

The current job market is not for sissies. Anyone who has done a job search recently will know how tough it is in some of the market sectors and geographies.

Across the globe, people will seek to blame these difficulties on the slow economy. The fact is, like many other things in life, economies are cyclical and to focus on whether it's good or bad is a moot point, says Bryan Hattingh, CEO of leadership solutions group Cycin.

He says what is important is to determine the various imperatives to ensuring continued growth and success in your personal and professional lives. One of these is the importance of personal branding.

As often happens as economies slow, talk of the recession is everywhere, and South Africans are feeling it hardest in their pockets. But the truth is that the job market is doing OK.

Your mortgage costs may be soaring, but your career is not necessarily going to take a dive. That's because it's affected less by economic indicators than it is by the severe skills shortage that has come to the fore as grey-haired white males retire, generation Xers focus on family and Yers build their own businesses.

The dearth of good people has become so critical, that high-calibre employees will be in demand for years to come, and it's unlikely that an economic downturn will really affect the job market.

With that in mind, what follows is some advice for job searching, whether the economy is good or bad.

Management guru Tom Peters first introduced the concept of "Brand You" in 1997, challenging people to

# Personal branding will set you apart in a slower job market

think of themselves in a new way:

"Regardless of age, regardless of position, regardless of the business we happen to be in, all of us need to understand the importance of branding. We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You."

Just as companies understand the importance of branding, Peters wrote, to survive and prosper in the new world of work, "our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You". Back then, Peters' views were novel; today embracing the concept is a necessity for survival.

Yet many people resist the idea of marketing themselves, despite the reality that personal branding and the ability to identify and market what sets you apart is vital in any economy.

There is no right way to secure the best position, but to increase your chances you need to use a variety of strategies and resources.

To begin, you need to conduct a self assessment to identify your skills, abilities, values, and aspirations, and you need to identify organisations that will make the best use of your talents.

Because most of our waking hours are spent at work, it is important to invest time in conducting a personal assessment.

Ask yourself what is important to you personally and



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professionally. Do you mind a long work week? Is relocation an option?

What about travel as part of the job? Are you seeking advancement?

Are you looking for a challenge in your next situation? Or are you perhaps looking for more balance between your personal and professional lives?

Think about the accomplishments you have achieved and the underlying skills you possess.

A skill list is important because you can use it to more easily identify areas where you excel, identify which skills match an employer's needs, target your skills to specific jobs, ask meaningful, relevant and smart questions during an interview, and assess the level of fit.

The results of your self-assessment can then be applied to crafting a résumé that stands out from the rest as well as evaluating possible job and career options that interest you.

Remember that networking is a highly effective strategy in almost any job market. Networking can help you obtain information about industry segments and the kinds of jobs available, give you ideas for brainstorming to develop effective job-search strategies, and yield introductions to new people who may provide even more information, ideas, and introductions. Networking is critical and when done well, yields dividends for your search.

Networking doesn't mean asking people to find you a job; it means using your connections to find opportunities to identify and target an employer through personal connections.

Don't be afraid to use your network. Everyone has one, and the foundation is everyone you know plus everyone those people know. The people you know include colleagues, clients, vendors, and friends, as well as people you may see only occasionally.

People like to be helpful. Talk to everyone you know and let them know what you are looking for. You have to be willing to ask for help, because this is where you can't do it all by yourself.

Also, think about how you can contribute to your network, not just benefit from it. Information that you acquire

during your job search is something you can share with people in your network. One way to extend your network is to become active in professional associations. Identify one or more associations that mesh with your interests.

Doing what you can do to make yourself and your abilities visible is effective in building your network.

At meetings, talk to speakers about their work, have business cards to hand out as you meet and talk to people.

Prepare a brief pitch to tell people about your search and what you're looking for. If you don't advertise yourself, no one else will.

You never know where a job lead will come from, so you need to be talking to as many people as possible.

Finally, bear in mind that career linearity is out. As Peters says, a career is a portfolio of projects that teach you new skills, gain you new expertise, develop new capabilities, grow your colleague set, and constantly reinvent you as a brand.

Do not make yourself a slave to the concept of a career ladder; rather reinvent yourself regularly.

Peters recommends writing your own mission statement, to guide you as CEO of Me Inc. "What turns you on?"

It's this simple: You are a brand. You are in charge of your brand. There is no single path to success. And there is no one right way to create the brand called You. Except this: Start today. Or else."