

How to Get Hired Where There Is Not Even an Opening

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

For some reason, almost every week (sometimes more than once a week) venture capitalists and private equity companies call me to talk about the various businesses I am involved in. I used to talk to them quite formally, the way average people like me talk to doctors, lawyers and bankers. I assumed (wrongly so), that I needed to be a little bit guarded, not share too much information and such. Do not ask me why I thought this way. I think it probably has something to do with the fact that when they call, they say something like the following:

"Hi. I'm from a private equity firm. We manage a fund of over two billion dollars and are looking for investments."

I do not know about you, but when someone calls and tells you they have two billion dollars to spend, it makes me a little nervous. I just cannot communicate effectively. Nevertheless, I have been taking these phone calls for years and am now far more interested in speaking with these guys. I have probably done over 50+ phone calls with them in the past few years and they have become a focus of intense interest for me. These guys are fascinating to me because they have penetrating insights into "hot" businesses and where the economy is going.

Most of the private equity players out there are really smart guys with great educations. They also really know business and their entire job is to identify businesses that are likely to increase and grow rapidly. They basically want to put money into a business that is growing and then "sell off" their portion of the business when it starts to "slow down". Typically, these investors will focus on industries and individual companies that are poised for massive growth.

In my opinion, if you are trying to decide what sort of company to work for, you'd be smart taking a look at what the most successful and profitable private equity companies are doing. They are very good at putting their money to work in the industries, companies and geographic locations where there is a cycle of expansion occurring.

Expansion cycles are good because they breed "inefficiencies". Inefficiencies are good because they create opportunity. When there are inefficiencies, companies (and people) tend to not watch their money as carefully.

When I was starting my legal career I applied for jobs in the following areas: Detroit, Los Angeles and New York. In New York City I got so many interviews I could not believe it. I was taking trip after trip there to meet with law firms. I also got a lot of interviews in Los Angeles. When I went into these interviews I was treated very well and found employers eager and excited to hire. They were not that critical, did not ask a lot of questions about my grades and were eager to make offers.

Detroit, on the other hand, was a different story. At the particular time I was interviewing, the Detroit market had been contracting for years. The interviews with the firms there were not as easy to come by. Firms were much less likely to make offers easily. The big firms in the city had not been growing for years and had been shrinking for a long time. In simplistic terms: There was not a lot of opportunity. The big law firms in Detroit were looking for reasons not to hire you as opposed to looking for reasons to hire you.

I realized early on that working in Detroit was not a good long-term prospect for me. The Los Angeles legal market was growing at the time and so that is where I went. The market was so "hot" at that point in time that law firms were making me offers during interviews, paying "signing bonuses" and so forth—it was far different than the sort of thing you would ever see in Detroit at the time.

If you are going to succeed in your career to your full potential ... seek out geographic locations, industries and companies that are booming. It makes all the difference.

When I was in college, I was close friends with a girl who went to school in another state. She shared a dorm building with a friend of mine growing up. My friend was good at science and had majored in a science-related discipline that was very much in demand at the time. He had done a very average job in college. I think he had around a 2.0 grade point average. The issue was that he did a ton of drugs. One day she called me:

"He has been sitting in a chair for 36 hours staring at a wall in the student commons and he has not moved. He is on really bad acid ... No one can get him to move."

I never thought that much would come of this guy. By his senior year of college he could scarcely form a sentence- he had done so many drugs. Nevertheless, due to this "unique" science-related major he received tons of job offers and ended up doing very well. Most of the better students and others in his class were searching for jobs months after he graduated and was earning an incredible living. He is still doing well to this day.

What did this guy do that was so smart? He chose a major (and obscure one) where there was a ton of demand. There was so much demand that all he needed was a pulse to get a job.

The basic cycle of a business involves a company coming out with a product or service and either succeeding, or failing. When the company succeeds it can succeed in multiple ways. On the one hand it may grow slowly. On the other hand, the company may "take off" and experience explosive growth. You want to go where there is "explosive growth."

- Individual companies can experience explosive growth
- Geographic regions can experience explosive growth
- Certain industries can experience explosive growth

Companies that experience "explosive growth" generally are able to do so due to the fact that they are not facing lots of competition and are doing things in a way that is competitively different from others. This allows the company to generate "windfall profits" for some time and the leadership of the company, the company's employees and others generally fall under the spell that the "sun will shine forever."

Regions that experience explosive growth are similar. In the "Wild West", for example, if you were one of the few businesses in a geographic region selling something you could mark up the price and be virtually assured of making good profits. This is happening in regions of the United States all the time where there is growth—due to an industry, demographic trends, or otherwise.

When things are good, companies and the people making hiring decisions inside of them do not give hiring a lot of thought. I have hired people I met at dinner, people who were recommended by friends and family and others — without much regard to whether we had a job opening at all. I just knew that the person had certain skills and could contribute to the overall efforts of the company. That was when things were "on the up" and explosive growth was occurring.

It is like this with lots of companies. When things are good and the company is "on the way up" the company does not closely scrutinize a lot of its hiring. It is this way with all companies.

"Back in the day" executives in the largest automotive companies had fancy wood paneled dining rooms where they were served gourmet foods and so forth daily. That soon went away as the industry started contracting under pressure. Companies like Google currently have cafeterias that are free and are so "fat" that they even allow employees to spend part of their work time on independent projects.

One of the most interesting things you can and should be doing in your job search is going after companies that are on this "explosive growth" trend. They will often hire you without giving it much thought—even if they do not have openings. It is the same thing with booming geographic areas and industries—you can often get hired even if there are no openings at a particular company just by "showing up."

I am going to tell you a job search secret I should not be telling you—but if you've read this far you deserve to learn it. If you see a company with a lot of openings proportional to its size—this means things are going very well there. It is the same thing with industries and geographic locations—a ton of openings mean some good stuff is going on. For example, if you see a small city somewhere and there are a ton of openings, then that city is growing.

Apply to companies that are growing fast—even if they do not have openings for you. This is a "contrarian strategy" but I have seen it work more times than I can count. Call them, email them and do whatever you have to do. Companies that are "on the way up" will often hire you even if they do not have openings. You need to find places, companies and industries on the way up.

THE LESSON

Going after companies on an "explosive growth" trend is among the most interesting and beneficial things you can do in your job search, as many such companies will hire you even if they do not have openings. Similarly, you can get hired in booming industries and geographical areas even if there are no openings, simply by showing up. Apply to growing companies, even if they do not have open positions.

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