

# Big Job Market in Small Places

**By: Kevin Donlin**

You've seen the headlines—thousands of jobs vaporized at corporate behemoths Lehman Brothers and Merrill Lynch. Some of the world's biggest businesses face big problems in the coming months. That's why, if you're looking for work, you should take a long look at small businesses.

Small firms employ about 50% of all private-sector workers in America and, since the mid-1990s, have generated 60 to 80 percent of net new jobs each year, according to the U.S. Small Business Administration.

"I'm a big advocate of targeting small businesses in a job search because it's easier to get your foot in the door and make contact," advises Thad Greer, a recruiter and author of *The Executive Rules* ([www.ExecutiveManagementSearch.com](http://www.ExecutiveManagementSearch.com)).

Not only is it easier to reach executives at smaller companies, "they also make employment decisions faster and you have more flexibility when negotiating a compensation package," says Greer.

That's the good news.

The challenge? Many smaller firms don't advertise job openings online, so it can take some sleuthing to find the right employer for you. Yet, it can be done. Here are three ways.

## 1. Look Beyond the Want Ads

Whether you read your newspaper online or on paper, it's a valuable source of intelligence about which small firms may be hiring. First, look for growing companies. Any local firm in the news for an increase in sales or market share merits your attention.

Second, check the business section for companies signing new real estate leases, which are a sign of a need for increased capacity—and employees.

Finally, any company profiled in the Sunday business section or elsewhere is a potential employment lead. If they're doing enough good things to merit special coverage, they're likely growing and in need of staff.

## 2. Call the Chamber of Commerce

Members of your chamber of commerce often rank among the area's leading small firms, making them an excellent source of employment leads.

Call the chamber, tell them you're researching the top employers in your line of work, and ask for the name of the best person to take out for lunch—you might get the name of someone at the chamber, at a specific employer, or both.

Any meetings you go on are fact-finding missions only—ask for advice, not for a job. And ask this question of every decision maker you meet: What would you do if you were in my shoes? This forces people to think specifically—you'll get more actionable ideas from this one question than any other I know.

**Note:** Don't limit your options. Call every chamber in every city within 25 miles, or however far you're willing to commute.

### 3. Hit the Pavement

You can find dozens of potential employers simply by driving (or biking or busing) around near your home—especially if you're an urban dweller. According to the SBA web site, small firms make up more than 99% of inner city businesses and create 80% of jobs in those areas.

So, get out, look around, and write down the names and addresses of any companies that interest you. When you get home, research them on Google, narrow the list down to 10-25, and find contact information for executives you might work for.

You have several options at this point:

- \* Put out feelers to your network asking for contacts at your top 25 local firms. When you make a connection, arrange a phone call or meet for coffee and find out how you can fill their needs.
- \* Write an "approach letter" to employers, in which you say, in effect, "Here's what attracts me about your organization, and here are the skills and abilities I can contribute. Would you be open to discussing this?" Don't include a resume. Do call to follow up.
- \* Call decision makers by phone. Give your name and explain how you found them; demonstrate knowledge of their company; ask if they have a few minutes to speak; ask questions to uncover their needs; and ask for a meeting to discuss how you could help. If you don't get a meeting, ask for referrals.

Confused about what to do? Mail or call five companies you don't want to work for. Practice on them before contacting your top 25 employers.

Although economic problems may loom for large employers, small firms remain resilient. While the private sector as a whole lost 33,000 jobs in August 2008, small businesses (with fewer than 50 employees) added 20,000 jobs, according to the latest National Employment Report from ADP.

So be sure to think small in your job search. The results could be huge.

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