

Keeping Track of Job Search Contacts

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Updated: 03/27/2009 06:16:14 PM CDT

If you haven't heard it elsewhere, I hope you've read it here: Job search is a numbers game. The more people you contact, the more interviews you'll get. The more interviews, the more job offers and the more likelihood that you'll be excited to accept one of the offers.

Knowing this is true and applying it can be two different things. Never mind the very real issue of energy and motivation. Assuming you're raring to go, and that you find enough people to contact, you still have to manage the process.

Of course, there are products on the market to help you do this. As I haven't sampled any, I can't make an endorsement. If you're interested in seeing what's out there, use your Internet search engine to look for "contact management - job search."

In the meantime, let me mention a few tools, including index cards, notebook paper, and their updated cousin, the electronic spreadsheet.

1. Index cards. Yup, index cards. Those cheap little squares of cardboard that come in packs of 100 for a buck or so. I love them. When it comes to job search contacts — or sales contacts, or client tracking, for that matter — there's nothing simpler to use.

Start by deciding where to place your information on the card. I tend to put names on the top left, with the person's title in an alternate color in the middle of the top line, and the company name on the upper right. Contact information might go directly below the person's name, while more general notes about the company or the person fill the rest of the card's front side.

The back of the card is reserved for actual contact dates and the results of those contacts.

Labor intensive? Yes — which is one reason why you may choose not to use cards to track your contacts. But let me sell you a bit on the convenience factor. I know — you can't run a report from a set of cards. Nor can you reorganize them with the flick of a finger on the keypad.

But you can sort them and pile them in ways that are very satisfying. For example, what if you wanted to contact five people a day for the next three weeks? Set yourself up with the piles of cards for each day and have at it. When the calls are

made for that day, see if you don't feel like reaching for tomorrow's pile as well. It's a good feeling to literally move something from one side of your desk to the other.

One other benefit of index cards is their accessibility. No matter how lightweight computers get, or how convenient handheld devices become, it's still a pain to power up, find the right screen and start poking away to enter information. In the same amount of time, I could pull out the card, write my note and enjoy half a cup of coffee besides.

2. Notebook pages. Sheets of paper offer most of the same benefits as index cards, except that they're not as much fun to move around on your desk. On the other hand, they hold more information and can be stored in binders with handy divider tabs. And yes, they're still labor intensive and old-fashioned, and no, they will never alphabetize themselves.

3. Spreadsheets. Of course, this is the option you're going to use, and for some really good reasons. Your information can be organized and sorted and made into pie charts if that's what you're dying to do. It also can be lost or jumbled in the blink of an eye, so do make printouts at regular intervals.

Whatever system you choose, the point is that you actually use it. Your goal is to capture information about people you meet as well as those you're hoping to meet. The next step is to sort the information into meaningful categories, and then to decide how and how frequently you will contact each person.

Remember that some people will be once-in-a-while, just-to-update-you contacts, while others will be the more frequent, "can you help me with this question" contacts. The ones you most want to connect with, of course, will be the potential employers themselves. All told, a successful job search might involve contact with a hundred or more people on a semi-regular basis.

For that, you really do need a system.

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