



Ask Jack

CareerLine Q & A

by Jack Wilson

ACM's career consultant, Jack Wilson, answers questions from students about their forthcoming careers in computing and information technology.

Q: I followed your guidelines in developing my resume and have gotten good reactions to it, especially from recruiters, who seem to think I have very good skills and experience. Two of them however have independently remarked that they cannot quite "position" me. How can I fix that?

A: Positioning is a key element in any job search, especially for recruiters who are trying to match you with one or more of their assignments. It means their being able to look at your resume, perhaps along with your in-person self-presentation, and essentially see where you would be a good fit; where your knowledge and skills would match the needs of a potential employer. In all likelihood, you have presented a very good portrait of yourself, but without showing the reader where you are focused. Many people detail such a variety and potpourri of skills that the reader cannot tell whether the person wants to do C++ programming or data base administration. Review your resume and ask yourself the following questions:

1. Is my focus clear and unambiguous?
2. Am I highlighting the things I do best?
3. Am I emphasizing the skills I most like to use?

Don't worry about painting yourself into a corner or becoming too narrow. You're simply trying to leverage your talents into your first job and are not necessarily committing yourself to a lifelong career in that function.

Q: My career goal is to work in network systems software, especially Internet routing and switching. I have been taking some part-time courses to update my skills in those areas. Unfortunately my company does not offer opportunities in that area, and I would need to switch. Should I try to join a large company or work in smaller ones (e.g., start-ups)? How can I arrive at a decision on this issue?

A: This is not a question to which there is an easy answer, because so much depends on your own personality, style, comfort, motivation, interests, etc. In other words, the kind of person you are and the kind of environment you would like to be in. It's whether you like being a small fish in a big pond or a big fish in a small pond. I would suggest that you talk this through with some people who know you well enough to offer some opinions of where they think you would best fit in. Having said all this, if I were just starting out, I would lean toward the bigger pond because I'm probably going to be a small fish at the outset anyway, and I can at least get the benefit of more people and issues with which to interact and learn.

Q: I recently became a student member of ACM, am 18 years old, and a Sophomore. I own and operate a small corporation. However, I have been having problems gaining larger businesses and keeping a constant stream of work. I've advertised with direct mail, sending 50,000 flyers out so far. I have also advertised in a few local papers. However, I'm still not getting the response I want. I would like to get involved in larger businesses. However, I am not sure how to go about doing this.

A: Obviously there's a lot more to getting business, i.e., marketing, than just advertising. Most companies want to develop a high degree of confidence in their suppliers before giving out business. That requires building professional relationships, making targeted sales calls, developing a pitch that extols the virtues of your service and what makes you different from every other guy who wants their business. It means developing professional credentials and certifications; attending professional meetings, conferences, trade shows; being able to demonstrate your skills and ability to deliver for your customers.

You should probably have a prospect list of companies that fit your services either because of geography, industry, products, systems, etc. You might want to read some publications like Home Office Computing and Contract Professional for some good marketing techniques. I would try to focus on getting at least that first good customer, doing a great job, and using that as a reference for future business.