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TECHNOLOGY

Are All These Skills Required?

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A job posting lists these skills: J2EE, EJB, JSP, XML, WebSphere, Oracle, UML, HTML, servlets and a minimum GPA of 3.0. You meet them all, aside from the one for UML. But does the company really expect to find a candidate with this laundry list of skills?

Should you apply, or keep looking?

Technology executives, hiring managers and human resource professionals say they don't intend to frustrate job seekers with lists of technical skills. However, they acknowledge techies must contend with a variety of approaches to listing skills that require candidates to read between the lines to determine what a company really wants.

"There's no real law or rule on job postings," says Sean Chou, CTO of Fieldglass, a software technology company.

The current job market adds to the difficulty. Companies sometimes post over-the-top laundry lists of skills just to see what kind of talent they can attract -- or to screen out unqualified applicants.

"As soon as the market slowed down, companies were creating unrealistic lists of skills," says Scott Hajer, senior corporate recruiter at Software Architects, an IT consulting firm.

Fantasy Combinations

A classic example is a position requiring more years of experience with a technology than it has been in existence. According to Hajer, such postings are sometimes "written by recruiters who don't understand what they're putting in an ad. [Job seekers] make fun of companies that will list something like four years of .NET. The laundry listing is something they find really frustrating."

Hajer contends such lists don't help companies weed out candidates. "In this market, candidates don't self-screen," he says. "They're more into resume spamming."

What Does "Required" Mean?

Thus, a simple question -- "Does required mean required?" -- becomes a conundrum for conscientious job seekers. Many companies differentiate between required skills and desired or preferred skills. In such listings, "required" often means just that.

"If you don't have the required skills, you should not even consider applying for the job," Chou says of his company's listings. "It's a right to play. If you don't meet it, you shouldn't be in the ballpark."

Others concur. "When we say they're required on our postings, they are essential," says Mary Medved, vice president of human resources for WAM!NET Government Services.

However, not everyone agrees. "Those things are the wish list for the company," says Lee Morrow, chief technology officer of Quantum AI, an enterprise application integration firm. "If half of the stuff on the list is what you do, give it a shot."

Read Between the Lines

Hiring managers and others say job applicants should read job postings carefully to determine if a company is presenting a wish list or set-in-stone requirements.

For instance, RightNow Technologies listed the following requirements for a senior software developer: three or more years of professional software development experience, expertise in C/C++, proficiency in SQL (preferably Oracle, SQL Server, MySQL) and Unix software development. Other desired skills included DHTML, Java and .NET.

Candidates must meet the requirements for consideration, says Susan Carstensen, the company's chief financial officer and head of HR. RightNow goes one step further, sending questionnaires to potential candidates asking them to rate themselves on a scale from one (for no knowledge) to five (for expert) in areas such as C, C++, Unix, SQL and Java.

There are other clues to how seriously a company views the requirements. WAM!NET, for example, needs to fill scores of openings that require security-clearance eligibility. Got a sordid past? Don't even think about applying.

Chou recommends candidates review postings for comparable positions. If the target job's requirements seem overblown compared to other postings, the company may be posting a dream listing and will likely be more flexible about granting interviews.

That's not to say candidates will always know when to apply. "In today's economy, people are thinking of job postings as a fuzzy match," says Chou. "If they're close, they're willing to send in their resume."