

Reading the News Like a Want Ad- A Possible Way to Create Paying Work When ‘No One is Hiring’

By Prof. Seth Freeman

I have a hunch that may help you discover hidden opportunities for excellent paying work. While I haven’t proven it yet, I’ve successfully used it myself, and there are other good reasons to think it can reveal hope when most see scarcity. Call it a promising possibility. I call it, ‘Reading the News Like a Want Ad.’

Here’s the idea. As you read a newspaper, magazine, or blog, keep this question in mind: ‘How could I use this news to help an organization I want to serve?’ Or to put it another way, ‘whose problem is this article reporting, and how can I solve it?’ Or, ‘what hidden opportunity lies behind this problem?’

A Simple Example- Empty Container Ships

For example: imagine you’ve been having trouble finding a job in an import/export firm. ‘No one is hiring,’ they tell you. You’ve sent out 200 resumes and gotten no nibbles. One day, as you read the business news, you see this headline: “Shippers Struggle to Fill Containers Returning to China: Empty Ships Face Losses as U.S. Exports Fade.” That gives you an idea. You brainstorm, do some research, test your idea with a friendly expert or two, and refine it. Then, using contacts and connections, you wrangle a ten-minute conversation with an executive at a smaller import/export firm. You say: “Did you know that container shippers are struggling to find goods to ship from the US to China? Did you know that 90% of all consumer products come in cardboard boxes? Did you know the Chinese are desperate for cardboard, since they have few forests? Did you know that I have a background in logistics and Asian business? I’ve developed and researched a proposal that can turn these facts into a large new market for a firm like yours. Would you be interested in talking about it?”

Your interviewer would have been wise to have said yes: a woman named Zhang Yin, who discovered these facts a few years ago, became the richest woman in China importing cardboard from the US.

Am I suggesting that you start a business? No. I’m suggesting a way to find paying work. The idea is to bring a promising, well-considered solution to the attention of a place you’d like to work for, and use it as a way to open a conversation about how you can help them immediately.

The Many Reasons It Can Help

How can reading the news like a want ad help you find paying work? Let me count the ways.

First, it lets you demonstrate qualities employers prize: initiative, creativity, and a laser-like focus on their needs. Second, it lets you show them that hiring you can pay for itself, because you come with a valuable idea. Third, it lets you powerfully showcase your skills, passion, and expertise. Fourth, it lets you lower their risk of hiring you; you’re showing them

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up front what you can do for them.

Fifth, it lets you reduce the competition from dozens to none. Since neither the firm nor other job-seekers have spotted your solution, the firm hasn't advertised for someone to carry it out. A related point: it lets you distinguish yourself from the pack because you bring a novel, valuable idea. Sixth, it can do what a resumé is supposed to do, but often fails to: arouse interest.

Seventh, it lets you create and profit from a valuable opportunity without being an 'entrepreneur'. Don't have any money to invest? Don't know how to set up an organization? No problem- the firm you're contacting already has money and organization. They need your help solving serious problems- or seizing opportunities- soon. Eighth, you can apply the strategy to almost any field or institution you're interested in. Ninth, if it doesn't work with one firm, you can take their criticisms, revise the idea, and offer it to another. Tenth, it can work in a formal interview- you can mention your idea there to showcase your special strengths.

Still More Reasons It Can Help

Eleventh, you can use the approach in addition to other, more traditional search strategies. It can enhance them, because it gets you thinking about the industry's needs and learning new ways to serve them. Even if you don't pitch an idea, the regular exercise of reading the news like a want ad can sharpen your thinking, and your readiness for a traditional interview.

Twelfth, and perhaps most importantly, it can work even if they don't want to hire you for a full-time job immediately. That's because you don't want a job- you want paying work. So, you can suggest any of several initial relationships- a paid consultancy, a part-time job, or a 90-day tryout, to name just a few possibilities.

Idea Theft? Good

But won't they steal your idea? Yes, hopefully. You want them to say, 'this idea is so good that we'll try it.' True, they may shunt you aside. More likely they'll associate you with things they badly need- the ability to solve problems and find valuable ideas. If you're helping them save money, make money, or overcome challenges, they'd be fools to let you slip away. That said, you may need to include some self-protections: "Here's the gist of the idea- enough to show it can work, but not enough to fully realize it. Work with me and I'll give you more details...."

What to Give to Whom

How detailed should your proposal be? Strike a middle path: don't bring half-baked, obvious, ill-considered ideas, and don't bring a highly complex business plan that assumes a great deal about the firm. Bring a well-considered but still-malleable idea with solid evidence to show its promise, and specific reasons why it can serve the firm's needs well soon. Then invite a conversation to explore the idea...and your abilities.

[Omit if space requires:] Must you propose a major new business plan? No. A simple, non-obvious improvement you can help implement may be enough (e.g. a way to cut printing costs, speed bill collections, or increase client response rates) if it addresses a strong need.

Who should you target, and what kind of news should you focus on? Your best prospects may not be big, inflexible firms and grim economy-wide news. Instead, focus more on smaller organizations and field-specific news- news that's more likely to inspire your creative insights. But look farther afield too- news in one industry (e.g., shepherding) may suggest good opportunities in yours (e.g., knitwear).

How should you contact them? Here's one way: through networking and referrals, call a contact and say something like this, "Hello Ms. Johnson, I'm calling at the suggestion of our mutual friend Gordon Wu. At your convenience for ten minutes or so I'd like to talk with you about a way I might be able to help the firm create a considerable new export market using an idea I've developed that Gordon thinks has real merit...." This approach builds on the tried and true power of networking. Email may work too.

Borrowing Another's Idea

What if you can't think of a good idea yourself? Use someone else's. Read the news with this question in mind: "what valuable new solution has someone developed at one firm that I could help another firm use?"

For example, imagine you read that one obscure import/export firm has recently opened a new market shipping cardboard to China- a first for the industry. With research and networking, you go to a competitor and pitch the same idea, showing how you can help them do the same thing. While you're not showing them you can create a new opportunity, you may be giving them something even better- a demonstrably hot prospect. True, your contact may well know about the prospect, but maybe they don't. Regardless, you may be able to use the news as an opening. The more you learn about the first firm's success- who did it, how, and what new hires the idea required- the more strongly you can make the case.

Reasons for Optimism

Why do I have a hunch that reading the news like a want ad can work? First, because I've used a similar method to create my career. Repeatedly I've gone to employers- graduate schools in my case- and said, 'did you know the X subject is hot? That peer schools are getting excellent enrollments with it? That you don't offer it? That I can teach it?' More importantly, decades of teaching negotiation around the world have shown me how well students can do when they focus on interests and find creative ways to satisfy them. Reading the news like a want ad is a way to discover hidden interests employers have and then develop creative ways to meet them.

The World's Ever Growing Need for Help Solving Problems

Since my suggestion is an unproven hunch, I offer it as an experiment worth trying, especially if you feel discouraged with traditional search methods. I invite your constructive feedback. I suggest it tentatively, but with good reason for hope. As old industries fade, economies sputter, and the world struggles to prosper again, it's critical to look for opportunity beyond well-trod paths. Every organization is struggling with news-driven problems. Reading the news like a want ad can reveal hidden answers, letting you serve someone well- and profitably- from the very first hour.

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