

What You Don't Know Can Hurt You

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You know the expression “Experience is the best teacher.” You may have even learned a thing or two that way! But on the other side of that coin is this equally true observation: “Experience is the worst teacher. You get the test first and the lesson after!”

Misperceptions and mistakes in any part of the job search can lead to lost opportunity. You’ll eventually figure out what follows in this article, but better sooner than later! Let’s take a look at some lessons that are better learned the head way instead of the hard way.

Avoiding Job-Search Mistakes

Understand how the application process works. There are similarities in processes among districts, but in the end, each hiring process is slightly different. Not understanding the process or not completing it correctly, can negatively impact your candidacy and slow down your search. It’s your responsibility to be informed, so scour the websites of every district you’re applying to and make sure you follow their correct steps and meet their established deadlines. For example, it’s likely that every district will ultimately ask you for an application, résumé, cover letter, transcript, credentials, and references.

What differs is when and how you will be asked for those items. You don’t want to be caught off guard, nor do you want to appear to be the candidate who couldn’t follow published instructions.

Don’t underestimate the challenges of the job search. The job search starts earlier than you think and takes longer than you

think; the sooner you face that reality, the better. You can (and should) start the process at least five months before you want to be employed. It’s also true that the more applications you have in process, the better. It’s less effective to search one job at a time. Instead, aim to have four or five jobs in various stages of application at any given time.

Thoroughly understand the credential file process used by your college or university and by the districts or schools to which you are applying. If you’re a new educator, you may find yourself in the position of self-managing your credentials. More experienced educators might find themselves caught off guard by the changes in the ways districts and schools handle credentials. Check with your college’s career services center early in your search to make sure you’re up-to-speed on how credential files are typically handled and what should be included in yours.

Be prepared to submit your credential file in the way that each school district requires, whether that is electronically or on paper. Scrambling to gather documents at the last minute leaves a bad impression on a hiring district.

Don’t settle for a level playing field. Every candidate will submit a résumé, cover letter, and application. To stand out, you need to think about how you can meet—and then exceed—the application requirements. How will you occupy mental space in the minds of the people who are making the hiring decisions? For example, find out the name of the recruiters in the district and make a phone call or send an e-mail. Contact the principals

of specific schools in which you are interested. Stop by the district office and introduce yourself to a recruiter. Every employer will assume that the way you conduct your job search foreshadows how you will perform as an employee. Teaching markets are competitive! You need to be on your game.

Avoiding Résumé and Cover Letter Mistakes

Use a professional e-mail address. Your e-mail address should be one that is related to your name and is not silly or juvenile (unless you think the employer can’t wait to hire someone like that!). Avoid the use of numbers and symbols, and never put your birthday, birth year, or other age or date-related number in your e-mail address. You will be giving your e-mail out verbally sometimes. Make sure your address is easy to understand when spoken. And while you’re at it, make sure your voice mail message is professional as well.

Prioritize résumé content. All your experiences have intrinsic value, but they don’t have equal value when it comes to a résumé. You should be writing more about your teaching-related experiences than you do about the summer you spent as a restaurant server. Remember to include information about all aspects of teaching including classroom management, testing and evaluation, building student relationships, and communicating with peers, superiors, and parents. Don’t just talk about instruction—that isn’t all there is to teaching. You’ll look less mature if you appear to have only a partial understanding of or experience with everything that teaching involves.

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Don't write an autobiography. The same attention to detail that makes you a good teacher makes you prone to writing a résumé that is too detailed. While you don't categorically need to limit yourself to a single page, your résumé should be filled only with the information relevant enough to get you an interview. Aim for being correct, but not excruciatingly precise.

Use keywords on your résumé. Keywords (the terminology of your profession) enhance your qualifications when used correctly in the course of describing your experiences.

Forget the résumé template. Recruiters recognize résumé templates. Right or wrong, it's easy to infer that the person who used a template just didn't put a lot of thought into the content of the résumé. A template says you are just like everyone else—average. In teacher language, average performance is a grade of "C." Would you want to hire a "C" teacher? They don't either. In addition, templates are hard to edit and tend to not e-mail well.

Let content determine format, not the other way around. Think of the big picture. What do you want to say and what format makes it easy to understand your message?

Avoid the junk mail trap. By definition, junk mail comes from someone we don't know who obviously doesn't know us either. It's like a horrific blind date that arrives every day in your mailbox. Your résumé, cover letter, application, and interview can all seem like junk mail to the recruiter unless you take great care to make yourself known and to demonstrate that you also have done the work to get to know the potential employer. You look like junk mail if:

- Your résumé makes it plain (by the content you include or omit) that you don't know what the key aspects of teaching are, nor can you discern the relative value of each experience you've had.
- Your cover letter makes it clear that you have no idea what the district is like, or it's not personalized for every district.
- The way you apply doesn't follow the district's process, which was clearly listed on the website.
- You don't follow up on your initial contact or after an interview; you just sit at home and wait for the phone to ring.
- You don't practice and prepare for an interview.

The truth for all job seekers is that the candidate who gets the job is the candidate who has the best total package from start to finish. Consequently, it is wise to prepare (or over prepare!) for every aspect of the job search. That means having a quality résumé, a sharp cover letter, researching the school district, following up after every contact, preparing for the interview, and writing a thank-you note after the interview. Louis Pasteur said it best: "Chance favors the prepared mind."

The better prepared you are, the more poised you are to take advantage of opportunities that come your way by out-performing the competition. And when you realize you didn't need nearly all of the material you prepared? Oh well! You have the job, don't you?