

Job Tips For GEEKS

The Job Search



by Dave Fecak

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About the author



Dave Fecak started the [Job Tips For Geeks](#) website and blog in early 2012 in order to share his knowledge with a wider audience of technology and software development professionals. He has 15 years of technical recruiting experience, primarily working with early growth companies and startups in and around Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Dave founded the [Philadelphia Area Java Users' Group](#) in 2000, and has served as the JUG President (JUGmaster) since the group's inception. The Philly JUG was twice named as a Top 50 and Top 25 JUG worldwide by Sun Microsystems.

Over the course of his career, Dave has represented thousands of technologists and placed hundreds into new positions. He has encountered almost every imaginable scenario in the industry and has provided career guidance and advice to countless industry professionals. He currently manages his own company, [Fecak Inc.](#), where he recruits technology professionals and consults to small companies on how to attract and hire talent.

Dave is a regular contributor to technology websites [DZone](#) and [Java Code Geeks](#), and his writing has been republished and/or cited by Lifehacker, Fast Company, the American Management Association, CBS Moneywatch, and many others.

Dave graduated from the University of Delaware with a degree in Economics.

Foreword

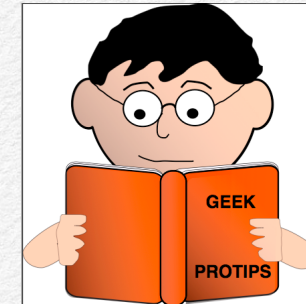
I'm a recruiter. If I do my job properly, someone gets a new (and presumably better) job, a company gains a new employee, and I get both personal satisfaction and a financial reward. It's a win-win-win. As the rewards can be substantial, many in my industry are willing to cut corners and breach ethics. In many cases the recruiting industry has earned their poor reputation. I have always tried to provide an honest service to my candidates and clients.

Software engineers and technology professionals tend to be smart people. Assuming you are one of the smart ones, this book probably contains some tips that you may already know. Hopefully you will learn a few new tricks as well. Certain passages in the book are updated versions of past blog posts that were relevant to that topic, while other concepts discussed are things I had never thought about until I started typing out this book.

Whether you agree or disagree with specific ideas or the effectiveness of a technique is up to you, but all of the material here is tested during my years of recruiting.

I chose to share many inside tips on recruiters because we tend to be a major influence in the technical hiring world, and some tactics needed to be exposed. Having some understanding of a recruiter's behavior should be helpful for almost anyone in the industry, as you will probably deal with a recruiter one day.

I hope recruiters more become transparent with their candidates and clients, as it will be helpful to everyone in the industry.



When you see the *Geek Protips* icon above throughout the book, a touch will open a text bubble with a few sentences of expanded content and usually some insight regarding recruiters.

Keep an eye on the Job Tips For Geeks blog for future book news, as I am planning some other titles.

I will be making exclusive downloads available on the Job Tips For Geeks site. Visit the [Job Tips For Geeks download page](#) and use password 'JTFG' for more details.

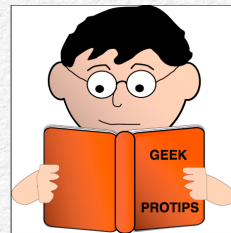
Thanks for reading, and enjoy.

Housecleaning

During a job search with technology companies, you are undoubtedly going to have strangers (hiring managers, HR, recruiters) doing some investigation of you and checking out your web presence. Since you will be having uninvited guests rummaging through your online footprint, it's a good time to clean up.

Here is a checklist of sites you may want to consider editing before starting your search:

- **LinkedIn profile** – Update your profile to be sure all information is current and accurate to match your résumé as closely as possible. Do your listed responsibilities match what you would include on a résumé? Are you a member of any technical user groups that you want to include? Is your photo or avatar appropriate? Make sure that your employment dates are consistent with your résumé as well.



GEEK PROTIP: *Some technologists that are hoping to hear from recruiters via LinkedIn wonder why they haven't yet. If you are not getting any re-*

cruiter contacts through LinkedIn, it is likely you have few connections or do not include technical buzzwords (languages, tools) that recruiters will include in a search. Adding your email address will also help recruiters reach you that only have a free LinkedIn account.

- **Facebook, Google+, MySpace** – Check privacy settings to be sure that anything you may want hidden is protected from public view.
- **Twitter** – Review at least your recent tweets to be sure that you may not give the wrong impression, or change your privacy settings if you feel your tweets should not be read. It is doubtful that all of your tweets will be viewed, but it is reasonable to believe that a quick look is possible.
- **GitHub, Bitbucket, SourceForge, Stack Overflow and other code related sites** – Are your code samples ready for examination? Are any comments clean? Public repos are a great way to differentiate yourself from other candidates, so be sure your code will make a positive impression if a potential employer were to browse.
- **Blogs** – Review any technical content for accuracy and be mindful of entries that may refer to your personal life. Fixing any broken links and making slight improvements to the UI are probably worth the time, particularly if you are going to list your blog's URL on a résumé or in other online profiles.

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- **Websites** – Do you have any old sites that look dated or have broken pages? Maybe even an old page with the infamous <blink> tag? As a technologist, you will be at least slightly judged on any sites you have built, even if web development is not your specialty. Do your best to erase or hide anything embarrassing.

There are obviously certain hot-button items that have the potential to scare off an employer. Give careful consideration to any topics that are divisive, and be warned that anything in your online footprint could make a difference in how you are received by companies and hiring managers.

Now is also a good time to be sure that you have a private email address that is professional for use on résumés, job applications, etc. If you have to ask someone whether or not your email address is appropriate, *it isn't*. Set up a new throwaway address if necessary.

Geeks Gone Bad: Housecleaning

Fifteen years ago, this concept of housecleaning didn't exist. Today it is the norm and must be a priority for geeks at all career levels.

I have seen candidates with stellar résumés and credentials that were passed over for interviews based on an off-color tweet or Facebook post. There are many developers that linked their GitHub accounts on a résumé, which would have been great if their code wasn't a complete mess. I remember a candidate that was rejected because he omitted an unfortunate six month job stint on his résumé but included it on his LinkedIn profile. I can think of a handful of web developer and designer applicants that were never interviewed because their personal websites were broken or terribly outdated.

Employers are going to look, and chances are recruiters will as well. Clean this stuff up before anyone in a hiring position gets a chance to see it.

The Benefits Of Agency Recruiters

Much of this section has been devoted to protecting yourself from any harm that an agency recruiter could bring. Once candidates understand the potential hazards of working with unethical recruiters and how to minimize risk, the enormous benefits of using recruiters become evident. Recruiters provide a free service to you, are compensated only when you are satisfied with a job offer, and the recruiter's financial incentive is (usually) to maximize your earnings. *What could be better than that?*

Some of the positive aspects of using recruiters were mentioned briefly in the [chart at the end of Chapter 1](#), but the value of these individual benefits warrants further review.

- **Multiple vacancies and access to unpublicized jobs** - A recruiter with a strong client roster could be one-stop shopping for your next position. You may not want to limit yourself to only using one agency, but the amount of activity that just a couple recruiters could provide may be more than enough for most job seekers. Recruiters often have job listings that you will not find on any job boards, and many hiring companies now require all contractors to come through agencies (often for payroll purposes). The recruiter has a more direct line to the hiring managers as well. Recruiters, when used properly, can save you a great deal of time.

- **Guidance and expertise during the search process** - You may search for a job every three or four years. *Do you consider yourself an expert in things you only do once every few years?* Junior recruiters may be a waste of your time, but an experienced recruiter manages multiple job searches every day and hundreds per year. The recruiter is a wealth of free information on résumés, the local demand for your skills, compensation data, and market rates. Knowing whether or not you are overpaid or underpaid is vital during a job search, and the data you will find on websites is often inaccurate based on the sources. Hardly any scenario that comes up (no matter how rare) will be new to a veteran recruiter.
- **Inside information on interviewers and interview format** - How many times have you been blindsided by a question or a request that you never anticipated during an interview? Have you ever walked into an interview embarrassingly overdressed or underdressed? Were you ever surprised when a former co-worker or manager was one of your interviewers? Although ethical recruiters will not tell their candidates every detail of an interview, most will prepare you throughout the process to minimize the chances of being caught off guard.
- **Buffer for salary negotiations** - After investing many hours through the entire job search and interview process, it is painful to lose out on your dream job because the offer didn't match up to your expectations. Recruiters help to set the ex-

pectations of both the candidate and the hiring entity early on, and then act as an intermediary when the details of a compensation plan are being considered. It may be awkward for candidates to negotiate with a potential new manager who would be sitting adjacent to you for 50 hours a week in the near future. Having an additional layer between the two parties is often the difference between a successful negotiation and failure to come to terms.

An ethical, professional, and knowledgeable recruiter can be a great asset throughout your career, and someone you may rely on for highly specialized information and advice. There is quite a bit of material written about the dark side of tech recruiting, but don't let the reputation of many in the industry cloud your judgment of the entire profession.

questions, but surely no candidate is rejected for not asking the *What's in it for me?* questions. Why not use your interview time to maximize your chances of receiving an offer, and save those *me* questions for after they decide they want to hire you?

Most quality employers will at least present some information on work environment, benefits, perks, and compensation during the process that may make asking the *me* questions completely unnecessary. Candidates do not need to rely on the defined interview process as their only opportunity to gather all the necessary information that will be required to make an informed career decision. Once an offer is made, request one final conversation where you can ask some of the questions that are better saved for when the employer's interest is fully established and communicated.

Protip: How to Partially Control an Interview

Generally speaking, when you walk into an interview you are at the mercy of the interviewers. Although you may be given some general information regarding the interview format and probably have an idea about the questions or exercises you may encounter, there are endless possibilities on the topics you may be asked about over a two or three hour session.

As was stated before, any item on your résumé is fair game, so one way to potentially avoid queries on unfamiliar topics is to keep those words off your résumé. Regardless of what is or isn't on your résumé, it is quite likely that you will be asked questions pertaining to subjects that are not within your areas of expertise. Trying to fully eliminate the exposure of certain vulnerabilities is an exercise in futility, but there is one rather effective method to at least attempt to mitigate the risks.

There is an increasing trend in the technical hiring world for employer's to request firm evidence of a candidate's abilities that go beyond what a traditional résumé includes. For programmers, this typically can be achieved through a code sample. Front-end designers and developers may be expected to show off some UI or website that they built, and architects may be asked to share documents. Mobile developers may hear this

more than any other group, and are routinely asked “*Do you have any apps available?*” as part of the vetting process.

One way to partially control the content and direction of your interview is to provide interviewers a work sample that will presumably become a point of discussion. This will turn what could be a technical interrogation into a version of show and tell. Even if the exchange about your sample only takes fifteen minutes, that is fifteen minutes of the interview where you hopefully will shine, and it is fifteen minutes less time for the interviewers to delve into other topics that are probably less familiar.

To employ this tactic, be sure to make it known at some point early in the process that you have samples of your work for review by request. A GitHub link at the top of your résumé, a URL to download your mobile app, or a link to sites that you developed are much more graceful than large file attachments. You can choose to extend an invitation to view these projects as early as your résumé submission, and when scheduling the interview you can express your willingness to discuss the projects in more detail and offer to bring a laptop with samples.

Independently volunteering to show representations of what you have produced will give an employer the impression that you are both willing and able to demonstrate the quality of your work. That act makes the applicant appear more open and trustworthy than someone who hesitates when asked for some samples. Recruiters and hiring managers alike will welcome

résumé submissions that are accompanied by additional supporting evidence of a candidate’s abilities.

When you enter the interview, you can mention that you brought samples to show if the team is interested in seeing your work. This will typically be received quite positively and could lead to a deep dive into familiar territory.

Acceptance and Resignation

Once you have decided to accept an offer, there are a few final steps to take to ensure that the transition is smooth and that the deal does not fall prey to any last minute snags. Many employers today are going to do additional vetting of new hires even after the offer is made, so you need to be absolutely certain that you will clear all hurdles. To reiterate from earlier, at will employment law generally means that verbal or written offers are not a guarantee of a job, but it is still best to delay resignation if you have any fears about your employability.

The most common items that may be included in post-interview vetting are:

1. **Reference checks and/or employment verification** - Your offer may be contingent upon your reference checks coming back positive and an employment verification with one or more past employers. Candidates do have a tendency to provide references that they are relatively sure will paint a pretty picture, so that is rarely an issue. Employment verification is

typically to see if your résumé and claimed work history on any applications is verifiable. The résumé and application must reflect accurate dates or you run the risk of the offer being rescinded.

2. **Background check, credit check, and drug screening** - Many companies today are running basic criminal background and credit checks on candidates, particularly firms that handle financial data. Drug tests are more likely to be a policy at the large companies. If you have doubts about these, wait to resign.
3. **Education verification** - If you listed a degree on your résumé or application, the company may contact the school to verify that a degree was conferred.
4. **Citizenship or authorization status** - Any limitations to hiring you based on citizenship or work authorization have hopefully been clarified to an employer well before this point, but be sure that you can show proof of your ability to work.

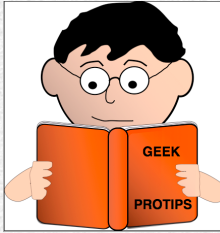
Although you may need to accept a verbal offer in order to receive a formal letter, you will want to have the official letter in hand before resigning your current position. The letter should be on company letterhead and is usually signed by an authorized employee. The formal letter may not include every single

detail of the compensation package, but should always include your salary and start date at the very least.

Technology professionals are often subject to signing a non-disclosure agreement (NDA), proprietary information agreement (PIA), or proprietary information and inventions agreement (PIIA) before they can begin employment. The terms outlined in these documents will vary significantly, based partially on the line of business, the company's fear level, and the potential value of the firm's intellectual property. If you develop products on your own or feel there is some possibility that you may do work outside of your day job, be sure to request these agreements before signing an offer letter and accepting employment. If you feel the company's terms are unreasonable, it is best to find out before you resign your current position. Companies may make exceptions to these policies under special circumstances, so do not hesitate to ask for clarification.

When accepting an offer you will want to sign their letter and send it back to them, even if the letter does not indicate a need for signature. Once returned, you should also confirm that the company received your acceptance. This is just a precaution, but at this point it would be costly for the employer to think you never responded to their offer because your acceptance is stuck in a spam folder or on an old fax machine. Lastly, you should verify your start date and time with any instructions for arrival.

One way to make a good first impression on an employer is to contact your new manager and ask about any technologies or tools that you might want to brush up on before your first day of work. Many managers will request a lunch meeting or coffee to discuss these topics. Any time investment that you are able and willing to make before your start date will be taken as a display of enthusiasm for your new employer.



GEEK PROTIP: *Well-trained recruiters (both agency or internal company recruiters) will encourage the post-acceptance meet and greet with the new hiring manager prior to a start date. In addition to it being a good way to make a new hire productive in the first days of work, it is also a tactic to start transitioning the new hire's loyalty from their current employer to the new employer. It is a preemptive measure to try and prevent counteroffer acceptance, should a counteroffer be presented.*

Counteroffers

We used the term *counteroffer* earlier to describe the scenario when a job offer is made to a candidate and the candidate responds with a proposal for a more attractive offer. Now we will use the term differently.

The term counteroffer is also used to indicate when a company attempts to retain a resigning employee by improving some aspect of that individual's employment situation. In most cases the counteroffer is merely an increase in salary, although other methods may include promotion, increased equity, decreased office hours, or some promise of a future act or event. In a tight market for talent, the counteroffer is a tool of last resort that many companies will utilize to try and compete, and it is a controversial tactic.

Most technology professionals who have been in the industry for a few years have probably had an experience with counteroffers, whether personally or anecdotally through a friend or co-worker's situation. If you have witnessed multiple counteroffer

scenarios, chances are you have seen quite mixed results. As a recruiter, I have been privy to many counteroffers that have led to a wide range of outcomes, with both short-term and long-term impacts.

Counteroffers not only effect the recipient, but can also have some influence on the behavior of other employees. Firms that develop a reputation for countering may have their hands forced more often once that trend becomes known, which can lead to secrecy and trust issues in an organization. Are employees in these shops more likely to take interviews with competitors for the sole purpose of receiving an offer to use as bait for a counter?

Companies that have a stated policy against providing counteroffers will not have to deal with the drama that is typically created, but they might struggle with their decision if and when top performers start heading for the door. Making exceptions in extraordinary situations may seem like a good idea, but could also backfire.

The Recruiter's Script

Counteroffers are without any doubt the bane of a recruiter's existence, and experienced recruiters will often begin the campaign to prevent a possible acceptance of a counteroffer on the first phone call with a candidate. Agency recruiter fees for a single hire in the tech industry might be as low as \$5,000 or above \$50,000 depending on the level of hire, so it is understandable what incentives there are for a recruiter to go to great lengths to prevent a candidate from changing his or her mind last minute.

As a recruiter, I have been trained in measures and techniques to prevent a counteroffer from ever being presented. If unsuccessful, I have also been trained in ways to discourage a counteroffer from being accepted. Whether recruiters choose to use these methods is up to the individual. Some recruiters will use tactics in counteroffer situations that are questionable and at least borderline unethical. My opinion is that many of the lines present a credibility issue for the recruiter, and losing a fee is a better alternative than losing your standing in the industry.

It is important for candidates to understand what they will be told, and to conduct their own due diligence to make the decision to accept or decline the counteroffer.

Early in the process, a recruiter will probably ask you why you are seeking new employment. Even if you are only a passive job seeker intrigued by a unique opportunity, you will probably share at least one gripe about your current position if asked why you change jobs. If your reasons for leaving are things that the employer can quickly change, such as salary or even work hours, the recruiter may tell you simply *"go get your counteroffer now"*. That line will usually confuse candidates.

What the recruiter means by this is that your situation is one that can easily be remedied, and there is a chance that the employer and manager are not even fully aware that you have an issue. A recruiter may ask if you have discussed this situation with your manager. Regardless of your answer, this is setting the recruiter up for down the road.

If you have had a conversation with your manager about some element of your job that makes you unhappy, the recruiter will bring this back up when a counteroffer is presented to you, as the counter will likely remedy your issue. A recruiter may say, *"You already discussed this issue with them and they didn't change anything, but only now that you hold a gun to the company's head are they willing to negotiate? If the company really cared about you, they would have made this change when you asked originally."*

If you have not talked with your manager, the recruiter will advise you to do so now. The reasoning is that if you ask now

and don't get what you want, the recruiter will be able to use the line above when the counteroffer is made.

Some recruiters will simply ask you directly about your personal thoughts on counteroffers or whether you have accepted or rejected one in the past. Most candidates say they would never take one, but find it very difficult to refuse the counter once it's made. The decision to leave a job can be purely rational, while attempts at retaining you will probably combine both rational and emotional elements.

Many recruiters will cite statistics and figures at the offer stage regarding candidates who accept counteroffers. Most of these numbers state that a high percentage of employees who accept a counteroffer will no longer be working for the company within a specific time frame. The recruiter may add that your eventual exit may also not be by choice, and that many people who accept counteroffers are terminated.

The ranges cited are typically between 75% and 90% of candidates leaving within six to twelve months of accepting the counteroffer. Independent research will reveal disparities in the data, but it is probably impossible to get an accurate statistic based solely on the fact that many counteroffers are offered and accepted in secret. Companies tend not to advertise their willingness or success in giving counteroffers, as you might expect.

Regardless of the accuracy of the actual data, one could surmise that a recruiter's description of a company's attitude towards those that accept a counteroffer could contain some truth. Remember that once a counteroffer is made, the recruiter goes into full survival mode and has thousands of reasons to convince you that acceptance is a mistake. The recruiter's manager (or a more experienced recruiter in the agency) may even get involved to try and dissuade you from taking the counter. Expect to hear terms that are emotionally charged, such as career suicide. The stakes for the agency recruiter are incredibly high.

Recruiters may tell you some or all of the following about employees that accept counteroffers:

- **The employee is viewed as disloyal, in that they were seeking new jobs** - Recruiters will lead you to believe that you will no longer be considered a team player. This seems a bit harsh, and in today's tech industry it is accepted that any job is likely not your last. Realistic managers will understand that your primary loyalty should be to your own career.
- **The counteroffer is simply a ransom payment to temporarily retain the employee until a replacement can be found** - Managers that are under intense amounts of pressure to meet a deadline know that the cost of losing an experienced employee can be significant, and the cost of getting a less experienced hire to a certain level of productivity is high.

A counteroffer may be a cheaper alternative to keep projects on schedule in the short term. Companies may make a counteroffer to also prevent a domino effect if they feel other employees may follow an employee of influence.

- **The employee will never be promoted** - Recruiters will tell you that your future with the company will not see any upward mobility, and raises or promotions will be given to others. That is, of course, if you aren't fired first.
- **The employee's co-workers and manager will be resentful** - The recruiter warns that you will be a pariah, alienated both professionally and socially by your peers.

As you can probably see, these tactics are primarily preying on various fears. The thought of being unemployed and/or wildly unpopular in the workplace is probably quite unappealing to anyone, and will lead to counteroffers being rejected if the recruiter is trusted.

Perhaps the recruiter's greatest weapon in counteroffer defense is the ability to accurately predict the future. As they say, hindsight is 20/20, so any recruiter can claim after the fact that they knew how the company would react to your resignation. But for a recruiter to walk a candidate through the stages a company will go through after an employee's resignation is a powerful sales tool that tends to be quite effective in opening a candidate's eyes to the counteroffer process. This tactic also makes

the recruiter look like an expert, leading to candidates placing greater weight on a recruiter's opinions.

So how will the recruiter predict the future? When you resign, recruiters will tell you that your manager and co-workers will go through certain stages during the period between resignation and your final day. Recruiters may use some variations in the number of stages based on how they were trained or their individual style. You may hear about three stages, and sometimes they are attached to the more commonly known five stages of the grief process. Here is a mixed version.

1. **Shock and surprise** - This one is fairly easy to imagine, unless the entire office is either already aware of your search or you have had some noticeable friction with co-workers or management. There will be immediate curiosity about where you are going and what made you decide to leave.
2. **Anger** - Again, the loss of a key contributor will probably have lasting implications. In the short-term, the loss may mean increased efforts required from other employees and the need to start seeking a replacement. Hiring and interviewing can take considerable time from productive activities, leading to more hours for those that remain. Anger could be a realistic expectation for people who will now need to work longer and harder due to your decision.

3. **Bargaining** - This is where the counteroffer comes. The company understands the cost of losing an employee, and may feel that it is more cost-effective to increase the employee's compensation than to hire and train someone new. A counteroffer will often come with some justification as to why an adjustment to salary, bonus, equity, role, or title were not made sooner. More often than not, a counteroffer will be made with the explanation that this new raise or promotion had been in the works and would have happened in the coming months. There is also quite a bit of praise that accompanies a counter, and managers will reiterate the employee's value, importance, and future prospects with the firm.

4. **Depression and Acceptance** - Once management realizes you are not accepting their counteroffer, they will start to mourn your loss and hopefully reach the point where they can wish you well in future endeavors.

When an event resembling any one of these stages occur, it is the candidate's natural reaction to attribute that event to the appropriate corresponding stage, particularly if the recruiter is there as a guide. This is a basic sales technique and not much different than horoscope readers being able to point to something that happened during any given day that related to that day's horoscope.

The recruiter may even request to speak to your spouse, or could call your home in hopes that someone else in your family

picks up. Spouse conversations will usually be about how unhappy you are with the current employer and why a counteroffer will do little to change that. The recruiter may ask the spouse to be the candidate's rock during the emotional resignation process, and to keep the candidate focused on the future at the new company.

When a recruiter gets this close to a fee and a counteroffer is in the way, you can be sure that the recruiter will pull out all the stops to prevent acceptance. Take the recruiter's advice with a grain of salt and try to clearly understand their tactics and motivations.