

Job Search May go Beyond Plan B

By Amy Lindgren

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We hear a lot about plan B job search these days. That's where you go for the second-choice job if the first choice doesn't work out.

Sometimes people work their plans A and B simultaneously, with a little C and D thrown in for luck. Eventually something has to work out, they reason, so it makes sense to keep pushing on all fronts.

These aren't terrible approaches, but they can be a bit exhausting. Trying to track several different options within several industries or job categories is like speaking multiple languages in the same conversation. It takes a lot of head space.

Confusion and exhaustion may seem inescapable if you're in job search, but I don't think they have to be constant companions. One way to reduce their impact is to move away from the plan A/B concept and into a more controlled and effective Stage 1 and Stage 2 process.

Initially, this sounds like semantics. What does it matter if you call the divisions in your job search stages or plans? Isn't it the same concept of moving from the ideal job to one you want less to the one you swore you'd never take?

Yes and no. I'd say that's a pretty accurate description of most people's implementation of plan A and B. But that's not at all what a staged job search entails. This is more like a product rollout, with outreaches to different audiences and varying levels of intensity during the campaign.

Let's suppose you wanted to work as a technical writer on staff for a medical devices company.

Under a plan A/B approach, you would try for that job for a certain number of months, then switch to your next goal, which might be to work as a contract writer through an agency.

Your fallback might be to return to home health care work, which is how you first became interested in medical topics.

This is not a bad plan, but it does concern me. First, I've noticed that people with a strong fallback option sometimes end up there almost like a foregone conclusion. They just don't seem to push as hard in their initial job search.

The other problem is that the fallback job can keep them from returning to the original goal.

One last issue I have with this model is the lack of continuity among the various job goals. Sometimes the second- and third-level jobs are so different from the ideal, they require a starting-from-scratch ramp up. Talk about losing momentum.

Here's a different, staged model for the same worker. Let's say this person needs to be re-employed in five months, for financial reasons.

Stage one: Three months

- Put out feelers immediately for a home health position, to ease finances and avoid last-minute searching. Take the first appropriate option, but stay part-time to maintain your job search focus. With luck, this strategy will fund a few extra months of job search.
- Identify five or 10 device makers you'd most like to work for and gather information on their products and processes. Ask your network for contacts in these firms.
- Using the information gathered, begin asking contacts for informational interviews to learn more about technical writing processes in these companies and about potential openings.
- Attend as many related professional meetings possible. This includes groups for technical communicators, for manufacturers, for medical writers, etc. Tell everyone your goal, ask for more contacts.
- Evaluate your progress every month and set goals for the next month. Modify steps that aren't working.

Stage two: Two months

- Continue all steps from stage one, including the part-time work.
- Broaden your list of target employers and send letters with resumes to the product development departments at each. Call to ask for meetings.
- Contact contract houses.
- Respond to appropriate posted positions on job boards.
- At the end of this stage, decide: Go full-time at the home health aide position? Take contract work if it's available? Maintain this process longer?

Stage three: Ongoing.

Here is the stage that gets lost sometimes in the plan A/B model.

In this stage, this job seeker would continue with the income-producing work, but would continue the job search as well. The effort would be limited to a few hours weekly, but that's enough time to take a class, attend professional meetings, volunteer or otherwise build contacts and work samples so he or she would be in good position when the ideal job comes around.

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