Landing a job in a tough economy

By Sharon Brewer, RN, BSN, MSN

If nursing jobs are currently in short supply in your area, use these tips to maximize your chances of securing employment.

NURSING IS ONE of the country’s fastest growing professions, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.1 Even so, because of a tough economy, many nurses seeking employment are facing stiff competition for jobs in some parts of the country. The economic recession is causing some nurses to leave retirement and return to work. Experienced nurses are postponing retirement, part-time nurses are moving into full-time positions, and many others are requesting additional hours to provide added income for families hit hard by layoffs. Additionally, hospital patient days are down as patients delay elective procedures or choose not to seek care at all except in an emergency.2

Now more than ever, given the abundance of applicants for nursing vacancies, employers will be choosing the most qualified and impressive candidates who meet their needs. While this may make it harder for you to land your dream job, you can still find a nursing position despite the economic downturn, especially if you’re experienced and are willing to work nights or weekends.

Start your search engines

To begin, use all venues available that may help you learn about open positions. Make new contacts at nursing conferences and professional meetings, perform Internet job searches, contact key people you know, apply online and in person, visit traditional and virtual job fairs, and tap your nursing and alumni organizations.

Many excellent free online resources, such as http://www.nursingcenter.com/CareerCenter/articles.asp, can help you with everything from writing your resume to doing an online job search. In this issue of Lippincott’s Nursing Career Directory, you’ll find an article about preparing for a behavioral interview (see page 8). If you haven’t yet entered the age of the personal computer, you can visit your local library for help and free computer time. Explore these websites for more information and help: http://www.nursingcenter.com http://www.healthjobsplus.com http://www.discovernursing.com http://www.monster.com http://www.nurse.com http://www.nursepath.com http://www.nursingworld.org.

The search for the perfect match may take longer in today’s economy, but your efforts can pay off if you’re motivated, professional, and prepared. Beware of your search too narrow. Expand your options and be open to new opportunities. (See Broaden your horizons.)

Consider an area of nursing that may be new to you, such as a public health agency, an outpatient clinic or office, long-term care, industrial health, or education. You may find another nursing specialty to love if you’re willing to try something different.

Best face forward

After determining where to apply, you’ll want to prepare a well-written resume to submit along with your application. The goal of the resume is to describe your qualifications and highlight the contributions you’d bring to the organization. A quality resume will give you an edge over other applicants.

Many human resource directors and recruiters spend less than 2 minutes to review a resume, and some spend less than 30 seconds.3 You have a very short time to make an impression, so consider these tips:

• Your resume represents you, so paint a clear picture of who you are.
• Use a cover letter, even when submitting your resume online. Don’t use fancy fonts or formatting that may not be available on other computers.
• Be relevant. Describe your education and work experience, but focus on your qualifications that are targeted to the position you’re pursuing. Don’t exaggerate your experience or education.

Broaden your horizons

During the economic downturn, you may need to consider a broader range of opportunities. Particularly if you’re a new graduate without experience, you may need to consider relocating, at least until you’ve gained some experience. If major metropolitan areas don’t have many nursing openings, try your luck in smaller towns or rural areas. Or you may need to go into a less popular specialty or shift or a non-hospital setting, such as long-term care, rehabilitation, community health, or a dialysis clinic. Consider joining the armed forces: the Army, Navy, and Air Force offer nurses attractive benefits, travel opportunities, and advancement possibilities. You could also choose to serve military veterans as a nurse for the Veterans Health Administration or to work for the U.S. Public Health Service, Indian Health Service, or American Red Cross.

Or you might work temporarily in a non-nursing job in your “dream” hospital, just to get your foot in the door. Consider doing some volunteer nursing work to enlarge your circle of contacts and to beef up your resume. Find out if you can participate in job shadowing, where you can really show your interest and knowledge.

If you’re a new nurse, when you search for jobs online, use terms such as “new graduate nurse” or “no experience necessary.” Consider part-time or temporary jobs. Be sure to contact your nursing school’s placement office for advice about job openings and help with crafting your resume.
• Use keywords that may trigger an applicant tracking system. Some examples of keywords include certified, experienced, leader, critical thinking, and preceptor. List any of your specialized skills.
• Make sure your resume is free of grammatical and spelling errors.
• Be prepared to follow up with a letter or phone call.

Making a good impression in person
Let’s say your resume has made a positive impression and you’ve been invited to interview. The key to getting a job offer is to meet your potential employer face to face so you have the opportunity to sell yourself in person. Consider these important elements when preparing for a successful interview:
• Exhibit professionalism before, during, and after the interview. Be on time for the appointment. Don’t use slang. Never discuss salary until you’ve been offered the job.
• Dress appropriately. First impressions are powerful. Your appearance doesn’t guarantee a successful outcome, but it can guarantee failure.
• Show enthusiasm but don’t be overconfident. Greet the interviewer with a handshake and make eye contact.
• Don’t be vague. Give specific answers to the questions you’re asked. Use examples from your own experience.
• Be knowledgeable. Know enough about the company to make an impression, and be prepared to ask intelligent questions.
• Know the company’s culture or ask about it at the interview, if necessary, considering how you can be a good fit. Let them know how you can contribute to the success of their organization.
• Turn off your cell phone.
• Be sure to follow up after your interview with a polite thank-you note or e-mail.

Bright future
As the recession ends, conditions affecting the shortage will return in full force. Retirements will resume, and the baby boomer generation is expected to leave the profession in staggering numbers. This will open up multiple opportunities—including the opportunity to be promoted into management positions.

Whether you’re a new graduate looking for your first job or an experienced nurse who wants a change, be professional, prepared, and persistent to increase your chances of finding a position in nursing.

REFERENCES

RESOURCES

Sharon Brewer is a clinical staff development specialist in the department of educational resources at Northwest Texas Healthcare System in Amarillo, Tex.