

## Socrates and Your Job Search

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Several years ago, we were launching a newsletter for [law schools](#). One of our employees, who was working on the project, decided that the title of the newsletter should be, "The Signal." He was very enthusiastic about this particular title. In fact, I had never seen him so enthusiastic about anything.

The problem with this name was that the domain name for it had been taken long ago and I seem to remember that the person who owned the domain name had no interest in selling it. Without a domain name, it did not seem like it made sense to have an important newsletter going out to law schools with this particular name. The newsletter was supposed to be electronic, and due to it being electronic, people would start associating the name, "The Signal" with the newsletter and looking for it under this URL when they did searches online.

I explained this to my employee but he was having none of it. He didn't care what the URL was. He was convinced the newsletter needed to be called "The Signal," and when I wouldn't agree, he became extremely irate. He stomped out of work. He stopped working on the project and refused to work on the newsletter the next day.

He had decided that things just needed to be a certain way and he didn't want to hear anything that was different from this certain way at all. He had made up his mind that only one name was appropriate and had thrown all of his thinking, energy, and spirit behind something that was really unnecessary. However, this is something that many of us do in one form or another, and we do it with numerous things.

One of the biggest challenges for me in working with people [looking for jobs](#), is that most seem to believe their search needs to work in a certain way. They believe there is one way of looking for a job and that way is the only way. People are extremely attached to doing things a certain way. Someone who is in their mid-50s may believe they should never go online and that the best sources of jobs are always in the newspaper. Other people may believe that networking is the only approach to getting a job. Still, other people may believe they will only be able to ever [get a job](#) with a certain type of employer. People are very stubborn and this obstinance is something that really holds them back.

The guy who worked for me was so frustrated by the title of the newsletter, he ended up not coming into work regularly and turned from a very dependable employee into one who was completely unreliable. This was a huge mistake and he ended up losing his job. He was pigheaded about something that didn't really matter. Many of us are pigheaded about stuff that doesn't really matter and it ends up hurting our careers. We believe that something can only be done a certain way and we stick to this without questioning everything around us.

For my entire career, I've been encouraging people to question their assumptions about how to find a job. I believe that questioning assumptions, consistently doing new things, and finding new ways to search are among the most important things we can do in a [job search](#). In fact, I believe they are *the* most important things. The more you question what you're doing and embrace new methods of looking for jobs, the better off you will be.

Socrates is considered by most academics as the Founder of Western philosophy. He lived around 2,500 years ago and since he never wrote a book, everything we know about him comes largely from what others wrote about him. Socrates was considered a very interesting figure around Athens. After having been a distinguished soldier, he returned to Athens and wandered around the city engaging various people in conversations. At the time, there were teachers who traveled around the country called Sophists, who taught various subjects to people who paid them. Unlike the Sophists, Socrates never took payment for his teaching, and most significantly, he claimed that he had nothing to teach. He told people he didn't have any actual knowledge and was no smarter than others. Socrates claimed that if he was wiser than others, it was only due to the fact that he was aware that he was ignorant.

Most of what is known about Socrates comes from the writings of his student Plato, and from his dialogues in particular (however, the works of Aristotle and others provide some insights as well). In these dialogues, Socrates will typically confront someone who claims to be an expert on one philosophical topic or another, such as moral or epistemological issues--the nature of justice or virtue. Through questioning of this person, Socrates will then proceed to show that he doesn't know what he claims at all. According to one definition:

The Socratic method is a *negative* method of hypotheses of elimination, in that better hypotheses are found by steadily identifying and eliminating those which lead to contradictions. The method of Socrates is a search for the underlying hypotheses, assumptions, or axioms, which may subconsciously shape one's opinion, and to make them the subject of scrutiny, to determine their consistency with other beliefs. The basic form is a series of questions formulated as tests of logic and fact, intended to help a person or group discover their beliefs about some topic, exploring the definitions or logoi (singular logos), seeking to characterize the general characteristics shared by various particular instances. To the extent to which this method is designed to bring out definitions implicit in the interlocutors' beliefs, or to help them further their understanding, it was called the method of maieutics. Aristotle attributed to Socrates the discovery of the method of definition and induction, which he regarded as the essence of the scientific method. Perhaps oddly, however, Aristotle also claimed that this method is not suitable for ethics.

According to W.K.C. Guthrie's *The Greek Philosophers*, while sometimes erroneously believed to be a method by which one seeks the answer to a problem, or knowledge, the Socratic method was actually intended to demonstrate one's ignorance. Socrates, unlike the Sophists, did believe that knowledge was possible, but believed that the first step to knowledge was recognition of one's ignorance. Guthrie writes, "[Socrates] was accustomed to say that he did not himself know anything, and that the only way in which he was wiser than other men was that he was conscious of his own ignorance, while they were not. The essence of the Socratic method is to convince the interlocutor that whereas he thought he knew something, in fact

he does not."

Socrates was eventually put on trial and sentenced to death in Athens for allegedly corrupting the youth of Athens with his teachings. It was during this trial that Socrates made the famous statement that the "unexamined life is not worth living."

The idea that there is one way of doing things is something that needs to be questioned. One of my greatest frustrations with job seekers is trying to get them to realize how many different methods there are for them to get jobs, and the incredible number of paths they can follow in their job searches. You need to be aware that whatever assumptions you have about the way you should be looking for a job may be doing you a tremendous amount of harm. These assumptions need to be questioned, and you need to ensure that in questioning these assumptions, you realize that they may be limiting you. Here are some of the assumptions that are not necessarily true that I've seen people make about their job search:

- A recruiter will not help me get a job.
- A recruiter will help me get a job.
- I need to use a recruiter for my job search.
- I would never post my resume on a [resume site](#).
- I need to post my resume on a resume site.
- I would never pay someone to help me get a job.
- I can only get a job if I pay someone to assist me.
- I will never get a job in this economy.
- I am too old to get a job.
- I am too young to [get a job](#).
- I do not have enough experience.
- I have too much experience.
- I need connections to get this job.
- I will never get another job because I was fired.
- I did not go to a good enough school to work there.

The list of things about your candidacy and job search could go on and on. You need to question everything about how you look for a job and what this means. Your job search is too important and your career is too important to allow yourself to be stuck in one way of thinking. You need to open your mind and ensure that you do everything within your power to think about your job search in a way that gives you more opportunities and not fewer.

#### **THE LESSON**

In your job search, you must question assumptions, find new ways of doing things, and consistently find new ways to search. You will be better off the more you seek out and adopt new job search techniques. Your career is too important for you to be stuck in traditional ways of thinking. You must open your mind and ensure that you are doing everything within your power to view your job search in a way that grants you more opportunities, not fewer.

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