proud of, and had labored hard on.

To make matters worse, I had been "courting" this publisher (a liberal blog) for more than a year. I also thought that if they ran my piece it would not only give me huge credibility, but huge exposure – possibly even a career breakthrough. So there was a lot riding on this particular submission.

And, to top it off, this rejection came on the heels of a bunch of other professional and personal ones. So, taken all together, it was a depressing scenario. I actually wrote a friend/mentor a very depressed note in which I described the situation and wondered "whether I'm on the right path."

2. Coping Philosophies

In a moment, I'll share with you the actions I took to cope. But first let me share with you the three principles underlying those actions:

1) Objectivity. Even in the depths of despondency, I still strove for as positive, or objective, a view of my situation as I could. In the same depressed note in which I questioned my path, I also wrote that, "I am making improvements in all of the areas noted." That objectivity is very important both on its own merits and because it provides a nucleus of hope that is empowering.

2) Took the situation seriously. I think the best thing I did was not to underestimate the urgency of the situation, or its potential to undermine me. I therefore took immediate strong steps to counteract the debilitating shame it caused.

3) Used the "boomerang." This is a technique from Carolyn See's excellent book *Making a Literary Life: Advice for Writers and Other Dreamers*, in which she suggests responding to a rejection in an empowered way, such as by writing a note to the editor thanking her for considering your piece. Acting empowered helps you feel empowered, and counteracts the shame.

3. The Actual Coping

Now, here are the actions I took:

When I first read the rejecting email, I felt a vague disappointment, but the full impact of the rejection hadn't sunk in. I mostly felt a sense of detachment or dissociation, which is a protective strategy. I almost never feel this way in my professional life, any more, so this indicates a very bad situation.

A few minutes later, I was less detached, and able to recognize both the partial accuracy and inappropriateness harshness of the criticism, as well as the fact that I had "failed." Then I did start to feel shame: I actually got sick to my stomach.

I resolved to work hard to combat my feelings of shame and disempowerment. First, I boomeranged: I wrote back to the editor and thanked her for her feedback, and noted that it must have been a difficult note for her to send. (She actually shouldn't have sent it at all, but called, given our professional relationship and the content of her communication.) I did

briefly rebut a couple of her points, but that wasn't the main part of my note. She wrote back thanking me for my "graciousness."

I was still left feeling bereft. (This is when I wrote the depressed note – it would have been better to call my friend, by the way, but he was out of the country.) I had no idea what to do with myself. The dogs, perhaps sensing an opportunity, started clamoring to go for a walk, although they had just been out two hours earlier. Not knowing what else to do, and figuring that at least someone in the household ought to be happy, I took them out for a long walk. It was freezing out, and the walk didn't really help my mood, but it didn't hurt, either.

Then I did my daily errands, but as I made my rounds, I spent about $50 extra on treats for myself – food, flowers, some fun office supplies. Some people might see that as irresponsible or escapist, but to me a treat is just that – something you wouldn't ordinarily do. It doesn't have to be about money – a luxurious bathtub soak or puttering around in the garden can work just as well – but often, spending a bit of money does help, provided you don't break the bank.

Treating yourself during times of crisis sends the message that, despite the failure, you are a good and worthwhile person. This is crucial because people who let their failures define them often are too afraid to take risks, and wind up with a procrastination problem or block. (It's also important to treat yourself when things are going well, by the way – treat yourself as often as possible!)

Later that same day, I was boosted when another writing project – less important, but still worthwhile – was better received.

Around 11 p.m. that night, I started writing this essay. Classic, empowered boomerang: writing well is the best revenge.

The next day, I remained disappointed but was able to mostly continue with my ordinary work as if nothing had happened. I also began to feel what I consider a healthy resentment over the harshness of the rejection. Later, I was to write the editor about that – stating my truth – and her boss graciously called and acknowledged his organization's mistakes and apologized. At that point, the issue was truly in my past.

4.The Lessons

When I was younger and lacked strong coping skills, a rejection like that would have set me back months or even years. I think the key thing I have learned is to prioritize coping with setbacks, because if you don't cope, the consequent guilt, shame, and disappointment can remain "unprocessed" and fester. Many people, either because a setback is too painful, or because they underestimate how undermining it has the potential to be, make the mistake of trying to ignore their painful feelings and push on with their work.

Also, if you tend toward negativity, you may make the common mistake of "over-blaming yourself." Keeping an objective viewpoint in which I took responsibility for my own mistakes but did not assume responsibility for the mistakes as others, also helped me recover.

It helped enormously that the editor's boss called me and took responsibility for his employees' mistakes and apologized. Unfortunately, there are many people in the world who

won't do that. But even if you are blamed unfairly – especially if you are – you should strive to be very clear and objective in your own mind about, (a) what you did wrong, (b) what you didn't do wrong, and © what others did wrong that contributed to the situation; and try very hard not let others foist their mistakes onto you. Friends and mentors can be very helpful in this regard, which is one reason you should consult them as soon as possible after a serious setback.

I'll have some more to say on the important topic of coping with setback later. Meanwhile, I hope this essay has been useful to you. If you've got questions or are struggling with your own setback experience, feel free to email me at lifelongactivist at yahoo dot com.

APPENDIX II. The Marvelous Mentor Mentality and How it Can Help You Succeed by Hillary Rettig

(source: http://lifelongactivist.com/blog/261/the-marvelous-mentor-mindset-and-how-it-can-help-you-succeed)

How important are mentors? Let's just say that everyone I've ever met who was stuck in their life or career was severely under-mentored. In olden days, mentoring was probably more of an automatic process: you grew up working alongside your parents on the farm, or apprenticed with a craftsperson or local business owner. These days, you often have to work a little harder to find mentors.

Mentoring is generally a more expansive, less-structured form of teaching in which you gain not just knowledge, but wisdom and perspective. Mentors are particularly useful for life and career planning, and for guiding you through complex projects that would be hard to learn solely through books: for instance, art, science and entrepreneurship. Mentors are also often well connected, and use their connections to help their mentees. A single phone call from a mentor may be all it takes to get you a new job or a new customer for your business. Small wonder that proper mentoring can take years or even decades off the time it takes you to succeed at your goals – or spell the difference between success and failure.

Ideally, you should have at least one mentor for every important area in your life, including not just your career but marriage/partnership, parenting, health and fitness, personal finance, and any passionate avocations like art or political activism. You can also have mentors for life's smaller challenges. Your brother-in-law the rabid GQ reader could mentor you on fashion and grooming. Or, your neighbor with the green thumb could mentor you in your quest to grow an organic garden.

Many under-mentored people assume that mentors are in short supply, and also that potential mentors would be unwilling to work with them. Not so! Mentors are everywhere, and many are glad to help. Here are some tips on finding and working with mentors.

(1) Start Small. Mentors tend to be busy people who get asked for help a lot, sometimes by people who are not serious or focused. Therefore, when approaching a potential mentor, make sure she (or he) understands that you are one of the serious ones by making a specific, focused, personalized and reasonable request, such as, "Your recent article on how to gain

consensus within diverse communities was amazing. I'm working on a project to bring vegetarian meals to our diverse school district and am running into resistance from different groups of parents. Would you be willing to talk with me for 5 or 10 minutes at your convenience on how I could get them on board?"

Note that the asker does not ask the listener to "be my mentor," or even use the word "mentor." What you're asking for right now is a favor, not a relationship: if the relationship is destined to develop, it will. Don't force it.

Many people will respond positively to such a request – including some whom you might think too busy or famous. Of course, others won't. If you get rejected by a potential mentor, don't take it to heart – go right out and ask someone else.

If your initial conversation goes well, there's a good chance the person will invite you to stay in touch or come back with other questions. Now you have the beginnings of a mentor relationship.

(2) Always Be Professional. When calling or visiting a mentor, be prompt, prepared and focused. Don't go past the agreed-on time – although, if the mentor is enjoying the conversation, she might, which is fine. In your discussion, focus on problem-solving, rather than on how miserable the problem is making you feel. Later on, send a sincere and heartfelt (but not gushy) thank you note.

(3) Always Ask the Key Question. Sometime during every discussion with a mentor, you should ask something like, "Do you know of anyone else who might be able to advise me on this situation?" And then, of course, follow through. This will help you build your mentor network.

(4) Stay in Touch. If you contact your mentors only when you need help they will probably feel used. Instead, contact them every few months just to let them know how things are going, and especially to share any relevant good news.

(5) Reciprocate! Mentoring should be a two-way street. Even mentors who are very successful appreciate – and expect – return value. Sometimes, it can be hard to see what you can usefully offer a more-successful mentor. But every mentor appreciates receiving useful articles or other information they might have missed, or an offer of help when their own schedules get crowded And, finally...

(6) Mentor! Yes, YOU should be a mentor. First, because it's good karma to give back, and, second, because mentoring fosters your own growth and success. (Now you know why so many successful people do it!) Mentoring freshens your outlook, sharpens your strengths and skills, and exposes you to new people and viewpoints. So get out there and find a junior colleague, student, or someone else to mentor.

Think you don't know enough to be a mentor? Think again: I've never met anyone who didn't have valuable wisdom or experience to impart.

So, go forth and be mentored – and mentor! Mentoring is a precious relationship, and a marvelously compassionate and productive mindset, so let's all work together to build a world where we're all mentoring each other to learn, grow and be happy.

APPENDIX III. Solving Problems versus Dithering by Hillary Rettig

adapted from *The Lifelong Activist: How to Change the World Without Losing Your Way* by Hillary Rettig. Lantern Books, 2006.
www.lifelongactivist.com

Solving a problem means taking specific actions such as observing its symptoms or manifestations; precisely defining it; researching it and its possible solutions; developing a strategy for solving it; testing the strategy; implementing the strategy if it tests well; and evaluating success or failure.

Dithering includes all the other things you do about your problems, including worrying, feeling guilty, beating yourself up, complaining to family and friends, and feeling sorry for yourself.

Dithering is pernicious. It gives you the illusion that you are solving your problem, so that you don't have to feel guilty for ignoring it. It also gives you the illusion that you are making progress, so that you don't have to feel like you've given up hope. But dithering doesn't really solve your problem. ***`The hallmark of dithering is that, no matter how long or seriously you do it, the problem never gets solved.`*** Sadly, this is true even in cases where a person dithers for decades, or his or her whole life.

How do you know when you're dithering versus solving? Easy: if you've been working to solve your problem, but making no progress, you're probably dithering. Even the toughest problem is solvable, at least to some degree — and it often takes only a small amount of actual solving to make noticeable progress. If, therefore, you are making no progress then you are almost certainly dithering.

Another difference between dithering and solving is that dithering tends to focus on the problem, while solving focuses on the solution. That isn't an absolute rule, because part of what you do to solve a problem is characterize and analyze it. But if all you are doing is thinking about the problem and how miserable it's making you, and you're not devoting any time to designing and implementing a solution, then you are dithering.

Another difference is that dithering tends to occur in isolation. You do it yourself, in the privacy of your own room, or at least in the privacy of your own thoughts. When you confide in friends and others, you use those conversations more to vent, or to see your own ideas and emotions echoed back at you, than to observe, define, etc. Maybe you don't even listen very closely to what the other people are saying, or ignore their advice.

Solving, on the other hand, usually involves other people — and not just your friends, but professionals such as a doctor, therapist, spiritual advisor, twelve-step sponsor, teacher or mentor. And, often, more than one of those. And instead of using these people as an echo-chamber to reflect your own thoughts and feelings back at you, you listen closely to what they are saying and do your best to follow their advice.

Because many job seekers tend to be ashamed and insecure, they have a natural inclination toward isolation. But most of life's toughest problems, including job searches, are best solved within a strong community. Much of the work you need to do to find a job amounts to building that community, via networking, newsletters, volunteering and other methods.

Dithering is a form of procrastination, actually. Procrastination is a behavior often grounded in fear – of rejection, failure, success or change. The purpose of procrastination is to NOT make progress – i.e., to not advance toward the change that scares us – and it often works spectacularly well. An artist who is terrified of being rejected by galleries or critics need only procrastinate like mad and never finish a painting to avoid facing that possibility. Don't get me wrong: procrastination feels awful. But for procrastinators, the pain of not finishing one's work is usually the lesser of two evils.

Many people procrastinate on their job search. Sometimes they just do unimportant "busy" work all day instead of networking and other important work – one of procrastination's main tactics being to mimic productive work – and sometimes they just give up and web surf or putter around the house all day. And many of them feel a huge amount of guilt about their procrastination. The reality, however, is that looking for work is one of the worst experiences many of us will ever face – it's several unpleasant experiences rolled into one, really. I don't blame anyone for wanting to procrastinate on it.

But procrastination, while an understandable response, is not an optimal one, because it often leads to more pain and regret in the long run. Just as the artist will probably eventually regret the fact that she never gave her painting a real shot, if you procrastinate/dither a lot on your job search, you will probably regret it, too. So, please: see a therapist or use other techniques to deal forthrightly with your fears so that you can be the most effective and HIAPy job searcher you can be, and get employed again as soon as possible.

END OF EBOOK