

Winning That Job in the private, corporate or not-for-profit sectors

An interview with Tim Crowden, Executive Coach and Founder of Coaching and Leadership

You've made the decision to seek a new career direction, leave government employment and pursue potential opportunities in the private, corporate or not-for-profit sectors. We spoke with Tim Crowden, executive coach, former senior public servant and founder of Coaching and Leadership to understand what needs to be considered and expected through the recruitment process.

Is finding a job in the private, corporate or not-for-profit sector different from finding one in government?

Recruitment outside government is often less structured and more conversational. Rather than attending a formal panel interview, you might be invited to a conversational interview over coffee, meet informally with a senior executive or participate in an exploratory discussion about an opportunity that hasn't yet been advertised.

You may not be asked to address selection criteria, prepare a lengthy pitch or attend a formal panel interview. Instead, you might have a coffee with a senior executive, meet several members of a leadership team, meet and engage with potential team members, to discuss a potential opportunity that hasn't even been advertised.

But don't mistake a more relaxed setting for a less serious recruitment process. The conversation may be informal, but the assessment is very real.

Employers still want to understand your experience, achievements, leadership capability and the value you can bring to their organisation.

And there is another important difference – who you know, and who knows you, can play a significant role in creating opportunities.

You've previously mentioned the Proximity Principle. What does that mean?

The Proximity Principle is based on a simple idea – the closer you are to the people, organisations and professional networks associated with the work you want to do, the more likely you are to discover opportunities.

The concept was popularised by American career adviser Ken Coleman in his 2019 book *The Proximity Principle*, although the underlying research goes back to the 1970s, when sociologist Mark Granovetter demonstrated the importance of professional acquaintances and networks in finding employment.

It's particularly relevant to private sector recruitment in western societies where personal introductions, professional recommendations, executive search firms and employee referrals are established ways of identifying potential candidates.

Think about how recruitment often happens.

A senior executive asks a colleague if they know someone with particular experience. A former manager recommends someone they've worked with. A recruiter identifies a potential candidate through LinkedIn. A conversation over coffee leads to an introduction.

Sometimes these conversations happen long before a position is formally advertised – if it is advertised at all.

But the Proximity Principle isn't about getting a job simply because you know someone. It's about developing genuine professional relationships, building your reputation and being recognised for the skills, experience and leadership qualities you bring.

It's not just who you know. It's who knows you, what they know about you and whether they would recommend you.

So, should people spend more time networking and less time applying for jobs?

I think they should do both but be more deliberate about building their professional networks.

Start by identifying the organisations, industries and types of roles that interest you.

Who works in those organisations? Who do you already know? Who might be able to introduce you to someone? Are there professional associations, industry events or forums where you can develop relationships?

Reconnect with former colleagues, clients and professional contacts. Have conversations with people whose work interests you.

And don't approach every conversation as a job opportunity.

Be curious. Ask questions. Understand the challenges organisations face. Share your own experiences and insights. Recognise the gaps you may have in your own knowledge.

The strongest professional relationships are built on mutual respect and genuine interest, not simply on what someone might be able to do for you.

Is the traditional CV becoming less important?

Not at all.

A well-written CV remains an important part of recruitment, even when the opportunity emerges through a personal introduction.

It should clearly demonstrate your skills, experience, achievements and leadership capability, with particular emphasis on the outcomes you've delivered.

If you're moving from government into the private or not-for-profit sector, pay particular attention to your language. Don't assume a prospective employer understands government classifications, acronyms or processes.

Translate your experience into outcomes they will recognise – leading people, managing complexity, improving performance, delivering results and navigating change.

You've previously emphasised the importance of referees. Are they equally important outside government?

Absolutely. And I'd encourage people to speak with their referees before they begin looking for their next opportunity.

Ask how they would describe your leadership, professional strengths and the impact you've made.

Their perspectives can help you refine your CV, strengthen your interview examples and identify the types of roles where you could make the greatest contribution.

In the private sector, professional reputation and trusted recommendations can carry considerable weight.

If recruitment is more relaxed and conversational, how should people prepare for an interview?

The fundamentals of good interview preparation don't change.

Don't spend all your preparation time trying to predict the questions.

Spend time understanding yourself.

Reflect on your achievements, your strengths, your leadership approach and what you've learned throughout your career.

Think about the contribution you've made, the challenges you've navigated and the impact you've had on people and organisations.

Understand the employer, its priorities and what it needs from the successful candidate.

And then practise bringing those two things together.

Because ultimately, the best interviews aren't performances.

They're thoughtful, professional conversations in which both parties develop a clearer understanding of what might be possible.

A relaxed interview can create a false sense of confidence. You might enjoy a very engaging discussion without ever clearly explaining why you're the right person for the role. You don't need to be the person who gives the most polished answers. You need to help the employer understand why you're the right person for the role – and why the role is right for you.

Remember, you're also deciding whether this is an organisation where you want to work.

What's your final advice for someone considering a move into the private, corporate or not-for-profit sector?

Don't wait until you see a job advertised.

Start positioning yourself for the opportunities you want to pursue.

Build your professional relationships. Strengthen your LinkedIn profile. Speak with your referees. Develop a compelling CV and practice articulating your leadership story.

And be clear about the organisations you want to work with and the contribution you can make.

The proximity principle isn't about getting a job because you know someone. It's about creating the relationships, visibility and professional credibility that allow people to recognise your value.

Because sometimes the most important career opportunity begins not with a job advertisement, but with a conversation.

About Tim Crowden

Tim Crowden is an Executive Coach, International Coaching Federation Professional Certified Coach (PCC), and founder of Coaching and Leadership.

Following a 32-year public sector career, including 16 years in the Australian Government Senior Executive Service and senior leadership appointments in Australia and internationally, Tim transitioned into executive coaching and leadership development.

With more than 1,700 hours of documented professional coaching experience, he partners with executives, senior leaders, managers and teams across government, business and other organisations.

Tim established The Coaching and Leadership Hub in Canberra at the beginning of 2025.

Through **Coaching and Leadership**, Tim and his colleagues provide executive coaching, career transition support, leadership development and highly individualised *Winning That Job* workshops. These services help participants understand their professional capabilities, prepare for new opportunities and navigate important career decisions with clarity and confidence.

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