Making Yourself Marketable in 2015

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1. My Context

- Recruit only for tech comms roles
- Software industry, mostly
- Small firm, not (yet) a Fortune 500 vendor
- Focus on hard-to-fill, lucrative staff and contract posts (typically the geeky kind)
    - I work solo
    - I need a sentient, responsive hiring manager inside the firewall
- Most successful on trusted/collaborative searches
    - Just like you, I flail on un-prioritized "kitchen sink" searches

2. Market Realities
- Cost containment
    - Hybrid roles prevalent
    - No training
    - Layoffs, offshoring as financial strategies
- Fearful, inexperienced, too-busy 'deciders'
    - unprioritized "kitchen sink" job descriptions
    - walled off from candidate base
    - consensus-based hiring
    - prefer contract-to-staff
    - onsite preferred
- Older workforce
    - prefer more offsite
    - prefer reporting to vertebrates
    - avoid open seating workspaces
    - motivated more by quality of life, less by upward mobility, least by chaos
- Sectors/Roles/Locations are unequal
    - Writing for developers is valued, won't fizzle when economy overheats
    - Writing for business end users, system admins is much less valued
    - Writing procedures, compliance doc for in-house users is least valued
    - Writing non-tech marketing content is (slowly) gaining in value, but probably transient
    - Content strategy (cf marcom writing) gaining popularity with Fortune 1000 firms
    - Writing for open source companies pays 10-15% better
    - Mobile, Big Data/Analytics, SaaS/virtualization/cloud, Security, Open Source arenas are **hot**
    - Networks, financial, manufacturing, energy, transportation, healthcare, hardware, government are **not**
    - Enterprise, medical devices, biomed/pharma, green tech, semiconductors, storage are **lukewarm**
    - San Francisco, peninsula, & South Bay are **hot**; North Bay, East Bay, Sacramento markets are **not**

PART ONE

The Basics

3. Assessing your candidacy
Assess your abilities, motivations, interests, timeframe, and fit

- Abilities
- tolerance for commuting, unrealistic deadlines, steep technical learning curves, no guidance, no training, no editing, insufficient time to do quality work, cultural conflicts (age, ethnicity, power, other)
- understanding of and empathy with target audiences
- friction with infrastructure (content management, bug tracking, dev environment, etc)
- efficiency with authoring tools, production processes

- Motivations
- respect/appreciation
- positive relationships with colleagues
- work/life balance
- good relationship with superior(s)
- money (salary, bonuses, raises, stock options)
- benefits (insurance coverage, matching 401k, paid vacation, paid conferences, etc)
- location, amount of onsite work req'd
- company/role's stability
- career growth potential

- Interests
- industry/products
- tools (structured authoring with CCMSs, or MS Word
- content's audience
- team or solo work

- Timeframe
- if near retirement, may favor income over lifestyle
- if "thinly capitalized", may favor faster-paying W2 contracts over 1099 ones
- if hard to insure, may favor staff benefits over contract (all-cash) roles
- if not local, may favor lower-paying contracts or contract-to-staff opps that may become mostly offsite

- if transitioning, may favor volunteering or unpaid/mentored work to build portfolio & references

- How close a match are you?
- 80% skills and experience match is better than most
- 50% (or less) skills/experience match; don't bother to apply
- "I can learn if you teach me" no longer works
    o substitute "I've taken a relevant course online" or "I'll learn on my own time once hired"

4. Finding Opportunities
- Networking (referrals are still the best; doubles the "skin in the game" commitment)
- Recruiters (pure contingency terms, 90-day guarantees, contract EOR improves companies' options/flexibility)
- Job Boards (mechanical, uneven quality, full of clueless & predatory keyword-hunting salesfolk)
    - LinkSV (**www.linksv.com**) - for discovering off-the-radar prospects
    - LinkUp (**www.linkup.com**) - for current, under-publicized listings
    - **Indeed**, **SimplyHired**, **Glassdoor** - high volume, auto-renewed opps. Mostly resume-harvesting, ATS-building black holes
    - **Monster**, **DICE**, **Craigslist** - least credible, lowest quality (role, pay) listings, refuge of desperate jobseekers
- **LinkedIn** - more direct accountability, but volume has led to service/access quality disintegration)

5. Portfolios/Writing Samples

- Sharable samples not optional
    - o online portfolio, or Dropbox folder, strongly preferred pre-phone interview
    - o lots of advice on what to show and how at **www.synergistech.com/portfolios.shtml**
    - o "disclaimer"/context-setting intros to each sample strongly advised
- Audience-specific samples strongly preferred
    - o API ref doc samples necessary to secure API doc work; no one hires such TWs based on promises
- Samples don't have to be whole, or even from the "business world"
    - o Create doc for a shareware or open-source project; having been paid for it isn't important
    - o Prove you can research, evaluate, organize, present, and publish at audience's level
- NDA'd samples aren't an excuse for not sharing
    - o get creative
        - ▪ redact
        - ▪ search-and-replace sensitive info
        - ▪ extract 4-5 page segments of conceptual, procedural, and reference content for several different audiences
        - ▪ insist reviewer sign a simple NDA mirroring yours with your old client/employer

6. Resumes
- Increasingly unread, but always searched
    - length is much less important than relevance
    - front-load your keywords by category, then use main ones again in job's context
    - front-load notable (preferably quantified) accomplishments, exposure to hot technologies
    - downplay or delete routine responsibilities
- Accuracy increasingly important
    - degrees, past employment easier and cheaper than ever to verify
    - resumes' claims are legally binding; expect to lose your job if meaningful exaggerations discovered
    - cover letter's claims aren't legally binding; feel free to be aspirational
- Consider copyrighting your resume to dissuade unauthorized recruiters from introducing you w/o permission
- Lots more specific "Help Me Help Your Resume" advice available from Andrew, on request
- Andrew doesn't remember the last time he received a flawless resume; it's been years
    - If I present you, I'll pour your resume into my template, create a Technical Summary and targeted 1-2 sentence Profile statement, and do a developmental edit to ensure parallelism, tense/punctuation/terminology/formatting consistency, etc.
    - Save me time by doing that yourself!
- If you need resume-writing services, I can introduce you to the best I know (someone I trained)

7. Cover letters
  - Customized cover letters that address listing's requirements in detail usually get noticed
      o Generic and/or boastful cover letters get ignored
  - Omitting a cover letter smacks of spamming or arrogant/entitled mindset
  - Claims aren't legally enforceable
  - Seldom stored with resume in company's ATS, so least likely to be searched
  - Never answer "recent/desired compensation" question until the hiring manager has voiced interest

8. Reference checks
- Increasingly necessary, even for contract roles and internships
  - "Character" (non-workplace) references much less valuable than workplace ones
  - Recent references much more valuable than older ones; must speak cogently to your role & added value
  - For-profit experience with reference is completely optional
- Managerial references are mandatory, peer references less so; subject matter expert references in-between
- Never share references unless there's a specific opportunity and you've already been introduced for it
  - most recruiters lack a moral compass, will cold-call your references seeking to raid/sell their own services
  - always omit references from your resume and cover note
- Always brief your references on role (& what to say) before the hiring manager or recruiter calls

9. Background checks

- For most staff & many brokered contract roles, background checks are now standard
- 7-year all-California-counties criminal background check is the baseline
- Financial checks are rare unless workplace exposes you to cash
- Drug screenings (peeing in a cup) are requested only at cos doing government-related work
- Academic degree checks are quick and cheap; larger companies may need these for government reporting
- All checks must be individually authorized
    - authorization doesn't mean the requester will follow through
    - you are legally entitled to a copy of all findings
- Even desperate companies will pass on candidates with questionable findings
    - if you have a liability (DUI, unpaid ticket, or any other 'record'), volunteer details before they check

10. Training
- MOOCs (massively open online courses) are the answer to your prayers, and ignoring them is self-sabotage
  - Explore one or more of the following, register, learn, and write something using your new knowledge:
    - Code Year, Lynda.com, w3schools.com, MIT (http://ocw.mit.edu/courses/), udacity.com, Wikibooks.org, LandofCode.com, Stanford (itunes.stanford.edu), Coursera (www.coursera.org), Udemy.com, Learnable.com, video2brain.com, Virtual Training Company (vtc.com), CodeAcademy.com, PeepCode.com, Edureka.co, Educator.com, TotalTraining.com, TutsPlus.com, PluralSight (pluralsight-training.net), eclasses.org, MOOC (www.mooc-list.com), edX (www.edx.org), JER Online (www.jeronline.com), ed2go (www.ed2go.com), CaveOfProgramming.com
- Trialware is the other answer to your prayers; ditto re ignoring it
- For would-be API reference tech writers, explore Peter Gruenbaum's new API doc-related course:
  - **https://www.udemy.com/api-documentation-1-json-and-xml/?couponCode=apidoc**
- Sarah Maddox' recent API doc course (given at Google 1/23/2015) is available here:
  - **http://goo.gl/VYHECc**
- Tom Johnson's API doc how-to presentation to TC Camp 2015 (given in Santa Clara on 1/24) is available here:
  - **http://bit.ly/tomapiworkshop**
- Check out TC Dojo, from Single-Sourcing Solutions, at:
  - **http://single-sourcing.com/products/tcdojo/index.html**
- Attend Write The Docs (WTD) meetups in SF (or, better yet, the Portland, OR conference in the spring):
  - **http://www.meetup.com/Write-the-Docs/**

PART TWO

Leveraging What You've Learned
(aka Marketing Yourself)

11. Getting Real

- Know what your audience needs vs what they'd prefer
  - excellent research, analysis, organization, writing, editing, and production skills
  - autonomous technical learning and tool/system troubleshooting ability (aka fearlessness)
  - deep interest in one or more technical sectors and current technical tools/development languages
    - o for software types: ideally involving some code-reading, code-commenting, and even amateur programming
    - o self-study in a technical domain is mandatory
    - o in Silicon Valley most Tech Writers are hired for their subject matter knowledge, not what they can learn
  - Don't apply for roles that are outside your commute radius, involve technologies or audiences you don't love, and/or which won't let your career evolve

12. Getting pragmatic

Use the resources listed in #4 to find suitable openings, then

- use LinkedIn to find someone you know or to whom you can get introduced; join Andrew's network and ask him for the person's contact info
- apply for a unique (URL'd or job code-specific) opportunity through someone other than a third-party recruiter (like Andrew)
    - o using a third-party recruiter increases your cost to the company by 20%, sometimes even 40% (for W2 contracts)
- include a cover letter that includes a table listing each required and desired qualification in the left column and, in the right column, how you compare
- follow up by email within 10 days of your application if you've had no response
- don't take it personally if nothing happens; there's no bulletproof way to get noticed
- if you apply via a website or an external recruiter, keep track of when you applied and how in case you are approached about the same or similar opportunity again; repeat applications are a red flag to the company

13. Interviews

- The role of your resume is to secure an interview
- All companies begin the candidate-winnowing process either by requesting writing samples or a phone interview
    - the more comfortable and interested you sound on the phone, the more likely it will lead to an in-person one
    - phone time is limited, but if you have an important question (and the interviewer has time), ask it
    - Companies seek writing samples before an in-person interview
        - your samples need to be ready to send online
        - responding "I'll bring samples to the interview" doesn't work
    - Companies increasingly ask candidates to take a writing test
    - writing tests are typically not to evaluate your technical knowledge, code-reading prowess, etc but seek to assess your basic instruction-following, organization, and procedures writing skills; they can be fun!
- Companies usually set up a single in-person interview, with up to 7 or 8 interviewers from multiple departments
    - arrive rested, well-informed, and armed with lots of trenchant questions; good interviews are a dialog
    - Read **www.synergistech.com/interviewing.shtml** for detailed interviewing advice

14. Negotiating
- Negotiations won't start until all interviewers evaluate the top candidates
- Negotiations demonstrate sincere commitment from the company to have you join their team
    - o this is the time to get clear on what the company can offer you, whether you can succeed there, and so forth
    - o this is the last time you have substantial leverage; use it **wisely**
- If you fear negotiations, get an informed recruiter (like Andrew) on your side. I'm willing to help, even pro-bono, so call me!

15. Resigning from your current job

- Resign in writing
  - o tell your boss first, ask if s/he wants you to let others know
  - o remain non-judgmental and opaque about your reasons; everyone knows that voting with your feet is one of our last freedoms
  - o if asked for an exit interview, oblige but offer only constructive input, never criticism or ad-hominem attacks
  - o solicit LinkedIn recommendations from your key SMEs, managers, and peers immediately
  - o secure written permission to use major deliverables in your portfolio
- Don't badmouth anyone, ever