

# Don't Trust the Official "System": It's Not Working in Your Favor

Depending on who you are and what your particular dreams are, you probably have a list of companies that you would love to work for. Perhaps any one of the 100 companies on *Fortune's* annual Best Companies to Work For list? Or even the runners-up would be nice. Or maybe any one of the Working Mother-endorsed companies? Or AARP-endorsed companies? Or maybe your tastes run toward the more adventurous: Wouldn't it be great to work for one of those luxury cruise lines that take passengers on eco-aware journeys to the Galapagos?

It's probably not hard to create a list of your ideal companies. The trouble is, how do people get inside? Surely there has to be a system. Some of these companies employ tens of thousands of very lucky people. If you happen to live near their headquarters, you know this for a personal fact. You've seen their parking lots full of cars. All those lucky cars, with their lucky drivers happily working away in a collegial spirit of focusing their time, energy, smarts, and skills on a shared goal. For a company that is magnificently managed and is the leader in its field.

How do you get your foot in the door? Which door, for that matter? What is that one door that is set up for stone-cold outsiders, such as yourself, who only ask for a chance to be noticed and considered? And then perhaps invited in for an interview. Followed by, of course, the offer of a great job because you are just as capable as the people they have. With all those thousands of employees already on the payroll, the company must have an

elegant system, a process by which to find people just like you, who are at the right place at the right time with just the right skill sets. Surely. Right?

Nope. Well... let's rephrase that a little bit. The company of your dreams may have a process, but that doesn't necessarily mean it's working. And that certainly doesn't mean it's working for you. In fact, it could be working against you. Not intentionally, of course. But the results are still the same.

The idea of a company having a sophisticated, smoothly run, imminently fair process for seeking, finding, and recruiting ideal talent (that would be you) is a modern myth supported by the whiz-bang of technology. In fact, the employers' pursuit of mass-efficiency over the last couple of decades has resulted in bringing in more resumé's rather than welcoming any individual superior candidate who especially wants to work for a particular company for specific reasons (that would be you).

From the perspective of individual applicants who really, really, really want to work for a specific company, getting a job is a messy, disorganized, haphazard process. True, people do get hired in the conventional job search process, using companies' established recruiting systems. However, the conventional job search process is still too much a matter of dumb luck and timing. And isn't your career too important to rely on dumb luck and timing?

Here are some of the ways the "system" (assuming there is one) can fail you:

- **Even companies with sophisticated recruitment processes have haphazard ways of finding the best talent.** Individual internal recruiters deal in volume. They tend to be used when there is a shortage of applicants, and they are often entry-level HR people. For many positions, particularly higher-level positions, they are simply bypassed. They

set up database systems into which they dump unsolicited resumés and create automated responses: “Thank you for your interest in our company....” When recruiting slows, internal recruiters are often among the first employees to lose their jobs. Managers are left on their own to find people, and they often outsource searches for candidates when they do need to hire. External recruiters may struggle under the disadvantage of not having a deep understanding of the company culture or that extra special something that will make the candidate the best fit for the hiring manager. The hiring managers themselves might not know exactly what they want. And if you rely on the conventional ways of getting in the door, you drastically reduce your chances of brainstorming the future with the person who could be your fantastic next boss.

- **Only a small fraction of open positions are even published.** However, 100% of all positions are “hidden” at some point (most likely in the very early stages of their development, when you can have the most influence over how those job descriptions are written). But once they’re published—if they’re published—you could get lost in the stampeding desperation of millions of other job seekers who just want a job (any job, please! please! please!).

So isn’t it to your advantage to get ahead of the herd? Tap into jobs before they are published, and you’ll have a greater selection and less competition, if any.

- **The drive to somehow stand apart from that crowd could compel you to try truly goofy gimmicks.** *Do not* attach your resumé to a bouquet of balloons. Or attach it to a Starbucks gift card. Or send it via singing messenger. You don’t want to stand out by looking stupid. You want to stand out by being extraordinary, and by having the right person notice how extraordinary you are. Using the HJM techniques will position you in that perfect light.

- **Conventional job searching methods, and recruitment systems, begin (and end) with resumés.** Resumés are a necessary evil, but they are not your friend. They give people reasons to screen you out more than welcome you in for further discussion. Resumés are about your past. The job search is about your future. And the company's future. And how you can help each other get there.

Using the HJM techniques, your introduction to a potential employer is much better than a resumé, and certainly more dignified than a singing messenger (no offense to all you singing messengers out there). You are in control of the way you introduce yourself and your talents to the company you might want to work for. You decide whom you call (and you're not waiting for someone to call you), who introduces you to whom, and what the tone is of that first one-on-one meeting.

When you're using the HJM techniques, you are a person in the mind of the hiring manager, not just a piece of paper. It's a snap to toss aside a two-page resumé, especially when thousands of others just like it are waiting to be read and screened. But in the hidden job market, you're *right there*, a real human being talking to the hiring manager. And you're not so easy to thoughtlessly dismiss, especially when you're conducting the HJM meeting, driving the quality of the conversation.

- **Applicant tracking systems are designed to spit you out.** You could be the perfect candidate for the published job. But: you're competing with hundreds of applicants whose resumé keywords might be just a bit more perfect. You know that there are many jobs that you can do, transferring completely appropriate skills from one industry to another. But: because your resumé doesn't have the exact keyword matches, as compared with the next person's, you're placed at the bottom of the list or spit out of the system altogether.

You know you can do the job, and you may be even more motivated than the “perfect candidate” with all the right key-word matches. But: the applicant tracking system isn’t programmed to pick out your passion.

- **The savvy hiring managers are already circumventing the official “system,” assuming there is one.** No one is better positioned to know how flawed the internal recruitment system is. Rightly or wrongly, the more powerful senior leaders won’t even bring HR into the recruitment discussion, especially if that open position is at a higher level than their HR director. Some may use executive search firms. But that represents a significant expense (up to 30% of your first year’s salary), one that many companies are loath to take on right now.

So what do these hiring managers do? They tap into the hidden job market: their friends; their professional networks; their resources; total strangers who call them and ask for a few minutes’ time to get acquainted and discuss their profession, business, or company.

Using the HJM techniques, you’re also circumventing the so-called official “system.” You have something in common with the hiring manager already. And because you’re not waiting for the applicant tracking system to miraculously discover you, you’ve found other ways into the companies of your choice, having one-on-one meetings with people who might be in a position to hire you (or who might know someone who is). While the recruiting department (if there still is one) is busily shuffling through applications, you’re already sitting in front of the hiring manager. You’re right there. Which puts you in a perfect position to demonstrate that you’re a really pleasant individual who not only has the ability to get the job done, but also has that extra special spark to get the job done beautifully.

That's the spark that will get you the job offer. The HJM system is the system that works. That's the system you should use. Because it's the system you control.

**The best thing you can do:**

Let go of any expectation that the way companies recruit is orderly, sensible, and fair.

**The worst thing you can do:**

Spend money on some executive agency that promises to "get you in the door" of hiring companies. No one will represent you better than you.

**The first thing you should do:**

Start a list of every organization you think would hire someone with your skills (even if you think they might have a hiring freeze).

### Three Strikes Do Not Count as an Out

After several years working as a test engineer for a utility company, Bob decided that it was time to update his career and focus on high tech—specifically, sophisticated computer chips, semiconductors, and networks. But the semiconductor industry has its ups and downs, and in a downturn, he was quickly out of a job. With a family to support and a new mortgage, Bob wanted to get back into the utilities, where he would have more job security. He applied for every job that was posted at the nearby gas and electric company.

He got a polite note from Human Resources: "Thank you for your application. All applications are under review and we will contact you in the future for an interview if your skills match our needs." *Strike one.* He applied for another position in the same company. Same response. *Strike two.* Now Bob was really running out of time. After applying for a third position, he called a former co-worker to renew their acquaintance. He, in turn, arranged a networking meeting for Bob with a manager.

A week later, the manager called him back and introduced him to an internal group that was looking for someone with precisely his blend of skills and experience.

Later that day, the manager told him, “They want to put together an offer.” Bob was thrilled. But the next day, he got yet another automated rejection notice from Human Resources: “After reviewing your qualifications, we have concluded we have no positions for you at this time.” He was crushed. *Strike three.*

Two days later, the manager called back. “We have an offer for you. When can you start?”

Bottom line: Bob got hired for a job that was never published; never went through Human Resources; was never officially in the system. The formal system rejected him not once, but three times. And he still got the job.

