Question:

I have diversified experience, yet my past positions (on my resume) are strictly related to insurance and financial services. I am looking to break into other industries, such as healthcare administration or medical sales.

I know I have a transferable set of skills that an employer would value but I am not getting the calls I hope for. It feels as if they're focusing on my past experiences, rather than how I can transfer my skills into new territory. Any advice? - Matt E., Tucson, AZ

Answer:

I know it can be incredibly frustrating when you send out application after application and don’t hear back anyone. You are definitely not alone! Let’s be honest – searching for a job, especially in this economy, is not fun. Have you ever heard anyone say “I love job seeking!”

No? I didn’t think so. Looking for a job – and a really good job that you actually want – takes time. A LOT of time. It takes patience. And a whole lotta work.

Trying to change careers is even more challenging because you will rarely meet all the must-have requirements in the job description. But there are some things you can do (and prepare for) that will help set you up for success.

(1) When considering a switch, do your research

Focus on identifying an industry that is strong or emerging in your targeted area and has similarities to your current industry experience.

If you’re unsure which industries are easiest to transition to, look for former colleagues who held a similar role to you and have moved on to other companies – what industries are they
working in? What companies have accepted their previous experience? This is a good place to start.

Once you've identified what industry you want to target, begin immersing yourself in their terminology. Subscribe to industry-specific online newsletters and blogs, join professional groups online and attend networking events or trade shows where you'll learn more about the industry and meet new people. Identify connections in your current network that work in your targeted industry, and take them out for a cup of coffee to pick their brain. This is a great way to gain valuable insight into the market and uncover unpublished opportunities.

(2) Pick one target, not five

Notice that I said “industry” and not “industries” – if you're going to make a switch, you're going to have to do a lot of work to become really familiar with that industry. The research I mentioned above takes time.

Now imagine doing all of these things multiple times for multiple industries – it would get old really fast, believe me. Not to mention that you need to set up your resume and online professional profiles so they are positioned for your new target industry.

Do yourself a favor and based off your market research, pick one main industry to pursue for your switch. If you’re switching industries, stay in the same function – i.e. if you're in sales now for one industry and you want to switch industries, target sales jobs in that industry – not some other role like corporate finance. One change at a time is challenging enough.

(3) Focus on job requirements, your qualifications & results

Your cover letter and elevator pitch should focus on your ability to deliver results. In your resume, play down the industry of your former positions and play up other aspects of the company (revenue, number of people, ranking, etc.) that may be similar to the companies you’re now targeting. If you’re struggling with repositioning your resume and online brand, don’t be afraid to reach out to the experts for help – that’s what they’re here for. There are lots of services out there, including TheLadders, which will help you rewrite your resume with a switch in mind.

When applying to jobs, focus on the nuts and bolts of the job requirements and show how you meet all of those requirements. A “t-format” cover letter can be a really great way to showcase how you fit these core must-haves.

If you’ve worked in multiple industries in the past (especially if you’re in sales), mention this in the cover letter to prove that you have been successful in a variety of industries, and can do it again for this organization.

For example: “Over the past 10 years I have met or exceeded quota in every role I've taken on, in industries ranging from financial services to pharmaceuticals. I excel at immersing myself in new industries, and then applying that knowledge to deliver above-average results. I am eager to put this practice to work for you.”

(4) Don’t rely on applications alone

Even with an excellent, well positioned resume and tailored cover letter, you may have difficulty getting a call back if you are only sending out applications online. Especially if the job
description emphasizes relevant industry experience as a must-have. This is when networking becomes an even more important part of your job-search strategy.

Why? Well, you need people to vouch for your previous experience and get you past the gatekeepers. Your connections in the industry can help you learn about job opportunities that aren’t even published anywhere. Pursuing these job leads (and with someone in the industry advocating on your behalf) puts you in a much better position to land the job. You will also gain valuable insight into the hiring process for that industry, and be able to navigate it more smoothly as a result.

(5) Show passion ... and patience

It’s imperative that you let your passion for this new industry shine. Why are you interested in this industry? Why is this company so appealing? How does it relate to your previous work? Have you worked in the industry in the past? If so, why are you so interested in returning to this type of work? Remember, this is your sales pitch. You need to find some element of the company or industry that you find particularly interesting or appealing and play that up in your elevator pitch and during interviews.

Keep in mind that transitioning to a new role can be a long process, especially in this saturated job market. Be prepared to be in the job hunt for many months – many career coaches agree it takes an average of 8 months to find a new job these days, even when you’re not looking to make major changes to your career. And that’s only the average! The greater the gap between your job goals and most recent experience, the more challenging this transition can be. It may be necessary to compromise on compensation and job title in your next job in order to get you on the right track towards your targeted role. Think of this job as a ‘stepping stone’ along the way to your dream job.

If you’re considering a change, give these best practices a try! I can’t tell you enough how important the research part is in the beginning – it will make all the difference! And don’t expect to get away with just sending applications – you need to meet people in your new chosen industry, and get them to be your advocates!

For more information on making a transition, check out this radio segment I did with Dr. Debra Condren on WebTalk Radio.

Amanda Augustine is the Job Search Expert for TheLadders. She provides job search and career guidance for professionals looking to make their next career move. Have a question for Amanda? Submit your question here for a chance to have it answered in her weekly column, and be sure to follow @JobSearchAmanda on Twitter and “Like” her on Facebook for up-to-the-minute job-search advice.