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The job posting looked promising to Andrea Altieri — the position was in her area and the type of work matched what she was looking for. And with years of work experience and a master's degree, she met the qualifications.

Except one.

“Must provide proof of current W-2 income,” the posting read.

“In other words,” Altieri says, “if you're unemployed don't bother to apply.”

She had a sense already that the deck was stacked against job applicants who aren't currently drawing a paycheck. “But to actually see it — wow,” says Altieri, who's currently working on a freelance basis as the marketing director for a real estate agency. “It was shocking to me.”

She's one of many who've gotten such a jolt recently, on encountering ads specifying that applicants “must be currently employed,” or otherwise indicating that, recession or no, the jobless need not bother.

A couple of recent stories highlighting such postings have generated a blast of outraged Web chatter, among them a widely linked Huffington Post item that generated more than 3,000 comments. A search through the job-listings aggregator Indeed.com reveals a number of ads in the New York City area insisting that applicants must be currently working, including listings for sales reps, a bank office and a restaurant manager. NO EXCEPTIONS, reads one.

But where the jobless are concerned, the most important issue may not be the relatively tiny number of ads that make such pronouncements, but the extent to which those decrees spell out a protocol that's widespread among hiring managers, even if they'd never risk saying it out loud. It's a bias that's well known to anyone in the staffing industry, say recruiters.

“We encounter this all the time,” says Peter Polachi, partner and co-founder of the executive search firm Polachi, which focuses on the tech sector. “There's a historical and ongoing bias not to look at candidates in transition.”

The presumption, he says, “is that if you're employed you're probably a good candidate.”

If you're out of work, that presumption disappears — and, says veteran recruiter Mindy Diamond, “We see that whether it's a mom who's been out of the job market or an executive who's completely high quality, with a crystal-clean record, who's been downsized through no fault of their own.”

That bias holds true even during a prolonged recession, recruiters agree, even as great numbers of talented people are idle due to circumstances that have nothing to do with how diligent or talented they may be.

“The perception is definitely out there that if they were any good, they'd be working,” says Barry Moss, a senior representative at Princeton Information Systems, a major IT staffing firm.

“It's a shame,” he says, adding that many good candidates get overlooked because of hiring managers' lack of interest in unemployed applicants, even though “realistically, you may be able to find a better candidate that's unemployed.”

If anything, says Diamond, president of the New Jersey staffing firm Diamond Consultants, a recession frees employers up to ignore unemployed candidates, given the oversupply of talent.

The mentality “is that if it's such a buyer's market, why would you go to somebody who's been terminated?” she says. It's “an unfortunate reality,” she says.

“The theory is that the best people don't get fired, even if in a recession we know that's not true,” she says.

And a recession encourages people who make staffing decisions to be as risk-averse as possible, notes Harvey Weissman, a staffing consultant at OBW Search in New Jersey, who's been in the recruiting field for over 25 years,

“The people hiring are darn scared for their jobs, too,” he says. “They're thinking, if I hire somebody that doesn't work out, am I going to get in trouble, is it going to cost me?”

As a result, he says, “There's this ‘Let's stick with the winner' mentality.”

UNSPOKEN RULE

Often, the preference for candidates who are already working isn't made explicit. While it's not illegal to discriminate against unemployed job seekers, it's a delicate topic, say recruiters, and employers are wary of lawsuits and being seen as insensitive.

But “off the record, people will say it to you,” says one longtime recruiter. “The conversation does take place.”

And even if it's not made explicit, recruiters know the drill, and some say they're less likely to bring a client an unemployed candidate, knowing it's going to be a tougher sell.

"I had a client say to me, 'Why the hell would you give us your dead wood,'" says another recruiter who proposed some unemployed prospects to her tech-sector clients (and who asked not to be named for fear of alienating clients.)

On top of a general perception on the part of employers that working candidates are more desirable, some other factors come into play.

One, said several recruiters, is that people who advertise jobs tend to get such an overwhelming number of responses that they're eager to cut the glut down any way they can. And ruling out anyone who's jobless is one way to do it.

"They're looking to quickly weed out as many applicants as they can," says Diamond.

A related issue, she notes, is that people who are jobless are much more likely to spread their bets around, applying for jobs they may not be well suited for.

There's also a concern that someone who's jobless will grab for anything that's offered to him, and is more likely to move on in a year than someone who gave up a job in order to come to a firm.

Plus, while the recruiters interviewed largely condemned the practice of bypassing unemployed candidates, some were quick to acknowledge that recruiters do their share to perpetuate it.

"That's the headhunter mentality," says Diamond. After all, if you bring in an unemployed candidate who may well have come to the employer on his own, you're not "adding value."

As the tech-sector recruiter put it, "We've been trained to tell the customer that the candidate they're looking for isn't looking for them — that they're having a great time working with their current employer, and the only way to find them is to hire us."

A NARROW VIEW

None of this means that unemployed job seekers stand no chance, of course. For one thing, while the attitude that jobless applicants are second-class is certainly out there, so is a level of understanding that there's no disgrace in being out of work at a time when job seekers outnumber jobs by 5 to 1.

"I think increasingly it's understood that it can happen to people through no fault of their own," says Manhattan career coach Roy Cohen, author of "The Wall Street Professional's Survival Guide."

"I've got lots of candidates who aren't working who are interviewing at top firms."

(Cohen further notes that the employed have their own burden to bear — suspicions about why they'd want to leave a secure job in a downturn.)

If hiring managers don't get this, they should, says Harvey Weissman, who like most of the recruiters interviewed, said he disagrees with the practice of dismissing jobless candidates.

"If you neglect someone for the simple reason that they got laid off, you're being very narrow in your perspective," he says. "The last cycle of layoffs hit some extremely talented people. A lot of really good people got caught."

Beating the odds

A preference for working candidates may present an additional hurdle for job seekers who are out of work. But there are things you can do to improve your odds, say experts.

Stay active You may not have a job, but you'll look a lot better to employers if you're using your time proactively. "You want to show that you're productively engaged with the world," says career coach Roy Cohen. One good way is to volunteer. "Identify a nonprofit organization where you can do volunteer work that's related to your professional goals," he says.

Seek contract work Taking consulting assignments or temporary jobs can be a good move, says recruiter Harvey Weissman. "If you're active, the perception is going to be a little more positive."

Network OK, this isn't groundbreaking advice, but it's especially meaningful for the unemployed. First because if you're only finding jobs through ads, you're going to be easy to dismiss. And second because having someone vouch for you personally can make all the difference. "The best way is to know someone who can vouch for you — who can say, yes, he was terminated, but he's fabulous and here's why," says Mindy Diamond of Diamond Consultants.

Reach out Don't send a resume and leave it at that. Follow up with a phone call — it shows "tenacity," says Diamond, and gives you an opportunity to address the unemployment issue head-on. Cohen suggests using LinkedIn to find hiring managers at companies where you're applying and contacting them directly.

Don't avoid the topic If you get a chance to make your case to an employer, don't skip over your current joblessness. "It's the elephant in the room," says Diamond. "If go on an interview and someone isn't bringing it up, you can bet it's on their mind. Be proactive and address it. It shows that you're not afraid."

And take pains to show that you're ready to dive right in, says Barry Moss of Princeton Information Systems. "People want someone who can hit the ground running, so you have to show them how you can come in and make a quick transition."

Go through a recruiter There's a Catch-22 here, which is that they may be less interested in an unemployed candidate, whom they'll perceive as a tougher sell to a client. But experienced ones have built up trust with employers, so if you can get one willing to go to bat for you it can mean a lot.

Says Diamond, "If I go to someone and say I have a candidate, he's out of work, but he's fabulous and he's smart and he's a victim of circumstance and you must see him, there's not a client on the planet who wouldn't be willing to see him."

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