

Leveraging the Hidden Job Market

Why many interesting roles are rarely advertised and what that means for candidates and companies.

An Article of the Swiss Association of MBAs

Plus: Extra-Interview with Someone Who Actually Cracked the Code!

When people think about job searching, they typically think of job boards, company career pages, and «LinkedIn Jobs». That's fine and the assumption is simple: If a role exists, it will be published. Like back in the good old days.

But a significant share of roles, especially at senior levels, or in highly specialized fields, are never publicly advertised. This so-called "hidden job market" is not an exception. In certain fields, it is the norm.

The hidden job market refers to roles that are filled without ever being formally published. These positions emerge in different contexts:

- Stealth projects, where confidentiality is critical.
- Replacement hires, where companies prefer discretion over public exposure.
- Senior and executive roles, where hiring is often targeted rather than open.
- Roles including buzzwords such as "Marketing", "AI", or similar.
- Roles that are being flooded by AI-generated applications.
- (Perceived) requirements and their combination becoming increasingly complex
- Speed is essential. There are strict deadlines and the process has to be completed fast.



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Author



Commonly known estimates suggest that around 70% of roles are not advertised, with even higher percentages in specialist environments. This fundamentally changes how hiring actually works.

The other end of the key dynamic: Top talent is not actively looking. They're happy people that might be open for opportunities (not "jobs").

Many sought-after candidates are not browsing job boards. Professionals, e.g. in fields such as AI, robotics, or advanced software engineering, are usually deeply engaged in their current roles and working on complex problems. Hence, they're not actively applying for jobs. Instead of searching, they are approached.

This all creates a structural gap: Roles are not publicly visible, and the wanted candidates are not actively looking. Bridging this gap requires a different approach on both sides. For the hiring company as well as for the candidate who's actively searching for a new job.

But how is access to the hidden job market created?

Access is not random. It is not a magic bullet, and there is no emergency switch you can flip the moment the house is on fire. Access is built over time through presence, networks, and credibility. Through relationships and trust. It's a game of give and take.

1. Micro-communities and ecosystems

The most relevant talent pools often exist in highly specialized communities. One can tap into the community, help others solve problems, contribute to social gatherings, be at the front of things, and get in touch with others who drive and build.

Regular interaction is key. This can include meetups, hackathons, talks, or informal working groups. The goal should never be immediate hiring, but long-term visibility and participation.

2. Referrals and trusted networks

Referrals remain one of the most effective channels for accessing hidden opportunities.

Strong sources include University ecosystems (in Switzerland e.g. such as ETH, EPFL, or UZH), alumni networks (like SAMBA!) and former colleagues. In tech it can be the open-source communities around recognized domain experts.

These networks act as filters. They surface relevant opportunities and candidates long before anything becomes public. Never forget, these networks are "alive", they're not to be compared with a "dead" job board or a generic job ad. Bursting in screaming "I need a job and I need it now" rarely achieves the desired effect.

3. For companies: Brand and positioning

The hidden job market goes both ways! Companies that consistently attract strong candidates are rarely the ones posting the most job ads. Instead, they are visible in the right contexts.

A credible employer brand, often reinforced by partner brands, plays a central role. This does not necessarily mean large-scale marketing campaigns or artificially polished "candidate experiences."

It means being recognized within a specific domain for working on meaningful and challenging problems and building genuine connections with talent. Authentic candidate relationships often outperform heavily marketed recruiting approaches backed by large budgets.

4. Working with specialized partners

Domain-focused recruiters and search partners can provide access to passive candidates, niche communities and pre-qualified networks. The value lies less in volume and more in relevance and reach. You've got to be where your people are.

And the same goes for people looking for a job. There are multipliers, central nodes where the threads of a network converge, that you can tap into and stay close to.

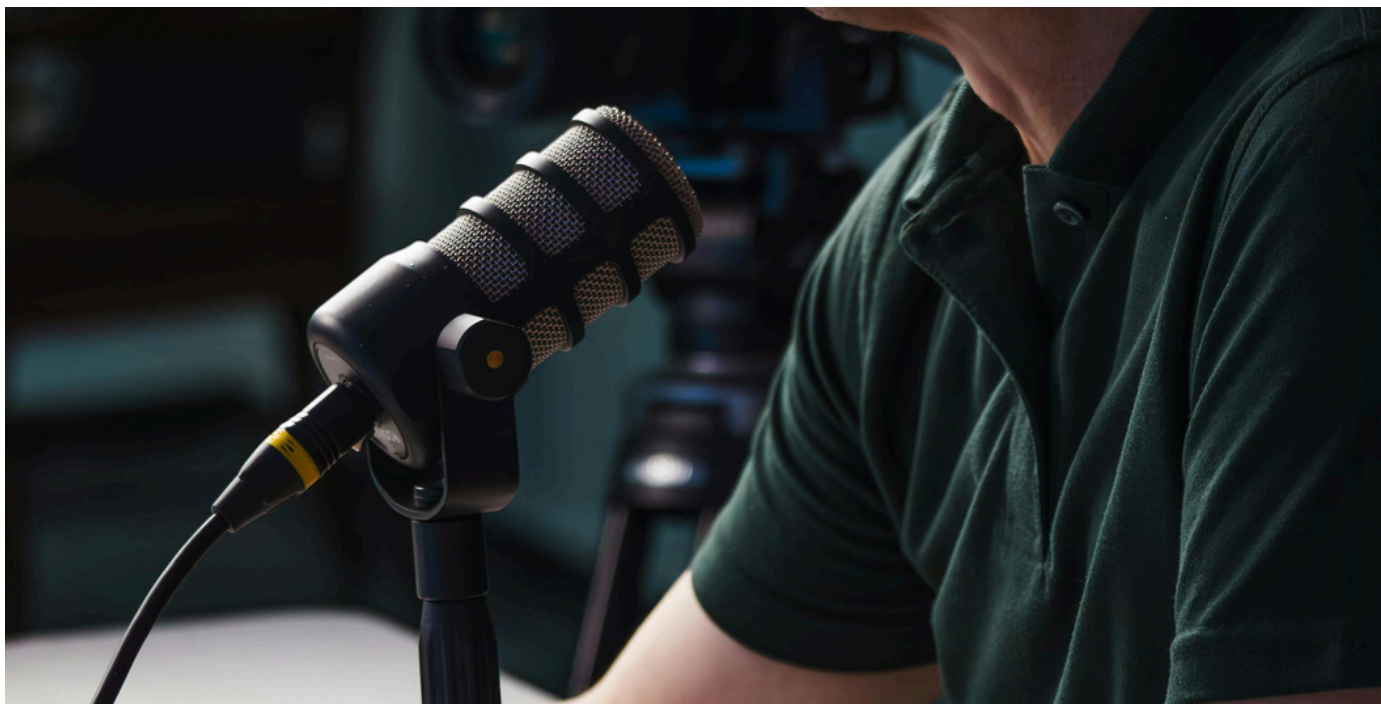
In sum, the hidden job market is a relationship-driven system which is built on trust. For companies, this means investing in long-term presence rather than buzzword bingo. Access to top talent comes down to being present in the right communities, with the right message, at the right time.

For candidates, it means building networks, contributing to communities, and being visible in the right environments.

Are you in for the long term?

Continued on the next page: Featured interview

Interview: Breaking Into Switzerland's Tech Industry Through Persistence and Timing



For this blog article, I interviewed a software developer who had to move to Switzerland due to political circumstances and eventually found his way into a stable position through persistence, timing, and tapping into the hidden job market at the right moment.

On a personal note: What truly impressed me throughout the whole process was the developer's attitude. Despite going through obviously difficult times, he never complained. He remained proactive, with a smile on his face, and kept moving forward. Looking back, I genuinely believe this demeanour became one of his biggest success factors.

Can you tell us a bit about your background?

Before I came to Switzerland, I was living in Ukraine. At that time, I was working in manufacturing and later in a merchandising company. Honestly, I didn't really like what I was doing. I already felt that I wanted to change something.

I spoke English already, but I never really used it professionally. At some point I thought maybe IT project management could be an option for me. So, I started looking at job descriptions. And then I realized: I'm missing coding skills!

That's basically how everything started.

So coding came later?

Completely. I started learning spontaneously. At first, I thought coding would simply help me move into IT. But once I started, something clicked. I remember watching one very specific YouTube video that completely changed my direction. That was really my "aha moment". Suddenly I realized: I don't want to be a project manager. I actually want to build things myself.

Then I had to choose a direction. I decided to go into mobile development. There was a very new framework for mobile development at the time, and I basically started learning it while it was still super new on the market. I did online courses, watched tutorials, practiced constantly. Mostly evenings and weekends.

How intense was that period?

Very intense. After around six months, I started applying for junior roles. Honestly, I was even willing to work for free just to get experience. Internships, unpaid positions, anything. After another three months, I finally found a small job for around 400 dollars per month.

At that point I quit my previous job completely and went all in. At that time, we were relying on my wife's financial support. When I decided to become a developer I was coding up to 14 hours a day because I realized that evenings and weekends weren't enough. But I knew already: this is what I wanted to do.

Eventually I found my first real developer job in Ukraine.

And then you moved to Switzerland?

Yes. Due to the political situation, we were forced to leave. We ended up in Switzerland and suddenly I had to start again from zero in a completely different market. I scanned the job market every single day. Literally every day. And honestly, that period was frustrating at times.

Some companies constantly publish jobs but never seem to hire anyone. Also, because I specialized in a specific mobile framework, my options were quite narrow. So I kept adapting my CV over and over again. Every application was customized. At some point, job searching itself becomes a almost full-time job.

What changed things for you?

I started going to tech events and job fairs. I tried to speak to people directly and make connections. One day I attended a tech job fair where I met several companies and also a tech recruiting company. I approached one recruiter there with my CV. He offered me a CV-check and we adjusted it together. Then nothing happened for a while.

Six months later, I went to the same event again. I met the same recruiter again. This time we had a longer conversation. He looked much deeper into my profile and said: "I'll keep you in mind. When we have something suitable, I'll come back to you."

And then he actually did.

What happened next?

He introduced me to a tech startup in Switzerland. The recruiter supported me throughout the whole process. Preparation, feedback, communication, everything.

I made it to the final rounds. One thing that definitely helped me was my responsiveness. I always replied immediately. I was willing to do whatever it takes.

Later, this was actually mentioned as one of my advantages compared to other candidates. And in the end, it worked out. I received a permanent contract.



Was that your breakthrough moment in Switzerland?

Yes, definitely. It changed everything. At the same time, I also learned something important: many opportunities are not visible. They happen through conversations, relationships, timing, and people remembering you. That's exactly what happened to me.

And where are you today?

The startup later struggled, so eventually I started looking around passively again. But this time everything felt completely different. I no longer had the same pressure. I already had experience in Switzerland, references, and confidence.

I ended up joining a stable Swiss hidden champion company. Not a startup anymore. And honestly, I wasn't applying aggressively anymore. I applied more randomly to a few things that looked interesting. The process worked out very naturally. Funny enough, when I saw the job description, it basically looked like my CV.

What would you tell people trying to enter the tech industry today?

Don't underestimate consistency. And don't isolate yourself. A lot of opportunities come from simply showing up repeatedly, speaking to people, staying visible, and continuing even when nothing happens for months. Sometimes the breakthrough comes much later than expected.

But the connections you build along the way matter.

About the Author

Lucas Zehnder has been working in recruiting since 2005 and in direct contact with companies and candidates as a consultant since 2012. He studied Social Psychology in Zurich (MSc, University of Zurich, 2011) and has been a Senior at Rockstar Recruiting since August 2020 and a Partner since February 2024. Since 2016, Rockstar Recruiting has focused on expert and executive search within the DeepTech and AI space.

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