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## Everything You Need to Know About Hiring a Career Coach

– Meridith Levinson, CIO

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With unemployment at a 16-year high of 7.6 percent and job opportunities very scarce, what job seeker wouldn't want to hire a career coach—someone who can help him [quickly land a job in this bear market?](#)

Career coaches and the clients who use them say coaches can give job seekers a competitive edge in a number of ways: They can help job seekers develop unique [personal brands](#) that will differentiate them in a crowded market. They can help job seekers mine the "[hidden job market](#)" for unadvertised positions. They can also help job seekers articulate their strengths and passions in professional communications (e.g., résumés, cover letters, "elevator pitches" and mock job interviews) that will grab hiring managers' attention.

An advertisement for a SUSE Linux Enterprise deployment workshop. It features an illustration of a toolbox with an orange arrow pointing right. The text reads: 'Need the best Linux? Request your SUSE Linux Enterprise deployment workshop now &gt;'. At the bottom, the logos for 'Novell' and 'Microsoft' are displayed.

Because [recession-weary job seekers](#) are looking for all of the above assistance, career coaching services are experiencing a surge in demand, says Kim Batson, a certified career management and leadership coach who works with IT leaders.

"As soon as the economy started tanking last September, the [coaching] industry experienced a couple of weeks of quiet, but then the floodgates opened in November, December and January," says Batson. "Because a lot of people have either been laid off or they want to prepare themselves in case something happens, we are seeing an uptick [in demand]."

But hiring a career coach isn't right for everyone. For one thing, career coaching services tend to be pricey. They can range from \$125 to \$500 per hour or from \$375 to \$3,000 per package, according to Laura DeCarlo, president of Career Directors International. So if you're unemployed and money is tight, you have to carefully consider whether spending money on a coach is worthwhile.

What's more, the service is not a quick fix. "This is not a situation where the coach waves a magic wand and gives you magic insights and everything is all better," says [Curt Rosengren](#), a career coach in Seattle who specializes in matching people with professions. "If what you're really trying to do is buy a solution, the solution comes from the work you do."

Here are eight signs that may indicate you're ready to hire a career coach and three signs that indicate you're not. In addition, here are eight ways to find a coach who's right for you and five tips for making the most of your coaching sessions.

### 8 Signs You're Ready for a Career Coach

1. You're bored or frustrated with your job, but you don't know what else to do for work.
2. You're looking for a new job and sending out résumés, but your job search efforts are not bearing any fruit: You're not getting calls in response to your résumé; you're not being asked in for job interviews; you're not receiving offers.
3. You need [help crafting a résumé](#) or cover letters, and help presenting yourself in job interviews.
4. You're not moving up the career ladder, despite your hard work.
5. You need help differentiating yourself from other job seekers.
6. You need someone to [hold you accountable](#) for achieving your career goals.
7. You're willing to explore new ideas and to look inside yourself for answers.
8. You want to be successful, and you want to accelerate achieving your career goals.

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#### Open Minds Required

Alec Smith, 42, began looking for a career coach in December 2008 because he wants to become a CIO. He currently works as an IT consultant, implementing [ERP](#), [CRM](#), EDI and job-costing solutions mainly for the distribution industry. Smith says he recognizes that a career coach has expertise—specifically in résumé writing—that he lacks but needs to move into a CIO position.

Smith realizes that not everyone is as open-minded about hiring a career coach. When he told some colleagues that he had hired a coach, he says they couldn't understand why. "Write your résumé and move on," he says his colleagues told him.

It's not uncommon for IT professionals like Smith's coworkers to be skeptical of career coaching. Kim Batson, whose coaching practice and methodology is geared toward left-brained, analytical IT professionals, says many of them perceive career coaching as too "touchy feely."

Smith thinks his friends, who are also IT consultants, were dubious of his decision to use a career coach for [résumé writing](#) help because implementing big, complicated enterprise systems makes them feel they can do anything.

Rosengren, a career coach in Seattle, adds that hiring a career coach is hard for people who subscribe to the idea "that we're all supposed to have it figured out on our own."

"If you are closed-minded about hiring a career coach, you may not be ready to move on," says Smith. "You may not be motivated enough, or maybe you're gun-shy, or you don't feel confident enough."

Hiring a career coach, Smith says, shows a commitment to one's personal and professional development. "When someone hires a coach, they're investing in their careers 100 percent," he says. "They want to excel and [they realize] quite honestly, they can't do it by themselves."

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### 3 Signs You May Not Be Ready for a Career Coach

1. You think a career coach possesses all the answers and will find a job for you (as opposed to helping you find a job.)
2. You're not willing to do the work involved, which can include self-assessments, self-examination and networking.
3. You're a control-freak or have trouble opening up to others.

## How to Find a Career Coach Who's Right For You

1. Ask people in your network for referrals.
2. If you're seeking a coach with specific industry or functional expertise, look for ads or referrals on industry websites and magazines. Alec Smith, an IT consultant who wants to become a CIO, found a coach, [Phil Rosenberg](#), through his posts on CIO.com.
3. Check out websites for career coaching professional organizations, such as the [Professionals Association of Resume Writers and Career Coaches](#), [Career Directors International](#) or the [Career Coach Academy](#).
4. Read career coach's blogs, if they have them, to see if you connect with the coach's tone and the topics they write about, recommends Rosengren, the coach in Seattle.
5. Make sure whomever you choose understands the idiosyncrasies of today's world of work, says [Deb Dib](#), a certified executive career coach who specializes in personal branding and job search services.

"They should know the skills and accomplishments companies value these days. You need somebody who's completely current in how to find work right now," she says. "With so many people out of work, career coaches have to change their processes a bit so we can help people get up and running quickly, because they don't have time to waste."

6. Choose a coach whose certifications and credentials address the help you need and the goals you want to achieve, says Batson, the coach who works with CIOs. For example, if you want to create or sharpen a personal brand, find a coach who holds a personal branding credential.
7. Ask the coach for a consultation to get a sense of his or her style.
8. Ask the coach for references.

## 7 Questions to Ask a Coach, Before You Hire One

Career coaches advise potential clients to ask the following seven questions during a consultation, before you decide to hire a coach, to make sure the client and the coach are a good fit.

1. How long have you been coaching?  
You want to make sure you're working with someone who has experience.
2. Are you credentialed? What are your credentials?  
Credentials show a coach has kept up with his or her own professional development, says Batson.
3. What is your area of expertise?  
If you're looking specifically for help interviewing, for example, you want to find a coach who specializes in that area, say Batson and Dib.
4. What kinds of clients work best with you? Is there a level or type of personality that most of your clients share?
5. What is your approach to coaching? Does it appeal more to left-brained or right-brained people?  
Deb Dib says some coaches use very structured methodologies while others do not.
6. What is the time commitment?  
Job search, salary negotiation and interviewing services typically require about five sessions, says Career Directors International's DeCarlo.
7. What are your results? What results have your clients had? How long did it take them to achieve those results? What should I expect for results?
8. What kind of return can I expect on my investment in your services?  
This question will help job seekers evaluate whether they can afford *not* to work with the coach, says

Batson. She says job seekers should ask coaches this question if the ROI is not evident from the coach's pitch.

## How to Make the Most of Your Coaching Sessions

### 1. Get over your concerns about what other people might think.

Philip Bryant, 35, a programmer who began working with a career coach last fall through his MBA program at [Rice University](#), notes that there can be a stigma associated with the people who hire career coaches--that they're somehow deficient. The awareness of that stigma can hold back professionals who might be interested in hiring a coach, says Bryant.

"The biggest thing is clearing your mind and quashing any sort of fear or hesitation or concern about what this coach is going to think of you, or about what other people are going to think about you for going to a coach," he says. "Get rid of all that junk because it's not helpful."

### 2. Don't overestimate what a career coach can do for you.

If you approach a coach expecting that the coach will connect you with a VP job in four easy steps, you may be disappointed. Career coaches are quick to point out that they can't perform miracles.

Some coaches will be able to do more than others depending on their specialization, flexibility in working with clients and their coaching methodology. That's why Batson says it's important for job seekers to ask coaches about their client results and the ROI the job seeker can expect from the coach's services.

### 3. Do your homework.

A career coach will almost always give a client something to do or think about for the next session. For example, the coach could ask you to take a personality test, to reflect on your best and worst work experiences, or to network in your spare time. It's in your best interest to put time into this work, say career coaches and their clients.

Alec Smith, an IT consultant who hired a coach to help him move into a CIO role, says he spent between 20 and 40 hours working on a self-assessment that his coach asked him to do, and that the exercise was worth every minute because it was so eye-opening for him. (He says his coach told him it would take about four hours.)

"If you expect this person to work magic with minimal involvement on your part, you're wasting your time and that person's time," says Smith. You're also wasting your money.

Bryant, the MBA student, echoes Smith's comments: "You're wasting valuable coaching time if you and your coach discuss a strategy for you to network with someone over coffee, and by your next coaching session you haven't done it. That's not useful. Your coach isn't going to beat you up, but he will hold you accountable."

If you don't follow through on what you discussed that you'd do with your coach, Bryant adds that you'll end up spending time talking about why something like networking, that seemed so important in the last session, suddenly seems unimportant, when you could better use that time discussing strategies you're comfortable with.

### 4. Be honest.

For coaching to be effective, clients have to be honest with themselves and with their coaches. "You're not going to get where you want to go as quickly as you want unless you're honest and clear-minded with your coach," says Bryant.

Both coach and client also have to be open to feedback and constructive criticism.

Deb Dib, the executive coach who specializes in personal branding, says good coaches will not shy from asking their clients direct, probing questions, and clients need to be prepared to answer them. By the same token, Dib recommends that clients tell their coaches not just about their personal and professional preferences but also about what is and isn't working in the coaching process.

"If you're not comfortable with a recommendation your coach is making, tell your coach," says Dib.

#### 5. Eliminate distractions.

Coach Batson says that 90 percent of all career coaching is done over the telephone. To focus on her clients while she's on the phone with them, she clears her desk, shuts down her e-mail and turns off her [BlackBerry](#). She recommends that her clients do the same.

"To maximize the effectiveness of coaching over the phone you need to get rid of distractions," she says. "You don't want to be in a busy office or at home with children or dogs running around. You want to be some place quiet."

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