

BostonWorks

VIEW FROM THE CUBE/EILEEN BOYLAN

The Net job search: Line up and leave us alone

Please do not respond to this e-mail." Those of you not looking for a job may not recognize this subject line. Those of you who are, however, may cringe at the site of the familiar automated response to a job application. Welcome to the world of Internet job search.

Back in the day, hiring managers viewed follow-up from applicants as a sign of real interest and persistence — qualities companies sought in a candidate. If you really wanted a job, you pursued it with letters and phone calls, demonstrating the same commitment you would to the position itself.

Not today. Call a company and you'll reach a CIA-like switchboard operator who implies the HR people are hiding in a bunker somewhere, safe from "job stalkers." Without a name, the operator won't connect you. She won't even tell you where to mail your resume. Instead, she will direct you to the Internet, where you can get the e-mail you can't respond to.

So, you comply and attempt to differentiate yourself online. Except, the application is all 'fill in the blank' and multiple choice questions. You can paste a cover letter and resume, but you know your professionally formatted version won't be printed on quality resume paper. Crammed into the textbox provided, it looks like a cross between the work of e.e. cummings and Sudoku with letters — a jumbled mess with no room for personalization of any kind. Pressing "submit" feels like one great big cyber flush.

It's like computer dating revisited. You completed an extensive personal profile, described your ideal date, and they paired you with someone exactly your height. In my case, 4-foot-11. Ever hear of chemistry?

Why do companies do this? Employers used to get hundreds of responses to a classified ad. Now they get thousands. It's so easy to apply online that you can complete your Christmas shopping on Amazon and "window shop" 20 jobs before lunch. With snail mail, you wouldn't both-



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er to apply without the qualifications, but, for couple of mouse clicks, hey, why not? Employers use computer search engines to screen all these extra resumes. So, unless you have the exact target resume, with the exact years of experience (must be between 25 and 40 years old), human

eyes will never see your brilliant cover letter or carefully crafted resume. No time.

Following the rare interview, today's average decision time is somewhere between six weeks and a "Sopranos" hiatus. Last year I completed 18 interviews, and a full background and credit check for a

wanted to work for a company like this, no less buy from them.

I equate the long post-interview wait with a flight delay. I may have to sit longer than I want, but I appreciate occasional assurances that the pilot remembers I'm here. Technology cuts both ways. How hard is it to e-mail?

Why can't employers find more effective uses of technology? When you purchase a shirt from the Lands' End website, you participate in a live Web chat to find the right size. A job is a bigger commitment than a shirt. Aren't employers trying to "custom fit" their employees? How about requiring a paper follow-up letter to "activate" online applications? That would certainly narrow the field. Or, companies could use their computer-based training software to create interactive applications that really differentiate candidates.

Yes, there are sneaky ways to "beat the system" and reach a real person. The Job Doc recommends locating the hiring manager instead of HR. I've pulled names from corporate press releases and e-mailed the people directly. I've asked the operator for the mailroom, claimed I've reached the wrong extension and gotten transferred to the right department. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. But it's a flawed system at best.

Anyway, I complete my online application. I enable 128-bit encryption to protect my privacy, and place my application for job number CXB-37R10 in the online job cart. I acknowledge that "the hiring company makes no representations or warranties about any other website that I may access through this one," and as instructed, I read "the entire privacy policy before using or submitting information."

I am encouraged to read the "legal notice," and I do. I press submit. In response, I receive an e-mail thanking me for my interest and warning me that if I am not the intended recipient, I am hereby notified to delete this from my inbox. And, in closing: "Please do not reply to this e-mail. Replies are undeliverable and will not reach the human resources department. Thank you."

consumer products position. Everything looked good. Six weeks passed. No news.

On my third follow-up call I reached the HR specialist. "Your timing is perfect," he said with unimaginable enthusiasm. "We chose another candidate an hour ago." Perfect, indeed. I wondered if I really