

Learn to read between the lines of a job ad

9 MAR 2016 · BY DAVID G. JENSEN

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Most companies in the recruiting business are experiencing a great start to 2016. It appears that the job market is finally picking up a bit of steam, at least across the world of commerce and industry. There will always be a fair amount of stress and uncertainty for scientists looking for Ph.D.-level jobs, but I believe you'll see more job ads today than you did a year ago.

As I've often discussed in [this column](#), my advice is not to rely on job ads exclusively, because the odds are much better with more personal approaches. But savvy job seekers must include checking job boards and listings in their daily regimen of tasks —and, perhaps most importantly, recognize what certain language really means in order to optimize their job search results. Here are a few examples of how to read between the lines of common ad language.

"A minimum 2 years of industry experience is required."

Read as, "We've been burned in the past by academics thinking that a move to our company would simply be like going on to the next postdoc."

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Why would employers put a minimum experience level like this into their job qualifications? They aren't interested in helping an academic make the adjustment to industry; they want some *other* company to have taken that risk. Not everyone is a sure-fire success in industry; that's why this column exists, as well as a great deal of the other [advice offered](#) at [Science Careers](#).

[N]o company with this kind of ad gets more than 60% of all the requirements it is looking for, so don't let this hold you back.

—David Jensen

But, is it a completely inflexible piece of the job requirements that a person have at least some industry experience? Absolutely not. Anyone with a couple of years of experience past the Ph.D. (a postdoc will do nicely) and the ability to write a convincing cover letter can make a good case to be considered for this job. That's why my advice is to apply anyway. Hiring managers will be receptive as long as you appear to understand the differences in culture between academia and industry and have a few industry buzzwords at your command. Each niche you focus on—R&D or regulatory affairs, for example—has its own set of terms and acronyms, which you can learn about by conducting a few [informational interviews](#) with people in these areas.

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The key success element when pushing past this job ad language is to write your cover letter using examples of problems you've solved. Consider the requirements of the job and what you know about the industry environment there. The manager has issues she wants to overcome with this hire, so choose a relevant accomplishment or two and come across as someone interested in helping her. Companies hire problem solvers, whether they have 2 years of industry experience or none at all.

"Seeking a Discipline A Ph.D. Scientist with experience in Disciplines B, C, and D, as well as hands-on experience with Techniques X and Y and a thorough knowledge of Technique Z."

Read as, *"We're tossing in everything but the kitchen sink because we're in no big rush, and we might as well reach for the moon because we haven't really figured out the job yet."*

This happens frequently: A company that hasn't completely thought through what it is looking for throws together an impossible-to-fill profile to test the market. This is all the more common these days, because companies can experiment with ads on various online boards for so little cost.

These laundry lists of skills result in what I call "pinpoint hiring." Back when I got into the recruiting business, seeing an ad that said, "Ph.D. cell biologist needed for growing biotech company" (or "microbiologist," "biochemist," etc. ...) would be fairly common. But in the years that have passed, employers have added skill after skill to their requirements so that the opening now exists on the head of a pin. Increasingly, there are no more broad areas of need in the sciences; there are only pinpoints.

So how do you fight pinpoint hiring? It's tough. The recruitment process may start with the need to find someone to contribute, today, with an exact set of skills, but at the center of that job description lies one core area of expertise. Find out what that is by examining the ad or by talking to someone you know in industry. Then, focus your energies on providing a CV and cover letter that fit this theme. Most of the time, the company ends up hiring someone who has that core. I would guess that no company with this kind of ad gets more than 60% of all the requirements that it is looking for, so don't let this hold you back.

"ABC Recruiting Company has a position to fill for a \$50 billion market cap client in the pharmaceutical sector. Please forward your CV to us at . . ."

Read as, *"We're using a blind ad in hopes that referencing a company without name will allow our Internet trolling effort to pick up leads for our candidate database."*

This is a common ploy used by some recruiting firms to expand their universe. Think about it—why would employers *not* want to use their names in ads? I suppose some ultra-secret plans for research might require confidentiality, but those odds are low. Most of the time, employers want people to know that they are hiring—it is good PR!

When companies assign an opening to a single recruiting firm, the recruiters there are almost like consultants, and they generally use the names of their clients when they advertise. Sometimes, however, employers assign an opening to multiple recruiting firms on what is called a "contingency" basis. All these different recruiters want to get your CV and send it to the

employers ahead of the pack. Keeping the names of the companies under wraps also prevents the candidates from sending their CVs directly to the employers, which would eliminate recruiters' potential for commission.

Contingency recruiters can have some good assignments, so you can't just forget that approach. But if you are considering dropping your CV into the black hole of a "blind" ad, consider using a one-page biosketch that will not be considered a resume or CV by an employer; this will force the headhunting firm to call you if it is interested. Include a few enticing paragraphs much like you'd use to describe yourself as a speaker in a conference. The caller will request a full CV, at which time you can ask for more details about this and other potential jobs. Then, if you decide to go ahead and submit a CV, clarify that you would like to retain control over the document by knowing where it has gone. Quality firms will be receptive to your request to get a call before it goes out to any employer in the future.

"Requirements include a Ph.D. with 5+ years experience in cell biology or biochemistry, or a M.S. degree with equivalent experience."

Read as, *"We've got a Ph.D. opening here, and that's the way we'd like to fill it, but we're required by human resources to show respect to those few Master of Science-level employees who have reached the scientist ranks at our company."*

I'm sorry to be sarcastic, but every time a client company sends me a Ph.D. scientist assignment that says "A master's is OK, too," I find out later—after hours of interviewing a few M.S.-level candidates—that this isn't the case. Despite what those ads say, for an R&D leadership position, the master's degree holder has to work her or his way up in the company, a process that differs at every employer but one that takes years and numerous hurdles. (Note that this is not the case in manufacturing operations, quality control and assurance, and other technical positions where M.S. degree holders go right to the top.)

Now, with what may first appear like a slight change of wording, this ad can mean a great deal more opportunity for the master's graduate. For example, consider "M.S. or Ph.D. required, with emphasis on cell biology and biochemistry." By rearranging the order of the preferred degrees, employers show that their intent to consider M.S. candidates is indeed serious. In fact, the "or" part of the statement says to me that the M.S.-level applicant is exactly what's at the core of this need and that Ph.D. holders applying for this job could easily be seen as overqualified.

So what does the future hold for job ads?

One reason that job ads have been plentiful in the past is that they are cheap and easy. But they have also shown a declining value to employers, as more and more emphasis has been placed on social media for candidate recruitment. Human resources departments now have teams of people onboard to identify and recruit candidates directly within the social media platforms that we use every day, in almost every aspect of our lives.

Still, the business of finding a job requires attention to be paid to every single element in the process, and job ads will remain one of these elements for some time to come. So learn to read ads carefully and to understand the issues that they refer back to, however subtly. And then show those advertisers that you are a key player in their core theme and, most importantly, that you've been a problem solver since you first stepped into the lab all those years ago.

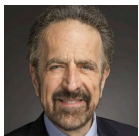
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