

## **Why Qualified Candidates Don't Always Get the Best Jobs**

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Over the past two years, I have conducted fifteen searches for nonprofit organizations seeking executive directors, chief operating officers, directors of finance and administration, and other senior staff. To complete these searches, I have read about 1,700 resumes and interviewed around 200 applicants.

Of the 1,685 people who did not get the jobs, many were clearly unqualified, usually because they did not have enough experience or their experience was not relevant. But I'm sure that a number of applicants were quite qualified for the openings. Why did they not get the job? Why did most of them not even get an interview?

Here's why these qualified people were considered "dead on arrival" as soon as I read their application:

- o Even though my job announcement stated clearly that I wanted a cover letter, resume, and recent salary history, applicants only sent a resume, demonstrating that they don't know how to follow instructions.
- o When a cover letter was included, the applicant did not demonstrate any knowledge of the organization he or she presumably wants to work for. My job announcement always identifies the employer, and provides their website address if it exists. The cover letter might include the name of the organization, but the tone and content make it pretty obvious that I've received a form letter that is probably being sent mindlessly to everyone else who advertised similar positions that day in the Washington Post, ExecSearches.com, CEO Job Opportunities Update, etc.
- o They were purposefully vague about their salary history, e.g. by saying something like "my total compensation package last year was \$65,000," a figure that could include the value of benefits such as retirement, health insurance, etc., which is not what I requested. (Some applicants said in the cover letter that they would prefer to discuss salary later; that was OK, in part because they acknowledged that they know I do want this information.)
- o The resume was dull. It probably identified clearly where they've worked and what jobs they've had, but it told me nothing about what they accomplished. "Overseeing the annual audit" is not nearly as interesting as "implementing new accounting system that led to the first annual audit without any adjustments in the history of the organization." "Managing an HR staff of 2" is not nearly as exciting as "introducing new employee benefits, which led to a 35 percent reduction in staff turnover with minimal increase in expenses." If the applicant has accomplished anything that is truly impressive, the resume gives no indication.

If the applicant followed instructions, wrote a cover letter that was tailored to the specific organization and job, and included a resume that showed a track record of success, then I would consider asking the person to have an interview with me—provided, of course, that their work experience was sufficient and relevant, and that their salary history and presumed needs are in line with the job.

Those who get interviewed have made a great leap—from a large applicant pool to a group that might represent only 10 to 20 percent of the applicants. As a search consultant, my objective is to interview these people and then, in consultation with my client, select the top six to eight candidates whom they will interview. Qualified candidates stumble at this point a number of ways.

- o They still haven't done any research on the organization. By now, I expect people to have visited the group's website, which is only a few keystrokes away, or read their annual report, which they can obtain by asking me or requesting one directly from the organization.
- o They come prepared to answer my questions, but they come with no questions of their own, which, frankly, I think is odd given the importance of making a wise career decision. Without any questions of their own, the interview becomes a stilted volley of my questions and the candidate's answers, rather than a more engaging conversation that, among other things, builds rapport between the candidate and me that is especially important if I am later going to be a strong and effective advocate for that person.
- o Following the interview, they don't follow-up. No thank-you letter, phone call, or email. They sit and wait, passively, which does nothing to inspire confidence that this person has the leadership skills, initiative, and drive that senior management positions require.

There are many good reasons why competent people don't get certain great jobs—their skills might not be what the position requires, they might have too much experience given where the position fits in the organization, they might be too inexperienced and would be much better candidates in three or four years. It's OK if these reasons keep you from a job that interests you; if the fit is not right, you're much better off waiting for something else. But when you do come across an opening that does make sense, please don't get yourself eliminated from the process by committing any of the *faux pas* listed above.

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