

Career Planning

Crack the Hidden Job Market

by John Lees

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I often hear British graduates expressing something like a physical revulsion at the idea that they might have to network their way into a job. The UK recently had a minor scandal about the fact that young people with great social connections find themselves in the top internships. Workers used to an equal opportunities culture often express ethical objections to the idea that you might talk your way into a short-list of one simply through opportunity or connections. Surely all jobs need to be advertised, if not just for fairness but to guarantee a strong talent pool?

There is a gulf between our idealized picture of how jobs are filled, and a hard but often unstated reality: in any market, no matter how transparent on the surface, a large proportion of jobs are either not advertised or already have someone's name on them before the first interview.

There is a lack of research data on exactly how people find jobs, but a rule of thumb across international studies appears to be that on average about one-third of jobs are filled through word of mouth connections. The subjective evidence from developed markets is that,

in many sectors, the proportion is much higher. It is widely believed in the UK, for example, that most new jobs are filled by small and medium enterprises who are more likely to fill jobs by word of mouth.

The unadvertised market has long been described as “hidden,” and there are consultancies, websites and even apps which rather promise access — an absurd idea, because hidden jobs are not simply cataloged differently. In most cases they are not listed at all. Hidden jobs are filled, and found, using a very different mindset.

The employer mindset often operates at two levels, the public and the private. The public level says, “Let’s be open and look at who we can get,” while the private level speaks with a more authentic voice: “Who can we get, quickly, with minimum risk.” Risk avoidance means that employers naturally gravitate towards people they know, or at least know something about.

Playing the public game is partly about conformity, and largely about passive behavior. Pursuing advertised positions looks like activity, but it’s relatively passive — you’re thinking about stepping onto a bus that happens to be passing your front door rather than planning a journey using your own resources. Responsive strategies requiring desk-based activities such as applying to ads and using job boards also have another appeal — *they feel like work to the job-seeker*.

The reality, I suspect, is that you’re more likely to have a job search breakthrough by chatting with the person next to you at the supermarket checkout than by spending all day registering on job boards. Use the standard electronic tools; use them thoughtfully, and frequently enough to maintain your visibility. But remember that job connections start by being human connections.

As a career strategist, I find it’s often easier to work with people who have no preconceptions about how to look for a job. They tend to make a much more direct buyer/ seller connection and look for opportunities to connect to decision makers. They instinctively know that you reach out to as many people as possible, wherever possible, because it increases your chances of a hit.

Breaking into the hidden market isn't about old school networks or special favors, nor is it only open those who are great at self-promotion. If success was about the people you already know, there would be little point to networking. It's about expanding your horizons, meeting new people, and about discovery. Networking can feel wrong — demeaning, or exploitative, and it's easy to fear rejection. All these fears indicate that you're probably going about it the wrong way. The classic model of “working the room” doesn't work, because it's all about you. The most important and effective aspects of networking are about finding things out, filling gaps, making connections.

I have a personal benchmark for success in the hidden job market. You know your strategy is working when your name comes up for the right reasons *when you are not in the room*. And when your name comes up, so does a short data burst containing just two or three brief, positive and focused messages about what you're good at and what you're looking for.

So is the hidden job market unfair? Yes, of course, like any form of competition. However, believing that the hiring process will work fairly and objectively in your favor is a great way of extending your job search time, and a watertight strategy for avoiding some of the most interesting opportunities. They won't be in the Help Wanted section, because right now they're brewing away in the brain of someone you might just meet, pretty soon, if you simply start asking the best career-expanding question ever: Who else should I be talking to?

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