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Navigating a Competitive Job Market

By Terri A. Gaffney and Deborah Rowe

Nurse graduates entering the job market today are finding it more difficult to obtain entry level jobs today than to their counterparts did five years ago. Before completing your education there are steps you can take to position yourself for the future. These steps include gaining work experience, expanding your network of professional contacts, and exploring unique employment opportunities. Presented here is the wisdom of seasoned healthcare recruiters with strategies and advice for nurse graduates navigating a tough job market.

There are many reasons why new graduates are facing more difficulty in their job search – most stemming from the economic downturn. However, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (October, 2010) reports that the healthcare sector continued to add jobs during the recession. In addition, the passage of the Affordable Care Act increases the need for registered nurses. The Southeast Regional Center for Health Workforce Studies (2010) estimated that 3.2 million registered nurses will be needed over the next decade.

Experience

A question many new graduates ask relates to how to overcome the experience barrier when seeking an entry level position. In a competitive employment market, many nursing jobs require experience. Working as a nurse extern is an excellent opportunity not only to gain experience, but to make important contacts. Positions such as patient-care technician or nurse aide also offer opportunities to gain experience and master critical skills such as time management, prioritization, and teamwork. Further, this experience demonstrates a strong work ethic and professional commitment on your part. As a result, recruiters are more likely to respond positively to new graduates who have worked in their healthcare organization and have developed relationships with hiring managers.

Network, Network, Network

Networking is an excellent way to obtain job leads. As students you have numerous opportunities to build your professional network. Begin by sharing your employment interests with faculty members. Clinical rotations offer opportunities not only to improve your skills, but



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to build relationships with experienced nurses. Write down the names of key contacts on the units to which you are assigned and follow up with them as you begin your job search. Another strategy is to introduce yourself to the nurse manager and share your interest in working on the unit upon graduation.

Connect with professional nurses in your area by attending local professional nursing and nursing student events, career fairs, and meeting with alumni. These nurses are excited to support you in your job search. Share your career interests, collect names and contact information, and follow-up with your new colleagues.

Friends and family offer another good avenue for extending your network. Let them know you are seeking employment and would appreciate the opportunity to obtain introductions to their contacts. Ask for specific names of nurses that you can contact and schedule times to talk with them about employment opportunities and ideas. Recently, a chief nursing officer at a local facility was approached by her niece who had a friend (a new nurse graduate) looking for an entry-level position. The chief nurse was impressed with the new graduate's credentials and asked that she be interviewed for an opening on their orthopedic unit. This nurse received her first job through networking with family and friends.

Unique Opportunities

While some hospitals have reduced the number of positions for new graduates it does not mean you will not find a job. Be creative in your job search strategies and explore all employment opportunities. Skilled nursing centers (long-term care) have opportunities for new nurse graduates but are often overlooked. However, with increased patient acuity, the need for skilled nursing care is in great demand. This particular environment offers unique opportunities for new graduates to build a strong medical/surgical foundation that is useful no matter what direction your career takes. In addition, skilled nursing centers offer new graduates experiences with infusion therapy, wound care, pain management, diabetes management, dementia care, and rehabilitation services.

Some long-term and skilled nursing facilities have created a nurse residency program to respond to the nurse graduate hiring challenge. These programs provide a centralized training program with a primary registered nurse educator assigned to the new graduates. Often they provide structured study of policy and procedures with clinical orientation, online documentation and education in specific areas such as infection control, ethics, and wound care.

Once you have expanded your network, and identified your focus and potential job opportunities, it is time to embark on the next phase of your job search.

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Résumé

A critical step in navigating the job market is ensuring that your résumé is accurate and current. Nurse recruiters recommend that résumés be individualized to the hospital or organization as well as the position of interest. It is important that résumés be error free, so ask a faculty member or colleague to review your résumé for accuracy and sufficiency.

Application Process

In regard to new online application processes, it is important to remember that online applications are position specific. When completing the online application, recruiters advise that entries should be accurate, complete, and spelled correctly.

When selecting references it is important to choose individuals who have known you over the past few years and are willing to speak to a recruiter. Again, when completing the application, be sure to provide the full name and contact information for all references. Be sure to ask the individual(s) who you are using as a reference for permission to do so.



Interview

Once you are scheduled for an interview, ask the recruiter what they would like you to bring to the meeting. Be sure to have copies of your cover letter, résumé and references with you.

Finally, be prepared for the interview. Research the organization's website so that you are familiar with their vision and mission. Dress professionally, be prepared with questions for the interviewer, and smile! At the conclusion of the interview ask for business cards and follow up with a handwritten note to each member of the interviewing team.

Today's job search requires creativity and flexibility. While you may have specific ideas of where you want to work, think creatively about your job opportunities and expand your search. Although you may have your heart set on working in the intensive care unit, the facility may only have an opening for a new graduate on a medical/surgical unit. Keep your eye on the objective, which is to obtain an entry-level job and gain experience. In today's competitive job market you may not be offered your dream job but with planning, creativity, and persistence you will find an interesting nursing position to begin your career. ∞



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