

By Lora Shinn / Special to NWjobs

Trevor McDowell, 27, always wanted to work in politics -- as a child he even debated policy with the school janitor. In college, he majored in political science and volunteered for a presidential campaign.



After graduating during the recession, Trevor McDowell stuck with the company that employed him during his college years. Now, McDowell has decided to lay the groundwork for a career in politics. (Lora Shinn / Special to NWjobs)

When McDowell graduated from college in December 2008, the recession swept jobs off the career landscape. So he stayed on at his college job, working for a large shipping company in Seattle. "I felt fortunate to have a decent job and decided to move up into management, hoping to gain valuable experience in the process," he says, instead of seeking a professional political role.

After losing his job last July, interviews with several shipping and transportation companies fizzled. "I'm not good at selling myself," he says. He also faces a choice: continue sending resumes in the operations and transportation field, or aim for a career in politics or public-policy development.

"How do I say I worked as a manager in the trucking industry on a cold dock, and how that translates to an office suite?" he asks. "I need to portray my skills well, without limiting myself."

After [volunteering for a NWjobs career makeover](#), McDowell met with three career pros to help reboot his job-search process. He realized that he is not just looking for a job, but that he also needs to "brand" himself. "It's not just having a goal, but knowing exactly where I stand, who I am and what I'm bringing to the table," he says.

Career coach and [NWjobs.com blogger](#) Lisa Quast of [Career Woman Inc.](#) says that McDowell needs to fine-tune his job-application process to reduce strikeouts. For example, after analyzing a job description closely, he might see where his work skills, experience and education align to the requirements.

Then, he should use keywords and phrases from the listed requirements and descriptions in his resume. "Tailor your resume to each specific job in a way that will showcase the skills and accomplishments that are the most relevant to the job requirements," Quast suggests.

To boost experience, skills and networking opportunities, Quast recommends that McDowell attend [University of Washington guest lectures](#), political or business leader speeches, or audit UW classes as an alumnus. Volunteering for political action groups would be another smart move.

Quast suggests using LinkedIn to reverse-engineer resumes of successful political science professionals: How did their education, job titles and skills pave the way for their careers? Using that information, McDowell can map out potential jobs to apply for or skills to attain.

McDowell's original résumé was targeting operations management and transportation roles, which was applicable to his former career, says Seia Milin, a local human resources professional. "We needed to translate these transferable skills to match opportunities in politics," Milin says, while also highlighting his recent political campaign volunteer experience.

To compete for a job in politics, McDowell needs to highlight his acquired leadership skills, such as initiative, drive, influencing and leading by example.

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Seattle-area career coach [Kathryn Crawford Saxer](#) suggests that McDowell create an "elevator pitch," a short, well-rehearsed personal narrative that includes his career experience and goals. He can use it on his resume and LinkedIn profile; such a pitch also makes it easy to cold-call an organization or chat with strangers at a party.

"He will have a clearly articulated and compelling explanation of who he is, what he has to offer and what he's looking for," Saxer says.

McDowell had treated LinkedIn like Facebook, connecting only with people he knew well. Instead, Saxer suggests sending invites to anyone likely to have positive associations with his name. "Every person we know knows somebody who knows somebody who might be hiring for work we'd love," she says.

Saxer asked McDowell to identify 10 organizations anywhere in the country where he would like to work, and then, using LinkedIn, to identify 10 employees within those organizations to contact.

All three coaches suggest that he request informational interviews with target organizations, acquiring inside information on possible entry-level career opportunities and volunteer openings. He should bring along a one-page summary of his skills, goals and contact info, almost like a mini-resume, and then follow up with a thank-you note.

McDowell says the experts' advice has helped reinvigorate his job search and reinforced the importance of networking. He has updated his resume and LinkedIn profile and is building a portfolio of work to put online.

He also called some organizations he likes, including nonprofits, political organizations, offices of elected officials and law firms. Though he says it's intimidating, he is getting better with each call.

"It is less nerve-wracking than a real interview," he says, "and is going to be good practice for when I find the job I really want to fight for or the interview I really want to nail."

