

Outsourcing could be way to go in short-term "gig" economy

By Ellen Fussell Policastro

Pounding the pavement, literally, in a sandwich-board job search has paid off for one man in the U.K., and others are trying it in New York. This says despite hard times, creative thinkers are still around and still in demand.

In fact, the American Staffing Association (ASA) index reports employment in the industry has been steadily increasing over the past two months, yet staffing employment for the monthly period of 10 August through 13 September was still nearly 20.8% lower than for the same period in 2008.

A glimmer in the unemployment tunnel could be the demand for temporary and contract staffing, which rose slightly from August to September in 2009, according to the ASA. For those starting over, this could mean you might find yourself looking more for part-time gigs, project contracts, or freelance work.

Contagious contracting

Engineers could take the contractor road if they are willing to take a risk, said Will Martin, an executive recruiter with FORTUNE Personnel Consultants in Greensboro, N.C. The upside of contracting is the pay is higher, and there is flexibility as far as working with a client for six months to a year instead of working at the same plant day-in and day-out. "Some people are road warriors; they love to travel Monday through Thursday of every week," Martin said. "There's a place for the contractor in the pharmaceutical industry. It is a unique type of situation.

"If you're a pharmaceutical company looking to add a new assembly line in your plant, such as a high speed filling line, making a glass bottle filled with liquid, this might not be a permanent line," Martin said. "Getting that line up and running may be a 12-month project. A contract employee is perfect for that. For 12 months, they specialize in getting that line up and running.

That company didn't have to hire someone full time, pay benefits, and find something else for that person to do," he said.

Yet working on such a sporadic basis takes a certain type of person, one who likes a variety in their work day. They like a clear-cut challenge—getting the project up and running and getting the line running with zero defaults," Martin said.

The downside of contracting is in lean times, as in the past year, the contract employees are usually the first to go, he said. "Plus, even with good pay and flexible hours, the travel can get tiresome."

The bottom line is contracting is an "up and down thing with risk and reward," he said. "If you're willing to take a risk, there is a larger payoff."

Opportunities in drugs, medicine

In the pharmaceutical industry, engineers who have experience working on capital projects like filling lines are prized possessions because they can get it done under budget, Martin said. "But in this type of economic environment, a lot of people are not adding capacity in plant," he said. Automation engineers may have trouble finding work if they are not in the right industry. Pharmaceutical and medical are fairly robust. Aerospace is promising as well; they are looking for a very high standard of quality and a specific skill set.

If you have automotive experience, you might not be so lucky. "Right now, the automotive people aren't finding anything. Automotive plants have been shut down, as well as electronics manufacturing. It's a tough job market; and from a consumer standpoint, people aren't buying cars, but they're still taking their high blood pressure medication," Martin said.

FAST FORWARD

- Outsourcing looking better as employment wanes.
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- Build your brand through networking in hidden job market.

The top disciplines for engineers today include anything having to do with healthcare, pharmaceuticals, and medical device companies. The open positions, however, are for those with prior experience in pharmaceuticals and good manufacturing practices. "If you have that background, you're pretty marketable."

But prior training is the key here. The pharmaceutical industry is looking to hire contractors with pharmaceutical background. "The most successful contractors are those who have had a career at a pharmaceutical company as a full-time employee," Martin said. "They've either retired or been laid off."

"A typical education in pharmaceutical technology or pharmaceutical sciences is not like real-world hands-on experience. If I am a hiring manager at a pharmaceutical company looking to hire a contractor to put in a new line, I can find it," he said. "There are a lot of contractors with a pharmaceutical background. It will never get to a point where talent is not out there."

Even if you are not a contractor, "unless you go to school for chemical engineering and go straight to Johnson & Johnson, it will be tough. There are so many people who have already come out of school and hit the ground running," Martin said. So if you have been

working in the automotive industry, and then you want to go work for a medical device company, you could be in for a long road ahead.

"We've already seen contract employment go up in the past three months," Martin said. "If I am making a product, and for the past two years my demand was low, and I laid off people, if my demand goes back up, I'll hire contractors because they can come in quickly, and I'm not making a big investment. If they do a good job, I can always hire them full time. We're seeing more opportunities open up. I have more jobs open now than in the past 18 months—and that's across the board, not just in pharmaceuticals," he said.

Forge hidden job market

With today's mass of search engines and automated job postings, job seekers could get seduced by the over-organization, letting the search engines do their marketing for them. "It's tempting to just sit back and let the world's network of computers talk to each other and spit out an interview appointment for you—for that one great appointment that will net you that one great job offer," said Duncan Mathison and Martha I. Finney in their book, *Unlock the Hidden Job Market: 6 Steps to a Successful Job Search When Times Are Tough*. "That's like the overwhelming desire to fall asleep in the snow when you're freezing to death. Don't do it."

To begin a quest of outsourcing yourself, or maybe even finding your dream full-time job, you could take a look into what authors call the hidden job market (HJM), from which "people are hired every day in jobs that are never published, never posted on the Internet, never put on the company web site, nor listed in the newspaper, nor posted on job boards," the authors said.

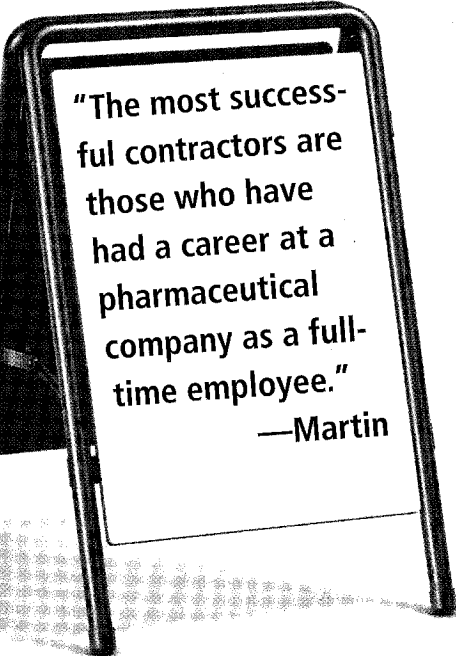
Instead of making a job search one "large, shapeless mass of possibilities surrounded by a maze of dead-ends and a tangle of unreturned, cold, phone calls," take the overly automated system by the horns and proactively seek out successful people. Sure it will take time, "just when the last thing you heard at work

might have been, 'I'm afraid we're going to have to let you go'—and patience, just when you need a job now," they said. But do not despair. Taking a step-by-step approach could mean the difference in getting your foot in the door or getting it slammed in your face.

The book illustrates one scenario in which, after several years working as a test engineer for a utility company, "Bob" decided to update his career and focus on high tech—sophisticated computer chips, semiconductors, and networks. After being laid off in this precarious field, he turned to utilities, which he believed provided more security. After several applications and frustrating robotic rejections from different jobs at the same company, he called a former co-worker to renew their acquaintance and landed a meeting with one of the managers. Later that day, the manager told him the group was putting together a job offer for him. The next day, he received another automated letter saying his qualifications were unwanted. The lesson here is Bob was hired for a job that was never published, never went through human resources, and was never officially in the system. The formal system rejected him three times, yet he still got the job.

Build web sites

Richard Heckl, founder of Engineering Trends, an e-commerce consulting firm specializing in engineering education, suggests practicing engineers build their own personal web sites if they want to start outsourcing themselves for contract work. "These should be professionally crafted to perform well-defined purposes," he said. "It is unfortunate that too many engineers rely upon their employer's web site for display of specific talents. These days, the talents of individual engineers should be uncovered by search engines, not by endless prowling of the web sites of organizations that just might contain the information needed. "Of course, some sort of engineer/employer agreement might be necessary. This approach would allow the employed engineer the opportunity to sample life as a web-



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—Martin

based consultant," he said.

Employers might get a bit edgy about this, Heckl said. However, employers encourage engineers to be active professionally, attend national meetings. "Engineering Trends started this way after I retired and is based upon compilation of engineering education statistics that began almost 30 years ago," he said. "Knowing what I know now, I should have founded [Engineering Trends] three decades ago while I was a faculty member at Michigan Tech."

Schedule research conversations

One simple but effective tactic to gaining entry and insight into a company is to set up a research conversation, the HJM authors said. These non-interview-type meetings will give you the chance to brainstorm with potential hiring managers, as well as more insight into your industry or profession. And they could generate more introductions.

If you think employers are too busy to meet and hire valuable talent to contribute to their success, think again. Good managers know that is one of their core responsibilities. As you practice taking control of your research conversations, you will find managers thanking *you* for the meeting and for all the ideas the two of you generated. You are doing them a favor as much as you are driving a job search campaign.

And do not worry about being too pushy about going for a job that is not officially posted. "No one is going to be offended if you come into their work world and solve their problem for them," the authors said. "If there is an identified need that has been turned into a defined job that must be filled, you've just saved the hiring manager hours, days, weeks, and even months of time finding you (not to mention thousands of dollars in recruitment costs)."

Do not buy into self-fulfilling prophecies, considering yourself a leper because you have lost your job from a layoff or firing. Even though your self-esteem could be in the toilet, you will find renewed confidence when you re-enter the HJM, "seeing your value as a

professional beyond the context of the company that rejected you."

The authors describe "David," who started his career with a major aerospace firm straight out of college, with promotions following soon thereafter, until he reached vice president of finance. "When the company was sold, the new owners wanted to put their own leadership team in place. Now, for the first time in his life, David was unemployed ... with misplaced, damaged pride. To him, networking was the same as begging. He could not even bring himself to call people who respected his talents the most and cared about him personally. It was not being laid off that wrecked his career. It was his insistent resistance to network."

The best thing you can do is take advantage of any outplacement or career transition package (if your company provided them) to help you with the job search, the authors said. The worst thing you can do is to blindly send your

résumé to search firms and expect they will do the job searching and door opening for you. Create an action plan, and update it every weekend for the coming week. "Remember that you are in control of this search," they said.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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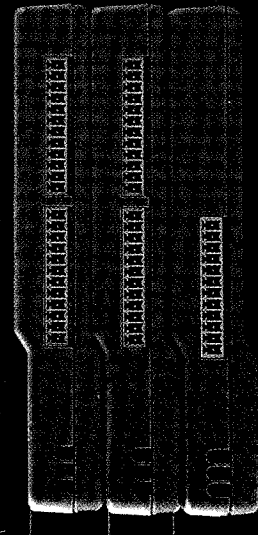
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