

When You Can't Get Past the First Interview

By TODDI GUTNER

Q. *I was laid off six months ago. I am basically still an entry-level employee even though I got a bachelor's in 2005 and a master's in 2007, both in economics from Ivy League institutions. Then I took a job at an investment company that I viewed as a stepping stone. After a few months, the company and I came to the mutual agreement things weren't working out. I feel like I've used every strategy: networking, cold calls, recruiters, company Web sites and direct emails. After a bunch of phone and in-person interviews, I always get the same reaction: "You have a great educational background, but don't have the experience we want." How do I get over this hurdle, especially in an economy where people with double the experience will take a lower-level job?*

A. You've clearly done a great deal to land yourself a new job, says Sheryl Spanier, a career coach. If you've gotten interviews based on your resume, this means that your background at least met some set of criteria employers were seeking. Otherwise they wouldn't have reached out to you, she says.

Take a hard look at your interviewing skills. Your failure to move past the initial interview stage likely has something to do with the way you carry yourself during the meetings, says Ms. Spanier. "It might be about how you present yourself or the attitudes or opinions you express," she explains. If this is the case, you'll want to try and figure out what you need to improve. Practice your interviewing skills — what you say and how you say things — with a friend or mentor and get feedback, she suggests. Hone the "story" you're telling and try to determine if it is helping you be considered as a viable and committed candidate.

Meanwhile, look for different and creative ways to build your experience and increase your odds of qualifying for more positions. "Volunteering with an organization where you can apply your skills is a great way to accomplish two key aspects of career development," says John Heins, senior vice president and chief human-resources officer at Spherion Corp., a staffing firm.

Volunteering can help you keep your momentum going, as well as explain gaps in your employment. It can also help you to expand your professional network, as you may be working alongside someone who could be in a position to recognize your talent and drive, says Mr. Heins.

Similarly, you might consider pursuing project work or an internship for six months at a company that interests you, says Ms. Spanier. "You can gain the experience and exposure and [the company] will appreciate your contributions." In this market, it's all about trying to showcase your skills and internships are one way to do that, she says.

Write to Ms. Gutner at cjeditor@dowjones.com. *If you have a question for the careers columnists, be sure to put Career Q&A in your subject line.*