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Be on the radar to secure a top job

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Still waiting for that top job advert to appear? Well, this section is the place to look. But you should also think about networking – because up to 90 per cent of UK private sector jobs paying a base salary above £125,000 might never be advertised.

Kit Scott-Brown, managing director of InterExec, an agency that has been helping high-level executives advance their careers for more than 30 years, believes that figure is accurate. If so, it means anyone looking for a job at these levels needs to network – and to do it well.

Almost every senior external appointment is made via a process of executive search, with search firms using desk-based research to unearth likely candidates with the relevant sector and functional skills.

But as Kate Donaghy, founder of Manchester Square Partners, a London-based board advisory firm, puts it: “Between 40 and 80 per cent of long-list candidates are referred by people the researcher talks to – and those are the people likely to know of potential suitable candidates.

“Therefore you need to do everything necessary to be known by respected and prominent people in your sector or function, as well as by headhunters.”

Anyone working at a senior level and wanting a job that is likely to pay less than £125,000 is best advised to visit a career counsellor or outplacement consultant – which are virtually the same thing, except it is “outplacement” if an employer pays for it and “career counselling” if the individual pays for it.

Both will advise a job-seeker and support them while they search, in most cases, for both advertised and non-advertised vacancies. Outplacement consultants will also advise on networking opportunities.

But Mr Scott-Brown warns: “Above £150,000 base salary it is a closed market. Jobs don’t get advertised and headhunters don’t post them.”

He says InterExec acts as a confidential agent for senior executives “in rather the same way as an actor or an artist might have an agent”.

Through networking, it helps put the candidate in touch with the right headhunter and role. Clients pay on the basis of their expectation of salary, with fees ranging from £5,000 to £50,000.

But what about executives trying to find that job on their own?

As one former headhunter puts it: “I have seen people succeed without networking but it is extraordinarily rare and you just can’t rely on a researcher to find you.”

Ms Donaghy, whose advisory firm works with many company chairmen in its senior career review and mentoring work, says: “Even the most thoughtful and senior people – including those who loathe networking – do it a lot. Chairmen network more than any other group I have ever met. They work incredibly hard at it and use business forums like ours to share information.”

One difficulty seems to be that candidates shiver at the word “networking” – which conjures up images of crowded rooms, strange faces, inaudible conversation and an exchange of business cards.

Networking skills can be taught, however, and there is a way to do it to good effect.

John Purkiss is a headhunter and board adviser who also focuses on personal development and is the co-author of books, including *Brand You*. On his website he quotes Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, who once said: “Your brand is what people say about you when you are not in the room.”

Mr Purkiss says the best way to market yourself is to build your brand, and his book is aimed at showing candidates how to do it. He says: “A lot of ‘needy’ networking goes on and I don’t think anyone benefits. It just feels bad.”

His preferred approach is to meet people and stay connected with them, including via social networking websites, with no expectation of immediate gain: “A lot of people think they need something they don’t have and that is why they are networking.

“But if you go into it in a positive manner, and give without thinking about what you might get back, things start to happen.”

This is echoed by others working in personal and career development. Networking is not about short-term opportunism but about a long-term, sustainable business relationship, says Stuart Lindenfield, head of transition services at Reed Consulting, and co-author of *Confident Networking for Career Success*.

He says: “In networking you need to demonstrate you value the relationship more than any transactional opportunity, and end any contact by leaving the door open.”

Mr Lindenfield says the book, which he wrote with his wife Gael, a psychotherapist and author, was sparked by their realisation of “a strong link between people who feel confident about themselves and those who are good at networking”.

At Reed Global, Mr Lindenfield says he organises programmes that help people “to be proactive about entering scenarios where they can tell their stories to a new audience where the reactions may be very different to what they have experienced in the past”.

In other words, he teaches good networking skills. He suggests the essential groundwork involves self-knowledge and the way in which you are likely to interact with potential future contacts.

A common networking mistake is to assume that it is entirely personal and about showcasing yourself, rather than about focusing on other people. Instead, it is “absolutely about an exchange of business information and the development of relationships”, says one headhunter.

The younger generation now entering the job market seems to accept more readily the necessity of networking for professional development.

For example, Oxford10, an alumni group, was created by Oxford University in 2008 to provide a network for recent graduates to stay connected and maintain a relationship with each other and the university. Membership has doubled each year so far.

Its most recent event in London attracted 250 guests to a festive drinks evening, although anecdotal evidence suggests it was as much a social, as a networking function. Cambridge University launched its own Cambridge10 recently.

Is it right that many posts are not advertised? Does it create an exclusive club of insiders? E-mail your views to recruitment@ft.com

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