



Keep the Faith

Dean Looney, Head of Testing/QA at Huxley Associates, has advice and encouragement for testers who find themselves between jobs

Testing times, indeed: More QA teams cut, consultancy work drying up, and a lack of opportunity for test professionals. It's been happening for over a year now. I have noticed this from my own activities, from the volume of applications that I am getting from candidates, and in the voices of those candidates who have been looking for weeks or maybe months.

In this article I want to give a few pointers to make the arduous task of speaking to recruiters and searching for the right role easier. I will not discuss the state of the market or the reasons underlying it; that's beyond our control. However I will discuss those things others have found to increase their chances of getting interviews considerably.

To begin with, you need to believe passionately in testing as a specialism in its own right. Those companies running dedicated test teams obviously do, otherwise they would cut costs by using developers and getting UAT done by users, which is not a great idea. In general your CV should have a testing and QA theme running throughout.

A proactive approach gets results. For example, recently another agent informed me of a candidate whose CV was considered average and lacked knowledge of banking and automated testing. However what she did have was enthusiasm, belief and willingness to do whatever it takes to get a job. The agent convinced a recruiting manager that this candidate was prepared and able to learn on her own initiative and posed the question "anyway, what do you have to lose by giving her a ten-minute telephone interview?"

The candidate spent a week reading books on financial products and automated testing. The telephone conversation lasted nearly an hour and within a week she had started at one of the world's top five financial institutions.

Of course things won't work out like that every time. But she got what she wanted by understanding what the client wanted from her. After that it was a simple matter of hard work.

I suggest that you employ more than one approach in your search. Obviously a good recruitment agent has a lot to offer; but not every company is enlightened enough to use one! Many, especially smaller companies, simply advertise opportunities themselves, in local media or on their own website. There are also recruitment websites that carry positions placed directly by employers, for example www.flipdog.com.

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If you are not used to cold-calling it can be a demoralizing activity. But if you feel that working for a particular company would be right for you, why not approach them direct and tell them so? You need a bit of luck to call at the right moment, but it's been known to work many times.

Read the broadsheets to see where the business activity is. This will help you to focus your search on a day-to-day basis: "banking-dead, defence-fair, public sector-busy" - situations can change rapidly and you will increase your chances if your search is influenced by this information. You will also have a better appreciation of business in the wider sense, not just IT, and this could be use in the less formal parts of an interview.

Organisations put a lot of effort into job specifications and the staff responsible for

recruitment have been charged with finding someone who fits the specification as closely as possible. Make sure that they can see you are this person by emphasising the relevant parts of your experience. If you move your Web Testing skills to the top of your CV, lose the IT support work you did just after University, and expand on your load testing tool knowledge you will be ten times more likely to be interviewed for a position as a web performance tester. Keeping one generic CV is not good enough any more. It's not cheating to use different versions as long as they don't contain anything untrue.

In the current market conditions, as well as being selective about the specific type of testing experience applicants have, employers are also increasingly selective about the type of organisation that the applicant has been working for. Therefore, along with a comprehensive and clear breakdown of the type of testing you have been doing, you may find it beneficial to include on your CV a short sentence explaining what your present or last employers do and what types of applications you have been testing.

Unsurprisingly, unless you work for a major player in the IT sector, the line manager who ends up reviewing your experience is unlikely to be aware of what the core business of your last (or present) company is, and hence whether it is relevant to what he is looking for.

Finally, I ask and encourage you to be patient. In my position I meet worried people all the time and it is hard work, a positive attitude and clear vision that keep them sane through the difficult periods.

As long as you don't give up, you all get the placement you deserve. When the market is poor it is likely to take longer, but in any economic conditions quality software, and the people to produce it, will always be needed.

Finally, don't forget to use the British Computer Society's very useful web site at www.bcs.org.uk. This has many self-assessment tools and tips for gaining work.

Good luck!

PT

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