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"One organization with a long record of success in helping people find jobs is The Five O'Clock Club."

FORTUNE

E-mail, Snail-Mail, Blackberries, and Cell Phones

Technology Etiquette for Job Hunters

by Kate Wendleton



Our coaches recently exchanged their thoughts about the use of technology in a job search, largely in response to inquiries about how to use all of the gadgets and formats appropriately. After all, the abuse of technology can mark a person as arrogant, insensitive, immature or just careless.

How you use technology speaks volumes about your skills, your style, your ability to connect with future employers and your manners! The devices you use, when and how you use them and the content of your messages send subtle (or not so subtle!) signals to a prospective employer that can improve ... or derail your chances for getting the next interview and ultimately landing the job.

Were our coaches in agreement on what a job hunter should do? Not at all. But we did come up with a few suggestions.

1. Use Snail-Mail for the First Contact Unless You Were Referred by Someone

Hiring managers already get too much e-mail and too much spam. They are prone to delete anything they don't immediately recognize, even if your unsolicited e-mail actually gets through. Administrative assistants are much more sympathetic than spam filters.

Snail mail allows you to take advantage of the quality of paper, résumé design and typefaces—like a printed marketing piece. It empowers you to control the initial impression and differentiate yourself from other candidates. Since e-mail is filtered, the *appearance* of your cover letter and résumé is at

the mercy of settings on the web, on the corporate network and on the recipient's computer. This triple-filtering means there is no guarantee that the HR person or the hiring manager will see what you sent *the way* you intended it to be seen.

Postal mail gives you the best chance to shape the initial impression and the best odds of getting your message delivered. And for many recipients, yours may be the only personally addressed mail they actually get that day!

The coaches' conclusion: "It all depends."

That was the majority opinion. However, a few coaches tended more towards e-mail for first contact: One said, "There is no single right way, especially in this very complicated job market. Our clients need to assess and develop their individual targets, research the companies and functions they're focused on, and *then, based upon the information they've gathered*, use the prevailing and appropriate approaches for the companies and functions they've identified. That may mean e-mail with the right dynamic subject line."

E-mail for a first direct contact may *Continued on page 3*

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be appropriate for junior-level people who are contacting a few hundred organizations in the hopes of being interviewed for an entry-level position. This is the equivalent of trying to win lotto. However, if a job hunter really does care about meeting with a specific person he or she is contacting, more thought needs to go into that first contact.

One Five O'Clock Club coach, who specializes in information technology (IT), said: "I suggest that even my IT clients send letters instead of e-mails. After all, what better way to differentiate yourself from your IT competitors?"

You can follow-up by either snail-mail or e-mail or both.

One coach summed up the blog to that point: "So which is more effective? How about both? Send an e-mail that tells of your interest (plus a relevant article or web-link) and says to watch for a *real* letter to follow. Of course, use The Five O'Clock Club Direct Mail and / or "Influencing" formats. People usually scan e-mail and may save — or delete your message — depending on the recipient's mood, interest, workload, etc. But a hand-written addressed envelope may get more attention. How do these people, who say we should modernize our communication, feel about being inundated with e-mails from job hunters? Snail-mail is more of a novelty that could make it more effective."

Another coach summed it up: "Different approaches may be most effective for specific situations. We all believe there's a place for e-mail; my sense is that it's effective only for setting up meetings *after* a relationship has been established."

So, job hunters, it's up to you and your coach. Like many other techniques, its effectiveness depends on the situation — such as your industry and your level. Most importantly, notice whether you are indeed getting a significant number of meetings *with people you don't know*

by using e-mail vs. snail-mail for your first contact. That's the research-based approach to job search.

2. Use E-Mail for Follow-Up Notes and Networking

E-mail is generally viewed as acceptable for communication *after* a meeting, especially when you want to send a link to showcase your work or to indicate a relevant article reflecting the content of your conversation. E-mail may also be acceptable for follow-up notes meant to influence the hiring team. But important follow-ups should *always* be sent by snail-mail as well, to assure that the formatting will be correct and the letter won't get lost in cyberspace.

E-mail also is ideal for contacting someone recommended by a member of your network. Put the person's name in the Subject line (*e.g.*, "Bob Smith Suggested That I Contact You") to be sure you are not automatically deleted. This is also the preferred format for using business-oriented social networks like LinkedIn to broaden your contacts or to solicit referrals. (More about LinkedIn later.)

Be careful constructing the body of message. E-mails are often scanned or read quickly, and they are easily misinterpreted. Many readers pay less than 100 percent attention and seek the key words or phrases, so they miss a nuance or a key point. There is a growing body of thought that the speed of e-mail affects the way people read and react to messages. This can hurt a job-seeker who chooses words haphazardly or doesn't carefully consider how to frame a message.

3. Follow Up After a Job Interview: Think Strategy!

In the old days, job hunters asked us how to follow up after a job interview: "Should I follow up by phone or letter?" Our coaches told clients that the issue of follow up was *far more complex than that* and involved a considerable amount of strategy. Phone vs. letter was the least of their worries (see our book, *Mastering the Job Interview*.) *Now*

clients ask whether they should follow up by e-mail or snail-mail, and our answer is the same. The communication device is *secondary* to the overall strategy, and clients usually need the help of a coach and their small group to determine their follow-up strategy.

If the issue were simply, "snail-mail or e-mail," follow-up would be easy and no coach would be needed. One coach says regarding follow-up: "Given the speed with which some hiring decisions are made, some clients are e-mailing and then sending the snail-mail copies of their influence letters. This is particularly true when the next round of interviews is a few days from the original interviews and they are questioning the need for snail-mail."

Yes. Once a job hunter has met the manager, he or she should do what is appropriate, given the situation.

Track results! Are you getting a significant number of meetings *with people you don't know* by using e-mail vs. snail-mail for your *first contact*.

4. Only Use Mobile Devices in a Pinch

Many people type rapidly and *badly* with their thumbs on Blackberrys, Treos and similar devices. The typical mobile message has at least two typos in it because most messages are composed in a hurry, and in quick reaction to an inbound e-mail. And the tone tends to be terse or glib and subject to misinterpretation. If you need to appear thoughtful, insightful or expert, the mobile device may undercut your credibility.

And, while we're on the subject, one coach reminds us that the general rule about e-mails holds when job hunters use these devices: Always *proof-read!*

One coach noted: "The value of a Blackberry is not in *communicating from* one. The value is that busy executives can monitor their e-mail through

their Blackberry or BB-like devices such as a Treo. If you have sent a thoughtful, compelling e-mail, they will see it no matter where they are in the world!”

5. Try Not to Use a Cellular Phone

We all have them, we all use them — so we know the drawbacks. Sound quality and consistent transmission are iffy. Background noise is ubiquitous. So our coaches recommend *never* using a cell phone for telephone interviews, even if it's just a cursory screening interview. The interviewer could easily miss words, lose the tone of your voice or not hear your emphasis on a critical question. You may not be able to communicate energy or enthusiasm without shouting.

What if you receive a cell call from a hiring manager? One rule is: always have pen and paper handy to take down information. One coach, a former HR manager, said, “I have actually had applicants ask me to e-mail information to them about an interview because they were using a cell phone. No way! You need to make it easy and convenient for the people who are trying to hire you.”

Also: Never make an initial or introductory call to a hiring manager's cell phone, even if you manage to get the number. In contrast to landlines, everyone still perceives their mobile phones as private as their home phones. It is the ultimate intrusion, the ultimate audio spam to receive an unsolicited call from a job hunter on one's cell phone. The same holds true for Instant Messaging. It virtually guarantees a negative result.

Remember the Seinfeld notion that only second class communications take place on cell phones. The person you are calling will think, “Does he/she think I'm not worth a real phone call?” Spare yourself and your future employer the trouble. Rely on landlines for formal interviews and formal conversations.

Use your cell phone to set up or change an appointment, to call ahead if

you are running late or to get in touch quickly with a recruiter.

One of our executive coaches thinks it is a bad idea to list a cell phone number on a résumé: “A hiring manager could call someone and get this response, ‘I'm sorry, but I can't talk now; I'm about to go into the butcher shop...’ or ‘I can't hear you; I'm in the subway.’ If you *do* rely on your cell, TURN IT OFF if you're in places where you don't want to receive calls or don't answer. A voice message left on your cell phone can also present problems: You hear parts of the message, miss the person's name, and don't get the phone number. End of job opportunity.”

This coach works primarily with senior executives, so his advice may not apply to everyone. Many young people may not even *have* landlines and use cell phones exclusively.

6. Avoid Instant Messaging, Internet Directories and Social Networks

IM is a *permission-based* concept. People invite others of their choosing to interrupt them with instant messages. Rarely are job candidates invited to use this technology by prospective employers. Seeking out and finding a hiring manager via IM is considered extremely rude and intrusive and should be off limits to job seekers.

And even though the Internet enables you to search out to an individual using directory tools or through social networks, it is not acceptable to approach future employers using these tools. There is a work-life dividing line. Unless someone explicitly invites you to check out their MySpace or Friendster page or contact them through a social network — don't.

7. “Networking” Through LinkedIn and Other Sites

LinkedIn.com has been getting rave reviews at The Five O'Clock Club. Says one member, “Linkedin is a terrific Web-based tool that can help extend a person's network and simplify the

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The Job-Search Buddy System

Do you wish you had someone to talk to—fairly often and informally—about the little things?



“Here's what I'm planning to do today in my search? What are *you* planning to do? Let's talk tomorrow to make sure we've done it.” You and your job-search buddy could keep each other positive and on track, and encourage each other to do what you told the small group you were going to do: Make that call, send out those letters, write that follow-up proposal, focus on the most important things that should be done—rather than (for example) spending endless hours responding to job postings on the Web.

With your buddy, practice your Two-Minute Pitch, get ready for interviews, bounce ideas off each other. Some job-search buddies talk every day. Some talk a few times a week. Most of the conversation is by phone and e-mail.

Sometimes, people match themselves up as buddies. Just pick someone you get along with in your small group. Sometimes, your coach can match you up. However you do it, stay away from negative people who talk about how bad it is out there. They will drag you down.

The small group changes over time: people get jobs; new people come in. If you lose one buddy who got a job, get another buddy.

Your buddy does not have to be in your field or industry. In fact, being in the same field or industry could keep you focused on the industry rather than on the *process*. But you *do* have to get along! The relationship may last only a month or two, or go on for years. Some buddies become friends.

Of course, you should see your Five O'Clock Club career coach *privately* for résumé review, target development, salary negotiation, and job interview follow-up. It's usually best to get professional coaching advice for these areas. ●

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process of identifying members of your network in target companies.

LinkedIn is free and a way to put yourself out there.

“It’s free to join so I’ve tried to recruit lots of other Five O’Clock Clubbers. In fact, I received a cold call this morning from a distant contact in my LinkedIn network who is looking for help on several projects. I was the perfect fit. A perfect lead! If you join, make sure to connect to [other Five O’Clock Clubbers]; the bigger your network the more effective it will be.”

Should *you* consider LinkedIn? Sure, just as you should consider contacting search firms and answering ads, two other passive techniques. When job hunters use LinkedIn, they are simply putting themselves out there (just as with search firms and ads), but someone has to contact *you*. Use these passive techniques and then get on with your *real* search.

Read more about LinkedIn in our book, *Shortcut Your Job Search: The Best Ways to Get Meetings*.

8. Use Your Judgment

After the coaches had blogged for a week or so, one coach summed it up. “We cannot develop definitive conclusions that we can transform into consistently-correct advice for our clients.



There may be too many variables: the industry, the urgency to hire, the linguistic skills of the client and potential employer, the communication style preferences of sender and receiver, the quality of the cellular devices on both ends of the call, the compatibility and revision level of the software in place on both ends of the e-mail message, the attitude and skill of the sender re: proofreading. How can you set up ironclad rules to play by when the game is so convoluted and constantly changing?

“Our dilemma: We want to use the speed provided by the technology but we also want some control over how the message is received and perceived. As long as one can’t be assured of the quality with which an e-mail, Blackberry, or cell phone message is received, there will be risk in using these methods. Under what circumstances is the risk worth taking?”

The bottom line: Talk it over with your coach and group to find your best strategy.

“The new devices enable more timely and more widely broadcast communications with far less effort, but a poorly or improperly received e-mail message, e-mail attachment, or cell phone voice-mail may damage a client’s image and chance of employment.”

It is a complex issue. The bottom line for you is to talk it over with your coach and small group to determine the best strategy for you, and then keep records to *notice what is working*. Note how many meetings you get using e-mail vs. snail-mail for the first contact. That’s the acid test. ●



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