



The Science of The Job Search, Part IV: Why Is It So Hard To Get a Job?

Getting a job is **hard**. Even if you're 100% qualified, it **can take 90+ days to get a job today in America**. Nearly 98% of job applications get black-holed.

But why? Politicians and TV pundits blather on about it everyday, but they're just playing to ratings. Instead, we can go straight to the data and give you a direct look into **what happens to your job application** after you hit submit—

 [what-happens-to-your-job-application-sankey.png](#)

426 people recently applied for a marketing job at TalentWorks. Although 97 people were potentially qualified, we **could only interview 13 people (3%)**. We ultimately made **2 job offers**.

To quickly illustrate this, I downloaded, parsed and tagged 426 applications for a marketing job we filled yesterday. Here's what we found:

- **426 people applied for the job** — this is higher than average, but not much (see below).
- Although 97 people were potentially qualified, we could only **interview 13 people (3% of applicant pool)** because of time. Ultimately, we **made 2 job offers (0.47%)**.

If you dig deeper, there's a few interesting nuances:

- **40 people (9.4% of applicant pool) were DQ'd for dumb mistakes:** misspellings, no email, etc.

- Of the 13 people we interviewed, a **total of 5 people (1.2%) were fully qualified** — I'm confident all of them would've been great. However, we didn't have the money to hire all of them, so I picked two based on what we needed right now and who I thought we'd have the best chemistry with.

Are we just a bunch of heartless assholes? I mean, anything's possible. (Although I hope not...) Here's the honest truth: for most jobs, **every company sees numbers like this — they just don't tell you**. Instead, they feed you doublespeak boilerplate like, "It wasn't a good fit."

No wonder everyone asks us, "What's going on? Is there something wrong with me?" Nothing's wrong with you — the system's just broken.

What's Going On?

To quickly illustrate what's going on, I downloaded and analyzed 1,013 job applications to our 5 most recent job openings—

(I feel a bit naked sharing our internal hiring data (and my calendar) online, but it's a small price to pay if it helps you get the job you deserve. None of this is necessarily easy to hear, but I fundamentally believe it's better to know what you're up against than playing ostrich. P.S. Is it just me or is it a bit drafty here today?)

The Numbers Are Against You

On average, **the typical TalentWorks job opening receives ~176 job applications**. (*Nerd alert: We used a geometric mean to better account for outliers.*) This number varies dramatically by role, location, compensation, etc., but we've never gotten fewer than 90 applicants for any job we posted online.

 applications-per-job

On average, the **typical TalentWorks job opening receives ~176 job applications**.


Since we're usually only filling one job opening (like most people), that immediately means you have a **~1% chance of getting a job offer** for any single online job application.

"No" is the Default Answer

One of the first things you're taught as a hiring manager is that **"no" is the default answer**. The (direct) cost of hiring someone damaging (liability, morale, etc.) usually far exceeds the (opportunity) cost of *not* hiring someone possibly amazing.

But, it's actually worse. Of the 426 applicants for our last job, **25% (108 applicants) was basically spam**, e.g. outsourcers, recruiters. In addition, **another 9% (40 applicants) made dumb mistakes**, e.g. misspellings, forgot to include their email. Let's be honest: if your resume didn't include your email, I'm not calling you to setup an appointment.

All of this to say: **Hiring managers default to saying "no,"** and that's reinforced over and over again by terrible job applications.

spam-job-applications.png

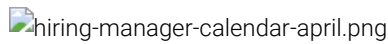
Hiring managers are trained to say no. More than **77% of online job applications are terrible.**

That still leaves 278 applications — reviewing all of them would take hours. What's a hiring manager to do? **Many hiring managers (including us) use resume keywords to target potentially qualified applicants.** We set a broad list of keywords that anyone even vaguely qualified for our job would've included. This narrowed down our list to **97 potentially qualified candidates (23%).**

Time Is (Also) Against You

You can't interview ~100 people (that'd be 2+ weeks of nothing but interviews!), but you *can* review ~100 resumes. From 97 potentially qualified candidates, I made a **shortlist of 13 candidates (3% of applicant pool) based on their resumes and a homework assignment**, and setup interviews.

Here's what my calendar looked like last Friday (my 2nd day of interviewing)—



I might've been a little hangry when I called Mom...

In other words, even to interview just 3% of the applicant pool, I basically did nothing but interviews for all of Friday (the blurred names are interviews). There were another ~2 days like this.

This is important! This means there's a hard upper limit on interviews: **there'll never be more than 10-15 interview slots for a job opening**, no matter how many people applied.

Put another way, getting to the interview is often the hardest, riskiest stage of the job search. If you get an interview, you have a **relatively safe, 10-15% chance of getting a job offer**.

What Can You Do?

Yes, it sucks. Yes, it's unfair. Yes, it's depressing. But, guess what? It's always been this bad, you just never knew.

And guess what else? You still need a job. That rent isn't going to pay itself. Here are some (data-driven) things you can do to take back control of your job search—

Job Search Tips

Job Search Tip #1: Your chances of getting any single job you apply for online is nearly zero; to make up for it, you have to apply to as many jobs as you can. **If you meet more than 60% of the qualifications, you should apply!**

Job Search Tip #2: Apply early. Our past research shows **people who applied in the first ~3 days saw a big hireability boost** over the competition. Hiring managers' schedules fill up quickly!

Resume Tips

Resume Tip #3: Don't get screened out! Make sure you use a **simple, machine-parseable resume format** and make sure it includes your email.

Resume Tip #4: Resumes start blending together after awhile. **Include as many keywords as appropriate in your resume** and cover letter from the original job posting.

Interviewing Tips

Interview Tip #5: **Get the earliest appointment you can in the day.** The later in the day your interview, the more hangry hiring managers will be. (Seriously. How hangry your hiring manager is has a **huge impact on your hireability.**)

Interview Tip #6: **Keep your interview responses short and memorable.** Whatever you do, don't be late. Chances are, if you're doing a phone interview, you're in a packed schedule.

Interview Tip #7: **Be charming.** If you're at the interview stage, you have a solid shot. But you don't want to end up being the fully-qualified-but-runners-up. Pre-game as best you can and listen for clues for what your interviewer is looking for.

Summary

So, why's it so hard to get a job? Both time, numbers and the default culture of "no," are against you. At TalentWorks, we've been getting **~176 job applications per job opening** and, for our last job opening, only **~3% of applicants got an interview.**

With the right insights and tools though, you can break through the noise. To recap: Apply to 250+ jobs. Use a machine-parseable resume. Triple-check there are no typos. Include your email. Add the optimal number of targeted resume keywords. Apply in the first 3 days for every job posting. Get the first interview of the day. Be charming. And KISS.

You got all that, right? Easy peasy.

Kidding.

Applying to 250+ jobs is a serious pain in the ass (not even taking into account the rest). We offer a bunch of free tools to help you keep things straight.

If you want, you can also **pay us \$10 to do it all for you:** we can **automatically find the best jobs and pre-fill job applications for you** based on your desired role, location and years of experience. In addition, you'll get our **Interview Guarantee** — if we can't get you an interview within 60 days, we'll refund everything back to you, guaranteed. *(90% of job-seekers using TalentWorks get an interview in 60 days or less.)*

Methodology

We downloaded all 1,013 job applications for the 5 most recent TalentWorks job postings. For our most recent (marketing) job, we then cross-referenced everyone with interview requests and results. Finally, we tagged everyone with key attributes (e.g. spammy, mismatched skills, dumb mistakes) using a subset of our resume parsing stack. We did all of this in python using pandas and bokeh (with a liberal helping of Google Sheets). The Sankey diagram was built with sankeymatic (with an assist from Sketch).

Why Are We Doing This?

With ApplicationAssistant right now, we **can boost the average job-seeker's hireability by 5.8x.** But, what makes ApplicationAssistant work has been an internal company secret until now. We're fundamentally a mission-driven company and we believe we can help **more** people by sharing our learnings. So, that's exactly

what we're doing.

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About the Author

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Mission-driven entrepreneur, world traveler (400K+ miles), dad to 100-pound German Shepherd. My #1 mission: To help you get the job you deserve.
