

Your Guide to Company Research

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How can you get an edge over the millions of other job seekers out there?

Research. Research can help you uncover hidden job opportunities and greatly improve your odds of acing the interview and landing the job. The key is to understand how to conduct company research and how to use the information that you find.

There are many good reasons why it's worth doing your due diligence in the company research department.

Here are just a few of them:

#1) Research can help you find the right contacts to land more interviews.

#2) You'll understand which of the top companies are in your industries and fields of interest, which companies are hiring, and what types of job openings they have. Research can open up a world of opportunities beyond the standard job boards that everybody's checking.

#3) Once it's interview time, knowing the facts about the company and the industry will reduce your job interview anxiety and make you seem more confident to your interviewer.

#4) You'll know how to answer that infamous interview question: "Why Do You Want to Work Here?" in a way that makes you sound smart, interested, and well-informed.

#5) You'll be prepared to make the right decision about whether or not a specific company is a good match for your career goals and personal expectations.

"By thoroughly researching the employer you increase your chances of making a positive and memorable first impression. I would recommend digging deeper than just general knowledge about an employer", says Nicole, Hiring Expert at the ManpowerGroup.

With those benefits in mind, here's how to get the dirt on the top companies that are hiring in your field.

1. Before You Apply (How to Get in the Door)

You don't have to settle for a reactive job search. With a bit of research, you can identify a target list of companies and network your way in (*maybe even before a new job is posted and competing candidates start calling*). These are just a few ways that company research can help *YOU* get that all-important *INTERVIEW*.

Identifies contacts within the company.

You may find people that you know or can be introduced to -- perhaps a fellow alum or a friend of a friend. From there, you can try reaching out to arrange an informational interview or respectfully ask for career advice. If there's a current opening (*or one likely to come up*), your new internal contact can forward your resume directly to the hiring decision-maker and bypass all of those online applications. You are much more likely to get called in for an interview this way.

Educates you on the company's needs.

Your research on the target companies will help you get a better sense of the company culture, current hiring needs, the qualities valued in employees, and much more. This information will help you customize your cover letter and resume and increase your odds of getting the company's attention.

At this stage of the game, you're looking for basic information about the business in order to go about *GETTING the interview*.

Step One: Visit the Company Website

The best place to begin your research and information gathering is the business website. Visit the company's **"About Us"** page where you can learn about the business, its products and/or services, origins, key company leaders, and mission statement.

There's more to this step though. Don't forget to look around for information relevant to *"Job Seekers."* Some businesses will have a dedicated page for this, while others bury the lead to some degree. Many have created a portal to their human resources department

through the website. **This portal generally includes names and, quite often, email addresses** to the people who are most actively involved in the hiring process for the organization.

Facebook is used by businesses frequently as a location to post job openings, information about future products, and even links to financial reports and other industry information. When you're trying to get the basics about a business, it's a great place to gather information from the business itself, as well as followers who post messages and queries to the web page.

Most companies have a LinkedIn presence as well as a Facebook page. Some are quite robust and include interactions, discussions, and comments made by key executive personnel. Peruse the company's LinkedIn page to see what information you can dig up, include key company players' names (*and possibly contact information*).

To bypass the standard application process, consider looking for shared contacts via LinkedIn. If you're lucky enough to have a contact that works for your target company (*or has in the past*), you might be able to get the inside scoop on the position and even a good contact to send your resume and/or cover letter to.

By now you should have the basic information you need to apply to the company you've researched.

Submit your stellar resume and engaging cover letter properly in order to get one step closer to the much-coveted interview. Next, find out how to research the company to prepare for the interview itself.

2. Researching to Prepare for An Interview

The minute you get the news that you've been invited for an interview, it's time to begin a thorough investigation of the business. You need more than the basics this time around.

These tips will help you get the information you need in order to dazzle the interviewer(s) with your thorough understanding of the organization and the industry it operates in.

Step One: Identify and Research Interviewers

Most large companies have more than one person conducting interviews, though smaller businesses may only have one interviewer for various positions. The key is to learn about each of the people slated to conduct your interview before it begins.

There are **four fast and effective methods** you can use to learn more about the people who will be interviewing you.

1) LinkedIn Profiles. Here you can find information about educational histories, professional organization affiliations and memberships, and companies they've worked for in the past.

2) Company Website. In many companies, the company website is a great place to get information about employees, management, and their roles within the organization.

3) Industry Publications. While this is not a guaranteed find for you, it will help you strike common ground with the interviewer if you've read articles he or she has published in industry magazines and newsletters.

4) Social Media. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and even Pinterest allow unique glimpses into the person on the other side of the interview table. You can learn a great deal by following them and reading past posts or checking out previous Pins and Tweets (*just be careful about creeping them out by seeming TOO interested in their personal details*).

"If you know the names of the people you will be interviewing with, look them up on LinkedIn and search for information about their professional background (not private life) that might be available on the internet. I like when a job candidate has done his or her homework. It will prepare you to ask questions of the interviewer that are relevant to their background and it will help you be more engaged during the interview," **says Sue, a hiring expert at the Gap Inc.**

Step Two: Boost Your Industry Knowledge

It's important to take the time to get up-to-date on industry trends and developments, especially if you're new to the field. Knowing about the industry and its ins and outs prior to the interview will make you much more appealing to hiring managers. With little time investment, this research can go a long way toward presenting you in a good light -- showing you have initiative, research skills, and a sincere interest in the business and the position.

How do you go about *researching industries* that are foreign to you? **Start with easy access from sources like the following.**

- *Read recent trade publications.*
- *Join industry-related groups on LinkedIn.*
- *Follow industry leaders in social media.*
- *Search local newspaper archives online.*

Trade publications vary widely from one industry to the next, though most industries have them. In the accounting industry, for instance, the following are among the top trade publications: *Accounting Today*, *The CPA Journal*, *Journal of Accountancy*, *International Journal of Accounting*, *CPA Zone*, and *Accounting Web*.

Every industry offers some kind of industry news magazines, journals, websites, and blogs you can turn to for industry specific research. Google can help you find the publications that are influential in your target industry.

Step Three: Get Social

Social media platforms can offer valuable insights about the company culture, customer service, and how they interact with others. **You can also get an idea of how forward thinking the business is from social media entries.** Businesses that are looking forward to the future are engaging their audiences, interacting with them, teasing them, and keeping them on the hook – eagerly awaiting the next big reveal.

Step Four: Include the News

See what's going on not only with the company you're interviewing with, but in the industry as well. Search popular news and business sites like Fox Business and CNBC to determine if there are any hot stories or major trends that you should know about. Information you specifically want to gain by exploring the news about the business and the industry includes:

- *Financial news about the company (Step six below provides additional information about gathering company-specific financial news.)*
- *Economic outlooks for the industry*
- *Labor market news and outlooks*
- *Competitor information and activities*

The more knowledge about the business, industry, and competition that you arm yourself with, the better poised you are to show the interviewer(s) what kind of employee or leader you can be within the organization.

Step Five: Explore the Company's Culture

“Company culture is key to placing yourself in a positive, successful environment,” reveals hiring expert Jonathan from Avery Dennison.

Company culture plays a critical role in how happy you are in any job you take. Glassdoor is an excellent resource to use to learn about a company's culture. It offers you the opportunity to see what other employees, past and present, have to say about the business and their experience working for the company.

For instance, if you research the company EMC on Glassdoor, you'll learn that one employee feels that EMC understands work/life balance.

Other pieces of information you can find about companies on Glassdoor, include salary information, company-specific interview hints and tips, explanation of benefits, and photographs of the business.

The anonymous nature of Glassdoor allows people to give honest, unvarnished opinions and insights about the business – making it an incredible resource when conducting personal company culture investigations.

Step Six: Investigate Company Finances

Understanding the financial reality of companies you're considering working for gives you a real advantage at the salary negotiating table, and as you decide whether this industry or business is a good match for your future goals.

Public Companies

Public companies are required to file annual report information. This is a great place to begin your research into company financials.

You should be able to find this valuable information on public companies at these sources:

Hoovers

Dun & Bradstreet

EDGAR - U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission

It's not only important to know where to find information about company finances. You also need to know what information may be relevant to know.

These are a few good areas to begin with:

- *How long has the company been in business?*
- *Has it been profitable over the past several years?*
- *Is the company hiring lately or has it been going through a period of layoffs instead?*
- *Has the company recently merged with another company – or does it seem poised to do so? This could signal a period of upheaval where layoffs are not only possible, but likely during the restructuring process.*

Conduct an Internet search for recent news articles about company financials too. This is often the first place to go to learn information about layoffs, recent hiring, and the outlook as it relates to your local economy.

Private Companies

With private companies, it's a little trickier to find company financial information since they have no legal obligation to file public reports about their financial status. However, PrivCo provides company financial intelligence for non-publicly traded companies, and is a good option to conduct fast financial research about private businesses.

Butler University Business Librarian, Teresa Williams, recommends using *multiple sources*, however, when comparing private companies so that you're getting a more robust image of the financial situation.

Other sources you can use for research private companies include the *Better Business Bureau*, *Dun and Bradstreet*, *GuideStar* (for nonprofits), *LexisNexis*, the *American City Business Journal*, and the Secretary of State Office or state department where the company is incorporated.

Step Seven: Hone in on Your Bottom Line

Once you've found concrete information on the company you're about to interview with, it's time to reflect upon what you've found out and compare it to your career goals.

For example, what does the company seem to value most? What do you value most?

Leadership?

Teamwork?

Youth?

Experience?

Forward-thinking?

Social Ideals?

Environmental Issues?

This information can help you prepare an intelligent and truthful answer to the inevitable interview question, "*Why are you interested in working for us?*" (or one of its many variations). Read more about how to answer this question in your job interview.

Even more importantly, you'll have a **better understanding of whether it really is the right company for you.** Beyond the questions above, you'll also need to consider questions like the following:

What is the atmosphere in the workplace like? What type of work atmosphere do you prefer?

Dress code?

Promotion from within?

Is innovation encouraged? Is professional development available?

These are just some of the questions that may impact your initial happiness in the workplace, as well as the potential for long-term career satisfaction and growth.

Final Step: Pulling All the Information Together

When it comes to making a decision about what company to work for, it's important to have the facts. After all, this decision will impact your life every day (and for 8+ hours per day) for the foreseeable future. It's a prudent strategy to take stock of your financial goals and ambitions and measure them by what this business has to offer you.

Do you feel confident that this business is the right place to help you accomplish those goals? Is this the industry you want to work in? How will this role and company position you for future opportunities?

What about the business? Does the company culture appeal to you? Can you live with the climate? How about social issues? Does the business atmosphere conflict with your personal views and ideals?

While you're not necessarily entering into a lifelong commitment to work with one company for the remainder of your professional life, this job will be a career stepping stone. Are you comfortable and confident with the impact this business will have on your resume from this day forward?

One way to answer some of these insightful questions is to thoroughly research the business ahead of the interview process. Then you can feel confident in your decision whatever it happens to be.