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AUTHOR	Kerka, Sandra
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ABSTRACT

The Internet is changing the way people look for jobs, but these questions still remain: How effective is online job searching? and Are traditional methods now a waste of time? Surveys indicate only 5.5 percent of 99 million American households had done any online job hunting; a majority of 4,000 executives had job openings posted on their companies' websites; Fortune 500 online recuitment increased from 17 to 45 percent from 1998-99; but the Internet accounts for only 2 percent of employment advertising. A recruiting industry source estimates the number of successful searches made entirely via the Web is around 17 percent. The "hidden" job market is still most effectively tapped by personal contacts, although companies are encouraging employees to e-mail job ads to friends and creating alumni networks for referrals. Surveys have found more than 80 percent of employers initially identified interview candidates from paper resumes more than half the time, while only 60 percent scanned electronic resumes; and only 30 percent of employers preferred electronic resumes. The Internet enables job seekers to access current information, reach deeper into local markets and transcend geographic boundaries, and connect with many employers for less time and money. The limitations of keyword searching may hamper the number or relevance of job matches. What the Internet does is allow job seekers to diversify their approach. (Contains 21 references.) (YLB)

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Sandra Kerka

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education
Center on Education and Training for Employment
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1090

CE 081 511

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MYTHS AND REALITIES NO. 14

by Sandra Kerka

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Job Searching in the 21st Century

"Find your dream job online!" "Electronic job search revolution!" Of all the hype surrounding the Internet, one of the biggest claims may be how information technology is changing the way people look for jobs. A huge number of electronic job resources are available: resume posting sites, job vacancy databases, employer websites, discussion boards and newsgroups, industry salary and information sites, and general career information sites. The Internet gives job seekers access to vast amounts of information about vacancies and employers, 24-hour availability, broader geographic reach, networking, career development advice, and simplified resume distribution (Dikel 2001). For recruiters and employers, the Internet can speed up the hiring process, provide a large pool of applicants, and reduce advertising and other costs (Pearce and Tuten 2001). But how effective is online job searching? Are traditional methods now a waste of time? Like everything else in cyberspace, online job hunting is constantly changing. For example, a 1999 *Fortune* magazine cover announced "I got my job online–and soon so will you" (Useem 1999). Now a 2001 article advises: "Enjoy being unemployed? Keep job hunting online" (Fisher 2001). And measuring any kind of Internet use is a perilous process—a variety of conflicting statistics can be found. This publication investigates some myths and realities of job searching in the 21st century.

Out with the Old?

Are job seekers flocking to online search methods? Approximately 100,000 sites offer resume posting and classified ad services; estimates of the number of resumes on the Web range from 2.5 million (Pearce and Tuten 2001) to 20 million (Corsini 2001). According to Bureau of Labor Statistics data, 15% of unemployed job seekers and 50% of all job seekers with home access used the Internet (Kuhn and Skuterud 2000). Recent college graduates are highly likely to search online: 80.3% of those surveyed by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) and 82% in a survey by SBC Internet Services used the Internet to locate job openings or information on careers ("In Search" 1999; "Net Playing a Role" 1999). However, career guru Richard Bolles (1998) estimates that only a fraction of the labor force participates; according to an IntelliQuest survey, only 5.5% of 99 million U.S. households had done any online job hunting.

Are employers recruiting and hiring online? It is difficult to get an accurate reading. A majority of 4,000 executives surveyed by BrilliantPeople.com have job openings posted on their companies' websites, 66.2% use outside job boards, and 47.3% use both methods ("Web Expands Role" 2000). According to Useem (1999), Fortune 500 online recruitment increased from 17% in 1998 to 45% in 1999. A survey by Recruitsoft found that 79% of Global 500 companies are recruiting via their websites ("Global 500" 2000). Hays (1999) claims that, by 2000, 96% of all U.S. companies were expected to use the Internet for some or all of their recruiting. Brooke (1999) counters that only a fraction of 16 million U.S. employers are on the Web, and the top employment sites—Monster.com, CareerPath.com, CareerMosaic.com, Jobsearch.org, and Head Hunter.net—each give access to only .06% of all U.S. employers and 6% of all vacancies. Although expenditures for online recruiting are expected to increase from $205 million in 1998 to $1.7 billion by 2003 (Pearce and Tuten 2001), the Internet still accounts for only 2% of employment advertising (Useem 1999).

Are people actually getting jobs this way? Again the numbers vary. A technology company like Cisco Systems may hire 66% of its staff via the Internet (ibid.), and a Recruiters Network survey found that online recruiting was responsible for 20% of the hires of 45% of companies polled, especially in healthcare, accounting, and sciences (Charles 2000). Overall, however, a Yankelovich poll showed that "companies hire only about 1 in 10 new employees as a result of an online contact" (Fisher 2001, p. 164); 40% of online job seekers say online resume databases are like a black hole and 50% say they never or seldom get relevant interviews. A recruiting industry source estimates that the number of successful searches made entirely via the Web is around 17% (Corsini 2001).

Perhaps some things have changed a lot but others haven't yet changed enough. Some of the variables affecting the success of online job searching include recruiter overload (ibid.) and poorly designed websites that frustrate and turn off potential applicants (Pearce and Tuten 2001; "Web Expands Role" 2000). One recruiter notes that "most job sites are still based on a traditional classified-ad model" (Fisher 2001, p. 164). Bolles is more critical: "The Internet is the electronic version of a Neanderthal job-hunting system that hasn't worked for years" (Charles 2000, p. 92).

Websites are valuable tools for attracting candidates and for allowing job applicants to research employers. However, people are still getting hired using the old ways: in surveys cited by Dikel (2001), Fein (1998), and Goldsborough (2000), high percentages of both employers and successful job seekers used networking/referrals, newspaper ads, on-campus recruiting, and headhunters. This is true even in technical fields; 71.9% of graduates surveyed by NACE, including engineers and computer science majors, used print sources ("In Search" 1999). The Internet may be increasing use of some methods (submitting resumes) but decreasing others, such as unions, placement centers, private and public agencies, and ad responses, but it is not yet having a large effect (Kuhn and Skuterud 2000). Large job sites may be too big, too global, and too difficult to search effectively (Useem 1999). The "hidden" job market is still most effectively tapped by personal contacts (Dikel 2001), although technology is enhancing this too: many companies are encouraging employees to e-mail job ads to friends and are creating alumni networks for referrals (Cappelli 2001). Use of traditional versus online methods may vary according to company size and industry type (Fein 1998); in the "Global 500" (2000) survey, website recruiting was used by 100% of high-tech, 89% of retailing, and 73% of financial services companies.

Only techies need apply? A piece of folk wisdom about online job hunting is that the great majority of jobs posted are in technology-related fields. That may have been true early on, but the ratio of technical to nontechnical jobs posted is estimated to be nearly even now (Dikel 2001); 65% of online job seekers are reputed to be nontechnical (Useem 1999). CareerMosaic.com's data show that management, sales, accounting, and marketing were four of the top five job searches done in 1999 ("Internet Job Searches" 1999). Are the positions mostly entry level? It depends on where you look. Goldsborough (2000) claims the Internet job hunt is better for entry and midlevel jobs, but others cite availability of a wider range of positions (Pearce and Tuten 2001), even at the highest salary levels ("Job Seekers" 2000).

All You Have to Do Is Post

Given the broad reach of the Internet and the ease and speed of resume posting (compared to postal mail), some may think you need only broadcast your resume on the Web and sit back and wait for the calls. However, electronic resumes are not universally acceptable, and the huge enterprise of resume databases has its share of problems. More than 80% in Fein's (1998) employer survey initially

identified interview candidates from paper resumes more than half the time; only 16% scanned electronic resumes. A large number of employers surveyed by Jennings, Carnes, and Whitaker (2001) found electronic resumes, follow-up letters, and resume services acceptable, but only 30% preferred them. Like newspaper classifieds, resume databases don't keep track of how many people actually get contacted (Dikel 2001), so it is difficult to know which sites would be most effective. Online resumes must be prepared differently (ASCII, plain-vanilla formatting); unlike paper resumes, in which action verbs are important, nouns are the critical keywords. The keyword approach isn't ideal for describing soft skills and not yet sophisticated enough to ensure relevant matching (Fisher 2001).

As in e-shopping, privacy, security, and confidentiality are concerns. It can be hard to remove resumes from databases, and posted resumes can leave job hunters open to spamming and irrelevant offers. It is difficult to control who has access to your resume, and there is no guarantee your current employer will not come across it or be sent it by an electronic headhunter (Charles 2000; Goldsborough 2000).

The accuracy of Internet information is also an issue when it comes to job searching. Company websites as well as resume and job posting sites should be evaluated using such criteria as objectivity and currency (Dikel 2001). The Net has great potential for networking, but job seekers would be well advised to be skeptical about the information acquired in newsgroups and chatrooms and careful about the amount of personal disclosure they make in these places.

Something Old, Something New

Little research has been conducted on the extent to which job seeking and recruitment are migrating to the Internet or on the effectiveness of online versus traditional methods. However, the survey and anecdotal evidence that can be found leads to the following conclusions about job searching in the 21st century (at this moment in time, subject to change, of course).

The Internet can enable job seekers to access current information at any time, reach deeper into local markets as well as transcend geographic boundaries, and connect with a large number of employers for less time and money (Dikel 2001). However, the limitations of keyword searching may hamper the number and/or relevance of job matches, so individuals with clear, focused career goals should target specific companies and concentrate on job sites that cater to certain industries or occupations rather than the "big boards" (Fisher 2001).

A common assumption about the Internet is that informality rules, but professionalism and courtesy still count in the employment arena—no spamming, no bombarding potential employers with messages, no misspelled colloquial e-mails (Goldsborough 2000). Job seekers should also learn about employers' and recruiters' preferences. Some want only electronic applications, some accept a variety of formats, most will refuse e-mail attachments, some still use primarily nontechnological methods or a combination of new and old (Fein 1998; Pearce and Tuten 2001).

Above all, job seekers should diversify their approach. According to Margaret Dikel of ***The Riley Guide***, "the Internet is merely an added dimension to the traditional job search...Job hunters need to focus less on the search for job listings and more on the idea of using the information accessible on the Internet as a tool for researching organizations and finding possibilities" (Bolles 1998, online, n.p.). Dikel (2001) advises limiting online methods to one-quarter of the total time devoted to a job search.

Online tools are becoming more sophisticated: coding standards for job requirements and applicant characteristics, third-party sites that administer skill assessments, career network sites that integrate a profile/resume database, a jobs database, and a matching engine (Cappelli 2001; Li et al. 2000). Yet, although screening software can identify applicants cheaper and faster, the nuances of character, personality, and fit with organizational culture are lost (Corsini 2001). The more things change, the more they remain the same. "Nothing in all this Net stuff eliminates the need for human contact. Face-to-face conversations will likely determine the ultimate fate of job seekers for decades to come" (Useem 1999, p. 78).

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Center on Education and Training for Employment
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus OH 43210-1090

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