

CATCH 22 - SECRETS ON GETTING THAT FIRST GOOD JOB IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL INDUSTRY

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Although everyone has a resume, new hires and seasoned geologists from other geology fields (petroleum and mining) are always calling and emailing me to find out about how to break into the environmental job market. I get several calls or emails every week. What follows is one opinion on how to break into the environmental job market without any experience. Persistence counts for everything.

The environmental industry is still vibrant based on the number of calls received from new graduates wanting career opportunities. Environmental issues, including water availability and treatment are an important national challenge. These issues will only grow in importance as the population grows and clean water resources diminish. There are many books on preparing resumes. Using an Internet search engine such as Google, type in key words "environmental jobs", "geology career", and hundreds of web sites will be available. The question is how to make your resume stand out, get a successful interview and the job offer?

The Catch-22 problem exists where many companies won't hire new workers without some experience. But how does a newly graduated environmental professional or the seasoned geologist with several years of experience in another field of geology get that first environmental job without experience? Here are a few ideas that might help:

Resumes – The resume is a sales brochure indicating your level of written communication skill. Keep it brief; 1 to 3 pages. Use many bullets and do include dates of previous jobs, colleges or activities. Spelling and grammar are important, especially on resumes. Resumes should highlight your proven activities such as problem solving, leadership, team building, reliability and organizational ability. Computer and Internet skills are always a plus. Technical training can be given to any good employee, however, companies cannot train new hires in reliability or honesty. For more information, there are dozens of books on resume preparation in the local library or bookstore.

Internships while in school - For college and university students, try to get that environmental internship while at school to make contacts and get some experience. Even if there is no money involved, the contacts could be well worth the effort.

Join Associations - For students and seasoned geologists alike, there are many good professional and technical associations one can join. The local and national

meetings of the American Institute of Professional Geologists provide excellent networking opportunities. The AIPG national meetings are excellent gatherings of high-level geologists. For students, some associations may have a reduced student membership rate. These meetings offer great contacts, friendships, as well as the chance to hear a good professional or technical talk. For those wanting a job in a new area, these meetings are the best place to meet the professionals who practice in a particular technical area or location. Sometimes even the food is good. Many times, the students are given free passes to participate in these meetings. The AIPG website (www.aipg.org) has information on local AIPG sections and on the profession. For California, check out the California Council of Geoscience Organizations (www.ccgo.org) for a listing of prominent geology societies and job listings. For other states, job hunters can call members in their state AIPG Section to get names and contacts for other local or state geology societies.

Get there first - I get resumes from environmental professionals throughout the nation and abroad asking for a job. If you want a position in a certain location, it would be good to set up an interview when you are in the area, if you don't already live here. Some larger firms are willing to pay for interview expenses and travel costs, but small firms may want to see some commitment to the environmental field and local area before shelling out hundreds of dollars in interview expenses.

Read Up – Many local libraries have trade and technical journals from the environmental field. Groundwater, Environmental Pollution, Water Well Journal, Pollution Engineering, and dozens of others contain important information about the environmental field. Type these names into the

Take the Training – Employers are required to pay for the training costs and wages during training. Combine the wages and the training costs, an employer could spend a few thousand dollars on a new untested employee. Many large environmental companies are willing to take the risk. However, in a crowded job market, to make a new hire more attractive to any environmental employer, pro-active job seekers could spend their own money and take the OSHA 40 Hour Hazardous Materials training. Make sure the class is widely recognized as accredited before spending any money. Call the local EPA and OSHA office and get their recommendations on accredited classes. Call some prospective employers and find out which vendors they recommend. Some employers may require all employees to take their 40-hour class.

Why should a job seeker take the class on his or her nickel? First, it shows commitment to the environmental field, but more importantly, it will allow the job seeker a better understanding of the environmental industry, the safety concepts, the terms and the equipment. It allows an employer to hire a prospective employee and with some in-house training, get the new hire billable within a shorter time. The training, required by CFR 1910.120 is given by many vendors and is sometimes offered as a for credit class at some colleges and universities. In fact, some vendors provide the training over the web. The costs range is from \$100 for training provided by equipment operators unions, community colleges, or city education extension programs to \$400 to \$800 for private firms. The internet classes are about \$400 to \$500. Does a job seeker need to have the 40-hour OSHA hazardous materials training class prior to the interviews? No, but having two similar job candidates, who would you hire?

Having the training will allow a general familiarity with the environmental field. The interviews will be much better, as the potential hire will be able to speak the language of the environmental professional. For the environmental company, the risk of hiring any new employee is huge – what if the employee doesn't work out and quits within 3 months. The OSHA Hazardous Materials training means large costs for the company: the cost of the training, the salary of the worker during the training and the delay in being able to use a new hire in the field until the training is completed. Having the training means the new employee can be billable in the field right away, making the company very happy.

Bring in a Clean Driver's Record - Get a driver's license for the state as soon as possible. Bring a copy of your driver's record with you during the interview to show a clean driver's record during the interview. Keep your driver's record clean. There is a steep insurance surcharge for new employees having numerous accidents or tickets for driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

Medical exams – Certainly, new hires don't need to have medical exams before an interview. However, a new hire having an occupational medical exam before the interview is ready to work. A graduating student might be able to get an occupational exam at the college or university health clinic at a nominal cost. A seasoned geologist

changing fields might use his health insurance for an annual occupational medical exam, usually covered by insurance. Without the exam certificate, the new company may have to wait up to 30 to 60 days to obtain an appointment for an occupational medical exam. The medical certificate should state that he or she is healthy, can wear a respirator and can work in the field. Again, most companies will provide their own medical exam, but if someone comes in with the forms already filled out, it shows a willingness to be prepared and get to work. Again, with two similar applicants, whom would you hire?

Supporting Paperwork – Bring personal reference lists, letters of recommendation and transcripts from all colleges and universities with you to the interview. For new hires, professors are a good choice, as well as summer job or internship supervisors. Having the paperwork available and ready in the interview shows preparation and understanding of the hiring process.

Practice – Go to as many interviews as possible. This is true for the new graduate as well as the seasoned geologist who has not been to interviews for many years. Practice the questions and answers before the interview. Show up neatly dressed and groomed, with copies of the above items. Good verbal skills are a requisite for most environmental jobs.

Interviews – Whether you are fresh out of school or a seasoned geologist with 30 years of experience in the oil business, honesty, ambition, communication skills and people skills can be more important in an interview than technical skills. Good attitude is everything in the interview and is contagious.

Summary – Getting a job in any field without experience is always difficult. Being prepared for an interview will help new hires and seasoned geologists with their job search, regardless the environmental company they ultimately join. Although there are no guarantees that having all of these items will get you a job, interviewers may be impressed and appreciate your skills, dedication and commitment to give you an opportunity. Best wishes on your job search and check out the local and national AIPG meetings and events! If you have any questions, please email me at augerpro@sbcglobal.net

About the author:

Jim Jacobs, CPG#7760, is Chief Hydrogeologist for Environmental Bio-Systems, Inc. His specialty is in-situ remediation of metals, hydrocarbons and solvents. He has over 20 years of experience. He is past president of the CCGO, a director for the Groundwater Resources Association of California (GRA) and active with AIPG and other organizations.