

# Adopting the Individual Strategy for Job Hunting

## *A modest proposal*

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You are about to begin applying for your first job post-PhD. Do you have a strategy? That is, are you going to do anything that singles you out from the scores of others in the market? I'll call this an individual strategy. Or, are you going to proceed as the vast majority of entrants into the job market do, which is to apply to many places and let the market decide? I don't regard the second approach as a strategy, but perhaps I should and call it the default or market strategy.

I've been associated with the job-hunting process from most angles for the past 40 years. I don't apply for jobs anymore, but I still write in support of people looking for jobs, sit on hiring committees, go to job talks, meet job applicants, and eat job dinners. To me, the most striking aspects of the whole process are that so many job hunters are using the market strategy, that they send out so many applications, and that so many get interviewed at each place.

My informal estimate is that more than 90% of job hunters are using the market strategy (perhaps more than 95%), that the number of applications sent out averages 10–20 (or more), and that the number interviewed for each job averages six or more. Of course, all these figures are intimately connected. I think this leads to many suboptimal placements.

My modest proposal is not as striking as Jonathan Swift's from 1729, but I am guessing it is no more likely to gain widespread support. It is that more of you adopt the individual strategy. Perhaps, in time, those who do can change the way things are done, something I believe will benefit all involved.

How might an individual strategy work? For a start, it requires you to know the answer to a few simple questions. I have found that many people answer "Where would you like to work?" with "The best possible place among those that will have me." This is not an answer to the question; it just tells me you are adopting the market strategy. So, here's a game we might play to get at the matter, though in a better world, it should not be a game, but evidence of forethought, seriousness of intent, and having done your homework in this business of job hunting.

## **Q1: Where Would I Immediately Accept a Job Offer?**

That is, without thinking of other places that might be better, without bargaining. Call this List 1. It should not be empty, otherwise what are you doing applying for a job? (Note that I'm omitting reference to details such as salary, start-up funds, etc. If these considerations preclude you from answering my question, please move on to another article.)

## **Q2: Which employers would be delighted to have me on their faculty or staff?**

Call the answer here List 2.

Now, let's think about the lists and their possible overlaps. I've already argued that List 1 should not be empty, but what about List 2? If it is empty, perhaps you haven't thought hard enough about the options open to you or fully explored the places that might employ you. (I'm assuming times are normal, by which I mean the absence of some common cause that might lead to there being few jobs overall, such as a deep national recession. In normal times, a high proportion of people with new PhDs in probability and statistics find employment.) Or, perhaps you're being far too modest about your abilities. The job market is no place for displays of false modesty. Where have people completing PhDs from your university gone in the past? What do your advisor and other referees think? Is it possible that between everyone, you cannot come up with a place that would be delighted to employ you? If so, that should be a serious worry for all concerned.

If there is some overlap between lists, I'll declare you well-calibrated and ask you to move to the next stage. (I understand we haven't let the employers speak yet, so this is all in your mind so far. Please be patient.) If there is no overlap, then some recalibration is needed. You are in danger of committing errors of the Groucho Marx kind: You want to work at places you don't think will take you, and you don't want to work at places that you think will take you. The job market is not a place where your reach should go beyond your grasp—you should aspire to work places where this is a realistic prospect, if not a certainty. The best appointments are those where the job hunter is happy to have caught the job and the hunted is equally happy to have been caught.

How do you arrange for List 1 and List 2 to overlap—and that this is based on reality, not just your imagination? I see two conditions that need to apply. The first is that your research, and teaching if relevant, must be up to the standard expected at the places on List 1. Is it? If you cannot assess with reasonable accuracy your chances



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of being found acceptable at the places on List 1, then you have failed an important test of a scholar in my view. Forming an accurate assessment of your position in the greater scheme is as important for job-hunting scholars as it is for musicians, tennis players, or chess players. I understand it can be hard, even impossible, for you to do this well on your own, but your advisor, referees, and fellow students will have opinions worth listening to. You should ask and take note of the answers.

You also can do some research into the matter, thinking hard about it and experimenting. For example, you can write and submit papers to the journals in which people at those places on List 1 publish. You can arrange to visit or meet faculty from your List 1 possibilities. Prospective PhD graduates in the biomedical sciences routinely make post-doc visits, where they go to a group of carefully selected institutions (their List 1 places) and arrange a mutual checking out. This way, they can find out if there is any overlap. If after doing something along these lines, it turns out you are not suited to any of the places on List 1, isn't it time to rethink your answer to Q1?

At one point when I was doing my PhD (in math), I conjectured and then proved a little theorem. It took a bit of work, so I was mildly pleased with myself, and it appeared to be new in the sense that I could not find it in the literature where I thought it would be. Not long afterward, a senior person in that field—the editor of a major journal—passed through my town. I showed my work to him and asked whether I should submit it for publication. He said in a very kind way, “No, don't bother, it's not new. You haven't found it in the literature because everyone knows it. It's just that no one has bothered to write it out.” I took from this experience the message that I

was well out of my depth, and, given the effort I'd devoted to getting there, it seemed unlikely I could do much about it (in that field). This experience had a major impact on my imaginary List 1, indeed on the desirability of my aspiring to do research in that field. Of course, if I would have had an advisor or mentor in this work, this experience would not have been necessary.

Now, let's say you think List 1 is reasonable. How do you go about ensuring that List 2 overlaps it and that this is all based in reality—not just in your mind? The second condition is that some places on List 1 make it onto List 2 from the employers' views. This means your suitability, indeed the desirability of their taking you on, must become apparent to them. Ideally, this should be on the basis of hard evidence such as published papers, programs, technical reports, or a completed thesis. But, barring this, letters from your advisor and other referees may suffice. This can be done during the usual round of job advertisements, but not necessarily. If you have done a good job of getting calibrated in this sense, those places on List 1 and List 2 should be happy to hear from you and know of your interest in working with them.

If all has gone well so far, you have List L and are ready to go. What next? For a start, the larger it is, the better your chances of success, for the fact that  $L \neq \emptyset$  is not enough to land you a job. The problem with knowing where you would like to go—and knowing they would gladly take you—is that this may be true of several people and you may lose out in the ranking. No one can ensure against third parties entering the picture and spoiling great plans. So, where do you go next? Ensuring that List 1 has at least one fallback place essentially guaranteed to be on List 2 would be wise.

Here's how it is now, with almost all people adopting the market strategy. People who look highly desirable get lots of interviews—and get run off their feet giving their job talk. In discussions and during dinner, they have to show genuine interest in joining each place they visit. They know this is fake and hope they won't be reduced to accepting a job there. Their hosts know their interest is fake, too, but hope that when the music stops, their chair will be the one in which this applicant is left sitting. Only when the offers start rolling in—which is naturally only after everyone has talked—do the desirable applicants begin the process of deciding where they would really like to be, typically aiming for the 'best' place or deal. People who don't seem quite as desirable get fewer invitations and must wait until the more highly ranked people have made up their minds before



they start getting offers. Those lower on the list wait longer still. On the flip side, departments with a job to fill are forced to interview many more applicants than they might wish, for the ones to whom they will eventually make offers might go elsewhere.

I don't want to suggest all the problems are due to applicants. Hiring committees can be lazy, too, preferring to request many interviews, rather than thinking hard about what kind of person they are looking for or reading the applications carefully and eliminating unsuitable people early in the process. But, having said that, applications are frequently unhelpful because the same letters and references are sent to every institution. Determining how well an applicant fits one's opening is frequently impossible without meeting and talking to them. The careful tailoring of each application and its supporting letters is exactly what doesn't generally happen, which is part of the reason for my proposal.

How could the individual strategy prosper under these circumstances? To be honest, I don't know. The whole process does have a large

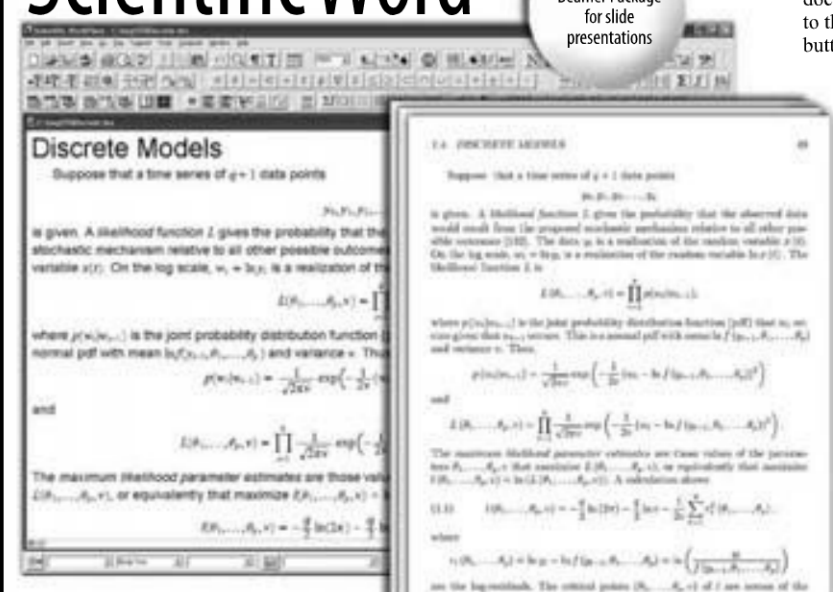
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element of randomness to it and my writing this commentary won't change that. A lot depends on the hiring committees, on whether they can decide what sort of person they would like and whether they are prepared to make an offer to someone who fits their needs. Nevertheless, I don't believe you—the job hunter—will be worse off adopting the individual strategy. You will be better informed, more realistic in your assessment of your strengths and weaknesses, and calibrated. Can you ask for more? ■

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