

STAFFING **ADVISORS**



HOW-TO GUIDE

The Staffing Advisors Guide to Senior Executive Job Search

In completing hundreds of executive searches, the Staffing Advisors team has seen firsthand how stressful the job search process can be for even the most accomplished executives.

No matter how prestigious the organization, the hiring process can be flawed. Trivial matters can assume outsized importance, while the most important factors go overlooked.

Advice for job seekers tends to focus on the minor components of the hiring process while ignoring the real reasons people don't get job offers. For example, there may be intense attention on your resume but little consideration of how your skills will compare with others—your competitive advantage.

But you can prevail in your job search amid an imperfect hiring process by focusing your attention on what really matters. This guide will show you how.

Your ability to tell the right stories about your experience is every bit as important as the experience itself.



The Power of a Good Business Story

Since ancient times, we've sat around campfires telling stories. Eons later, we're still hard-wired to think narratively.

Stories help you stand out because interviewers understand and remember them. Stories are far more memorable than degrees, credentials, or other background facts. A well-told anecdote contains more useful information than a disconnected interview answer ever will. The right story brings your skills to life and provides the vital context your interviewer needs.

Don't worry if you're not a natural performer; this isn't about putting on a show.

A well-told story is truthful, brief, appropriate to the business context, and easily verifiable.

The hiring process is like a jigsaw puzzle—every sentence on your resume and every interview response is like a single puzzle piece. Individually, they don't reveal much, but your career story assembles the pieces into a cohesive whole. By properly organizing the information, you present the entire picture of your career instead of forcing your interviewer to guess.

Build a narrative to explain your career trajectory, and you can tilt the entire hiring process in your favor.

- Where did you come from?
- What adventures did you have along the way?
- What interests you?
- Where do you want to go and why?
- What are your most valuable skills?
- What's the business problem you love to solve?

Properly told stories help people relate to and understand what drives you, significantly improving your odds of landing the job.

Be laser focused on the business issues you handle best, the business impact of your work, and why that's important to you. If you don't explain it, hiring managers will make assumptions about your motivations.

[Watch Simon Sinek's incredible TED Talk](#) for advice on the simple power of explaining why you do what you do.



Step 1: Discover Your Superpower

Remember the context. The hiring manager will judge your skills compared to those of other applicants. They are looking for you to demonstrate how you are measurably better than your competitors at achieving business results.

We all have different combinations of skills, interests, and abilities. To explore your own story, start with two interrelated questions:

- What is the pattern of your career?
- What are your superpowers?

The pattern of your career may be difficult to discern until you have been working for a decade or two. Your career pattern comes into focus only through the rearview mirror. It's not what you planned to do; it's what you did and what drew you to that work. This closely relates to your superpower.

Your superpower is what will land your next job—it's your competitive advantage. The odds are good that you were repeatedly drawn into work situations that drew on your superpower.



The Four Paths to Discovering and Claiming Your Superpowers

First, look back on your career.

Consider what came easily in your past jobs—the tasks you could do that caused other people to struggle. What did you manage that required real mastery? What work did you enjoy doing that made other people notice and comment? Those are most likely your superpowers.

Different situations require different skills. For example, some people live to bring order from chaos; they love ambiguity, uncertainty, and situations where established rules do not apply. Others relish the feeling of productivity that comes from doing an established process well.

Some people are attracted to intellectual challenges, interesting tasks, significant missions, or high-profile, high-stakes scenarios. Others enjoy more predictable jobs where they can do great work but leave it at the end of the day. What kinds of situations draw you?

Take a hard look at your career's successes and failures and determine what kind of environments encouraged you to do your best work and which stymied you at every turn. Once you claim your superpower, you will notice and appreciate it even more. Hiring managers find it very appealing.

Communicating how your superpower drives your career is a huge predictor of success in an interview.

Second, seek the opinion of a friend or mentor.

Spend time with people who know your work and think highly of you. Ask them where they think you excel, how you compare to others, and what situations bring out your best. All of this helps you better understand your capabilities compared to others. The key is listening, writing it down, and saying thank you.

Third, consider where your superpowers would be useful.

Consider the business situations you like best. Are you clear on how your superpowers make you better than your peers at dealing with that particular situation? If 300 people were to apply for the same job, would your advantage put you in the top 10% of applicants?

Research how professionals in your target field, organization, or functional area describe their work. Using that language to talk about your superpowers will appeal to a hiring manager.



The Four Paths to Discovering and Claiming Your Superpowers

Fourth, decide which jobs would be the best fit.

Once you know the business situations you prefer, you can create a decision framework to determine which jobs would be a good fit. Think about what is most important to you: career growth, challenge, job security, compensation, mission, and/or work-life balance. What combination of these would you need to accept an offer?

You will gain a significant advantage when you are clear about your superpowers and have a strong decision framework for selecting your next job.

The hiring process is a two-way street. The interviewer wants a good hire, and you want to make the right choice for yourself. Having your own standards puts you on equal footing. You can ask questions to help you decide if the opportunity is right for you. Managers are far more interested in hiring people with high standards than people who will take any job offer.

A Note for Candidates With Nontraditional Career Paths

Sometimes you may not appear to be the right candidate for a position you want. For example, if you want to switch from a declining industry to one that is thriving. Or perhaps you want to move to a new functional area in which you have little experience. These jumps are possible but require special preparation. Follow this [guide on how to reposition yourself](#).



Step 2: Write Your Resume

Now that you know the elements of your story, it's time to work on your resume to present them in the best light.

Your resume is the translation of your career narrative. It should be factual, tangible, and verifiable. And it should explain the context of your success and make your competitive advantage crystal clear—even to someone who only skims what you write.

Executive Summary

The summary can be the most powerful section of your resume if you stick to the facts. A good executive summary is 100% provable, encapsulating the superpowers you want to apply to your next job.

Be brief and focused, with three sentences at most. Decision makers reading your resume are asking, "Can this person handle the challenges in this job?" (When applying for jobs, consider the reverse question, "What business situations will demand someone with my superpowers?")

An example of an excellent executive summary:

"15 years of experience negotiating complex multimillion-dollar international trade deals. Proven ability to open new markets (Asia and Europe) while maintaining long-term relationships with Fortune 500 organizations."

This example is full of facts and context. Without context, even a strong resume can appear disconnected.

Resume Body

Your resume should support the executive summary. Lead with the problems you like to solve. Be sure to provide the scale and context of your achievements.

You are writing so the hiring manager can determine if you can solve their particular business problems. Include verifiable facts. What was the revenue, number of employees, number of international locations, or percentage savings of your initiative? Were your achievements unusual among your peers?

Lead with the most impressive bullets that are relevant to the type of role you want. Don't assume anyone will read more than the first three bullets about each job; don't assume anyone will do more than skim the second page of your resume.

Be sure to describe your accomplishments in the language used by your future hiring managers. You want to speak in the language of the organization doing the hiring, not the language of the place you are leaving.

To ensure you are not using jargon or acronyms that others might not understand, read ten job advertisements from other organizations in the field or functional area you want to work in. In the hiring process, you are always judged by your ability to understand and adapt to your new employer's work context.

Step 3: Apply to Positions

With your resume ready, what's next? Send it out—with a cover letter of course!

Cover Letter

Always customize your cover letters. Ideally, your resume will be useful in multiple situations without the need to customize it each time you apply for a job. Spend time on your cover letter instead. A generic resume may raise doubts, but a generic cover always makes a poor first impression.

The cover letter is a perfect opportunity to introduce your narrative. But not everyone reads them, so keep it short. Here is a simple formula to follow:

- Write no more than two sentences paraphrased from the job ad demonstrating that you understand the organization's desired results (a fact you might only know from your research).
- Write a few sentences about what draws you to those kinds of situations.
- Close with a phrase like, "I look forward to having the opportunity to meet you in person."

Avoid the following:

- Incorporating keywords from the job description without authentic context. Using keywords is a good strategy, but only when they relate to your proven experience and measurable competencies.
- Making grand claims and promises about your skills or what you will do or comparing yourself to other candidates in any way.
- Sharing a famous quote or differentiating yourself with anything other than your ability to drive business results.

Stay simple and business focused. Allow your accomplishments to speak for themselves.

A generic cover letter makes a poor first impression. Always customize your cover letters.



Step 3: Apply to Positions (continued)

Help Organizations and Recruiters Find You

Always follow the rules and do what is asked when responding to a job advertisement. Then take it a step further. Leverage your network to bring more attention to your application. Search through LinkedIn to find a connection who works there and reach out.

The single easiest way to help recruiters find you is to update your LinkedIn profile so your accomplishments are as visible there as they are on your resume, with plenty of facts and context.

Most recruiters rely on LinkedIn as a fast way to search for candidates. When you answer a job ad, you will be one of 300 resumes. But when someone recruits you, you might only be one of 10 or 20. It's worth optimizing your profile to increase your visibility.

Research

There are two types of research: pre-application and pre-interview. Your level of scrutiny should increase with each stage of the hiring process. We recommend a decision framework to help you quickly determine which jobs are worth your time to apply for (your pre-application research).

Once you are offered an interview, you should invest much more time (your pre-interview research). If you are going to use one of your precious vacation days to interview with another employer, make it count.

For some quick ways to glean insight into an organization, read [*The Busy Person's Guide to Smart Job Research*](#).



Step 4: Interview Strategies That Work

Interviews are about risk management. Your goal is to convince the decision makers that you are a safe hiring choice by demonstrating how your capabilities will help you be successful in this new and unfamiliar business situation.

Use your interview time strategically. You can't just wing it or cram for it like an exam. You must think deeply about what the organization seeks, what business impact they want to achieve with the role, and how they will likely judge your performance.

Try to filter out irrelevant issues and focus on demonstrating that you possess the four or five key competencies needed to succeed. You cannot afford to waste precious interview time on topics that don't point to your ability to deliver results.

With any interview, your goal is to be bright and brief. A longer interview is not better; a more comprehensive one is. Especially for a senior position, an interview is akin to briefing the board of directors. There is a tight time frame and a long list of agenda items, and everyone is eager to end on time.

An interview is not a normal conversation; normal conversation styles are lethal in an interview.



How to Handle a Bad Interviewer

Prepare to succeed in the interview even when the decision maker is not prepared. Many employers understand their business situation but will struggle to understand how relevant your capabilities are.

Many employers understand the big picture of what they are trying to achieve but not necessarily all the details involved with getting it done. This is the classic problem of a wide-angle strategist interviewing someone down in the weeds.

Beware of false assumptions. You should not assume:

- That the interviewer knows how to ask the right questions.
- That the interviewer is as prepared as you are. (They probably just rushed in from another meeting, first glancing at your resume now.)
- That everyone you meet will be an experienced interviewer.
- That your interviewer sees the world the way that you do.

So how do you make the right impression, regardless of your interviewer's preparedness? How do you demonstrate that you are qualified for the job, despite someone's lack of interviewing expertise? How do you get your point across, even when they aren't asking good questions?



How you structure your interview answers will determine your success:

Give interviewers the information and the context they need to form a valid opinion about your capabilities.

How to Answer Interview Questions Believably

Assume that interviewers will be skeptical of your opinions about your skills. However, they will always believe the opinions they form about you. You want the interviewers to conclude on their own that you have the key competencies to achieve the results they need.

An interviewer will be skeptical of your opinions about your skills. But they will always believe the opinions they form about you.

The best way to tell your career story is with short CAR interview answers (context, actions, results—also called STAR or CALL answers). These answers should include everything the interviewer needs to understand your achievement, how recent it was, and its scale.

[Behavioral interview questions](#) always favor the person with the quick and ready story—the person who says, “Just last week, I was doing exactly that.”

To prepare, review the [50 most common behavioral interview questions](#). Come up with CAR responses for the questions most relevant to the job. Be [brief, concise, and full of details](#) about how your superpowers helped solve a business problem. And make sure that your references can support these stories. When you say, “I’m sure my references will tell you ...” your credibility climbs. When a reference later verifies the story, you’re on your way to a job offer.

To develop your stories, think about an accomplishment that makes you proud or a great day at work. What happened? What are the elements of a great day for you?

We recommend you develop at least a dozen tightly honed CAR answers, demonstrating your impact on solving a particular business situation. These succinct answers should never go past three minutes, unless the interviewer asks for more detail. This requires practice, but most interviewers will be delighted with brief, factual answers to their questions. They will likely make a positive note and then move on to a new topic.

A good CAR interview answer will help the interviewer conclude several things about you. In preparing for the interview, you should decide what you want the conclusions to be and prepare your story to lead to those conclusions. (We call this an engineered epiphany.) You can prove you’re a hard-working team player without ever saying those words out loud.

Be ready for some of the standard follow-up questions:

- Did you do that by yourself or with a team?
- What was your role?
- What challenges did you overcome?
- What resources did you use to make it work?
- What was complex or frustrating about it?
- What caused you the most stress?
- What would you do differently next time?

Decision makers will be looking for humility, your ability to work with a team, your ability to talk respectfully about other people, and self-awareness.

Step 5: Concluding the Interview

You wrote a great resume. You engineered a terrific interview. How do you ensure you get a job offer?

End your interview on a strong note, giving one last vivid demonstration of your capabilities. Ask questions that demonstrate how you think, your passion and curiosity. Your questions will often prove your experience more than your answers do.

If you want to prove you are strategic, ask a strategic question. If you want to prove you are process-oriented, ask a process question. Don't just ask a question you found online; don't use the same questions in every interview. Ask about something you are genuinely interested in learning, grounded in the context of your conversation.

Great questions will force a decision maker to think, which is a wonderful thing. Your questions should demonstrate that you understand the context of the hiring decision and that you understand how the position differs from your current one.

If you ask the right questions, you will not only look good, you will gain a clearer understanding of the position, the company culture, and whether you can work within that structure.

Key Takeaways

Build your entire job search process around a narrative that explains your career trajectory and interests, where you want to go and why, and how you excel.

Prepare business stories with the CAR method. Don't make claims about your own skills when you can engineer an epiphany in the interview process. Bring the puzzle pieces together with a cohesive narrative of vignettes that demonstrate your capabilities—without ever needing to tell someone that you're the best option for the job.

See our blog for more job search advice including:

- [Job Searching 101: Where to Start](#)
- [The Busy Person's Guide to Smart Job Research](#)
- [Job Searching 101: How to Overcome Roadblocks](#)



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