The Five Steps of a Strategic Job Search

It’s funny how the little things can seem more daunting than the big ones. Finish medical school? Check. Excel in residency and fellowships? Check. Find that first job as a doctor? Uh-oh.

It’s not that job search is so difficult. It’s just hard to know where to begin. Unlike formal training programs where the steps and expectations are made clear, job search is one of those life tasks with a very sketchy blueprint. That’s largely a factor of uniqueness: Everyone’s career path is different and the jobs needed for that path will differ as well.

Luckily, some parts of the process are universal to everyone. Following are five steps that will help you be strategic about finding your first (or next) job in the field of medicine.

Step 1. Get clear on your goals. You know your specialty, but do you know where or how you want to pursue it? In broad terms, choices for neurologists include practicing, teaching, or researching. Knowing which is more important to you is a start, but it’s not quite enough to be helpful in developing your search pattern.

For example, researchers might work at universities, but they could also work for the government, for corporations or labs, or for small specialty clinics. Likewise, practitioners could be working for hospitals, government systems, private practices…or they could go solo. Knowing where and how you want to work is as important to a strategic job search as knowing the content of the work itself.

For this step, stop and think about the first five years out of training and ask yourself: What setting do I want to be in, and what do I want to be doing for the bulk of my day? Once you have that picture in mind, do the same exercise for five-year increments until the date you expect to retire. That means that a 30-year old who wants to retire at 65 would have seven five-year blocks of time to imagine.

The reason for extending the timeline out to retirement is that long-term goals can influence short-term choices. A practitioner who wants to teach at some point might choose to practice neurology at a teaching hospital where those opportunities could crop up more readily. Likewise, a doctor who anticipates going solo might benefit from working at a smaller practice where business decisions are shared—this could give a good perspective for making the leap to self-employment down the road.

Do the best you can on the extended picture, and then return your attention to the first segment of five years after training. The work you choose to do in this timeframe is the work you’ll pursue with your next job search.

Step 2. Learn about the market. Now that you know what kind of job you’ll be seeking, you need a little more information. It’s not enough to simply watch for ads in the category you’ve chosen, or tell a recruiter to alert you to opportunities. In both those scenarios, you’re placing the responsibility and power for your career in someone else’s hands—that’s pretty anti-climactic after seven or more years of intensive work to get to where you are now. That said, you do want to use the ads, recruiters, and any other tools or processes that can make your search easier—but only after you’ve organized these strategic steps so you can control the direction things take.

Your research doesn’t have to be exhaustive, but it should be thoughtful. If you’d like your next job to be focused on practice, for example, it would be good to have a basic understanding of the different practice settings for someone with your skill set, and the advantages and disadvantages of each. At that point, you can narrow things down to identify the organizations you’d most like to work for, perhaps based on a combination of the work itself, their reputation, and location. This is also the time to consider goals in your personal life, including family issues and continued education. Some employers and work settings are going to be conducive to those goals, while others could be less accommodating.

You get extra points if your research tells you some of the challenges faced by the employers in your target market, and the solutions that are being considered by those in the field. To redeem your points, mention some of those findings in conversations and interviews to indicate that you are focused on more than just your own career path when you join someone else’s team.
Step 3. Identify your top three to five employers.
Your research will lead you to this stage naturally, but it’s still important to check this step off the list. Without a clear sense of preferred employers, you’re left with no actionable process to follow. As you build your list of employers, look for this data:

- Organization name and location
- Heads of the departments you would work in— their names and contact information
- Names and contact information for internal recruiters, if relevant
- The reasons this employer made it to your short list (perceived benefit of working there)

Step 4. Reach out to your targeted employers, regardless of the season. Whether you intend to start working in a few months or a couple of years, there’s no time like now to email a potential employer to note your interest and ask for a conversation.

If your earliest start date for working is several months away, contacting the department head might make the most sense. In this case, you’d be sending a brief note of introduction and general inquiry, perhaps asking for a few minutes of time to meet in person at the next conference, or to talk on the phone in the next few weeks. The idea is to establish a relationship and to learn more about the department’s goals and initiatives, but not to worry about making formal application (since that may be premature at this stage).

On the other hand, if you’re ready to launch your search, you might make your first inquiry to the organization’s recruiter if they have one. This person can arrange a tour for you, ask and answer preliminary questions related to your candidacy and make introductions to key people in a timely way. If they don’t have a recruiter, default back to the department head with a letter that expresses your interest in meeting to discuss potential opportunities in the timeframe you’ve chosen.

Step 5. Be a joiner and a doer. If you follow the first four steps, you’ll almost certainly be headed to one or more offers of employment. More importantly, they’ll be offers for work you’ve chosen, at organizations you’ve specified, rather than the more random opportunities that come from relying on advertisements alone. At this stage, you’d probably (understandably) like to settle into your job and move forward with a somewhat less hectic pace than you’ve been keeping during your training.

Not so fast! Remember that list of potential career goals in five-year increments from Step 1? Now is the time to begin laying the foundation for those ideas to become reality. On the job, there will be opportunities to join or lead committees, programs, business processes, etc. The sooner you jump in, the more quickly you can gain the relevant experience while also deepening your contribution to your new employer.

Likewise, participation in a professional group, such as the American Academy of Neurology, gives you the opportunity to explore options that may not be well-represented in the workplace you choose. Being a joiner and doer provides the foundation to be strategic in your next job search, whether that happens in five years or 15.

As a final word of advice, don’t hesitate to get started on one or all steps right away, even if you’re currently in training. The best employers are always watching for the right candidate, so conversations at an early stage are never wasted.