

Search function job boards reviewed (part 3)

## The Search Engine Results Page (SERP) on job boards

Jaap van de Putte, 2 use it | October 18 2008 | Editor: Sue Brokmann

Job boards are the favourite place for job seekers. But are they really useful to them? In this article we report on our research of the Search Engine Results Page (SERP) on job boards. We compare the SERPs of 9 job boards with a checklist we developed for this specific purpose.

This article is the third article in a series of 5 about our study on the search function of job boards.

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*Previous articles*

In the **first article** we presented the study. We evaluated the keyword search function of 9 job boards with a group of 30 students<sup>1</sup>:

- Monsterboard, [www.monsterboard.nl](http://www.monsterboard.nl)
- Nationale Vacaturebank, [www.nationalevacaturebank.nl](http://www.nationalevacaturebank.nl)
- Jobtrack, [www.jobtrack.nl](http://www.jobtrack.nl)
- Intermediair, [www.intermediair.nl](http://www.intermediair.nl)
- Stepstone, [www.stepstone.nl](http://www.stepstone.nl)
- Academic Transfer, [www.academictransfer.nl](http://www.academictransfer.nl)
- Werken bij de Overheid, [www.werkenbijdeoverheid.nl](http://www.werkenbijdeoverheid.nl)
- Jobs.ac.uk, [www.jobs.ac.uk](http://www.jobs.ac.uk)
- Indeed.com, [www.indeed.com](http://www.indeed.com)

The first article is available on: [www.2useit.nl/usabilityupdate/searching-a-job-online-part1.php](http://www.2useit.nl/usabilityupdate/searching-a-job-online-part1.php)

The **second article** describes the first part of an online search: the search interface. We concluded that most job boards have a pretty good interface and that improvements can be made and are easy to implement, for example enlarging the search box or adding Boolean search to the search function.

You can find the second article on [www.2useit.nl/usabilityupdate/searching-a-job-online-part2.php](http://www.2useit.nl/usabilityupdate/searching-a-job-online-part2.php).

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1 from the Academy of Digital Communication of the Hogeschool Utrecht (School of Higher Education, the Netherlands)

## 1. What is a Search Engine Results Page (SERP)?

After having submitted a search query on a job board the search engine returns a result page: a list of short descriptions of the jobs that contain one or more keywords. This page is referred to as the Search Engine Results Page (SERP).



The screenshot shows a search results page with a purple header. The header contains navigation links: 'Kort | Gedetailleerd | Vacatures op kaart tonen', the current page range 'Resultaten 1-25 van 81', and a 'Volgende >' link. Below the header is a sorting section: 'Sorteren op: Datum Relevantie Functietitel Bedrijf', with 'Relevantie' selected. The results are listed in a table-like format. The first result is for 'User Experience Manager KLM.com' at 'KLM', located in '1117 Amstelveen', posted on '10 jun'. It includes a 'Taakomschrijving' snippet and a 'Meer >' link. The second result is for 'Manager UX (User Experience) Engineering' at 'Monster Prague', located in 'Prague, Czech Republic', posted on '09 jun'. It also includes a snippet and a 'Meer >' link. Each result has an 'Inklappen' icon and a 'Vacature bewaren' link.

A typical Search Engine Results Page (SERP) (monsterboard.nl)

## 2. The perfect SERP for job boards

In general, people prefer a SERP that they recognize from the big search engines, for example Google (Nielsen in Prioritizing Web Usability, 2006). We assume that will be the same for a SERP on a vacancy site.

Based on our own research we formulate the following criteria for an optimal SERP:

1. The search box – input field with search button – is above the results. Less preferable, the box is placed on the left or the right of the results.
2. The search query is in the search box and is adaptable.
3. The job title is clickable and leads to the full job description.
4. There are at least 4 vacancies visible (screen resolution: 1024 x 768).
5. Each result has a summary of more than 100 characters.
6. The date format is universal.
7. When there are 0 results, the site shows tips for better search.
8. Results can be sorted by relevance and date.
9. The elements of paging are big enough.
10. Refinements can be made easily.
11. The results agree with the search query (there are no false positives or false negatives).

Requirement 11 – no false negatives or false positives – was too time consuming to study fully, so we decided to drop this in our findings, but we discuss the item in the section below.

### 3. SERP Research Findings in short

We matched the SERP of all the sites on the first 10 criteria above. Indeed.com has the best score: they meet the criteria 100 %. Second in line is Monsterboard which complies very well with our checklist with a score 80 %. Jobtrack gets a pass, but the other ones all got an unsatisfactory mark. The good news is that a lot of improvements can be easily made.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	P*
1. Indeed.com	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	100 %
2. Monsterboard	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	80 %
3. Jobtrack	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	60 %
4. Intermediar	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	50 %
5. Nationale Vacaturebank	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	50 %
6. Jobs.ac.uk	✗	✗	✓	n.a.	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	40 %
7. AcademicTransfer	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	30 %
8. Werken bij de Overheid	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	30 %
9. Stepstone	✗	✓	✓	n.a.	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	30 %

\* P: Performance-score for the SERP

Notes:

- All sites provide a summary in the job description, except Stepstone and Jobs.ac.uk. For this reason criterion 4 (number of visible jobs) could not be assessed fairly for these boards.
- Criteria 1 and 2 are closely related to each other.
- Criterion 11 is left out of our results.

### 4. SERP Results in detail

#### 4.1 The search box – input field with search button – is above the results

A search box should be above the results. This is a standard requirement for all Search Engine Results Pages. It is exactly like the big search engines. Preferably it is directly above the results, but it might also be at the left or the right of the results.

Monsterboard provides a good search box, including the search query.



The screenshot shows the search interface for Monsterboard.nl. At the top left, it says "Zoek een baan resultaten" with a question mark icon. Below this, there are several search options: "Zoek op trefwoord(en): Tips" with an input field containing "ICT", "Zoek op beroepen:" with a dropdown menu showing "Selecteer beroepen...", and "Locaties" with a dropdown menu showing "Provincies...". There are also links for "NL | EU | Global". A checkbox is present with the text "Trefwoorden alleen op functietitel laten zoeken". On the right side, there are input fields for "Plaats:", "Postcode:", and "Provincie:". A prominent orange "Zoeken" button is located on the right. In the top right corner, there are links for "Bekij" and "Zoek".

**Clear search box with the search query ("ICT") above the results (monsterboard.nl)**

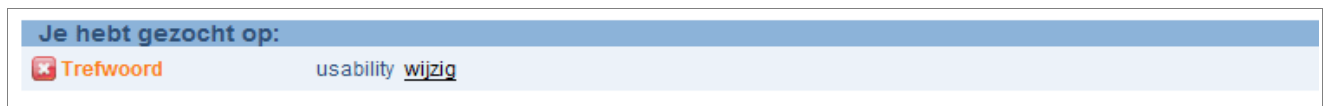
Stepstone places the search box below the results. This is not only uncommon - people will not expect it there - but it is also not visible without scrolling, which makes it quite clumsy to use.

Although a search box above the results is perhaps the most important criterion, two thirds of the sites did not meet this criterion. Submitting the search box will substantially improve these sites. We advise all sites to add a search box to their SERP above the results.

## 4.2 The search box contains the search query, which is adaptable.

In addition to the first criterion the search box should contain the search query and the query should be directly adaptable so you can directly start a new search. Only 4 out of 9 sites meet this criterion.

Nationale Vacaturebank ([www.nationalevacaturebank.nl](http://www.nationalevacaturebank.nl)) shows the search query, but you have to click on it first to be able to change it. If they placed the query in a search box people could change the query immediately. This alteration looks quite easy to implement, so we advise them to do so.



**Search query ("usability") is visible but not directly adaptable (nationalevacaturebank.nl)**

Werkenbijdeoverheid.nl (working at the government) shows no search box and no search query at all (see image below). So how do they help me to know which query I used?



**Where is the search box and my query? (werkenbijdeoverheid.nl)**

## 4.3 The job title is clickable and leads to full job description

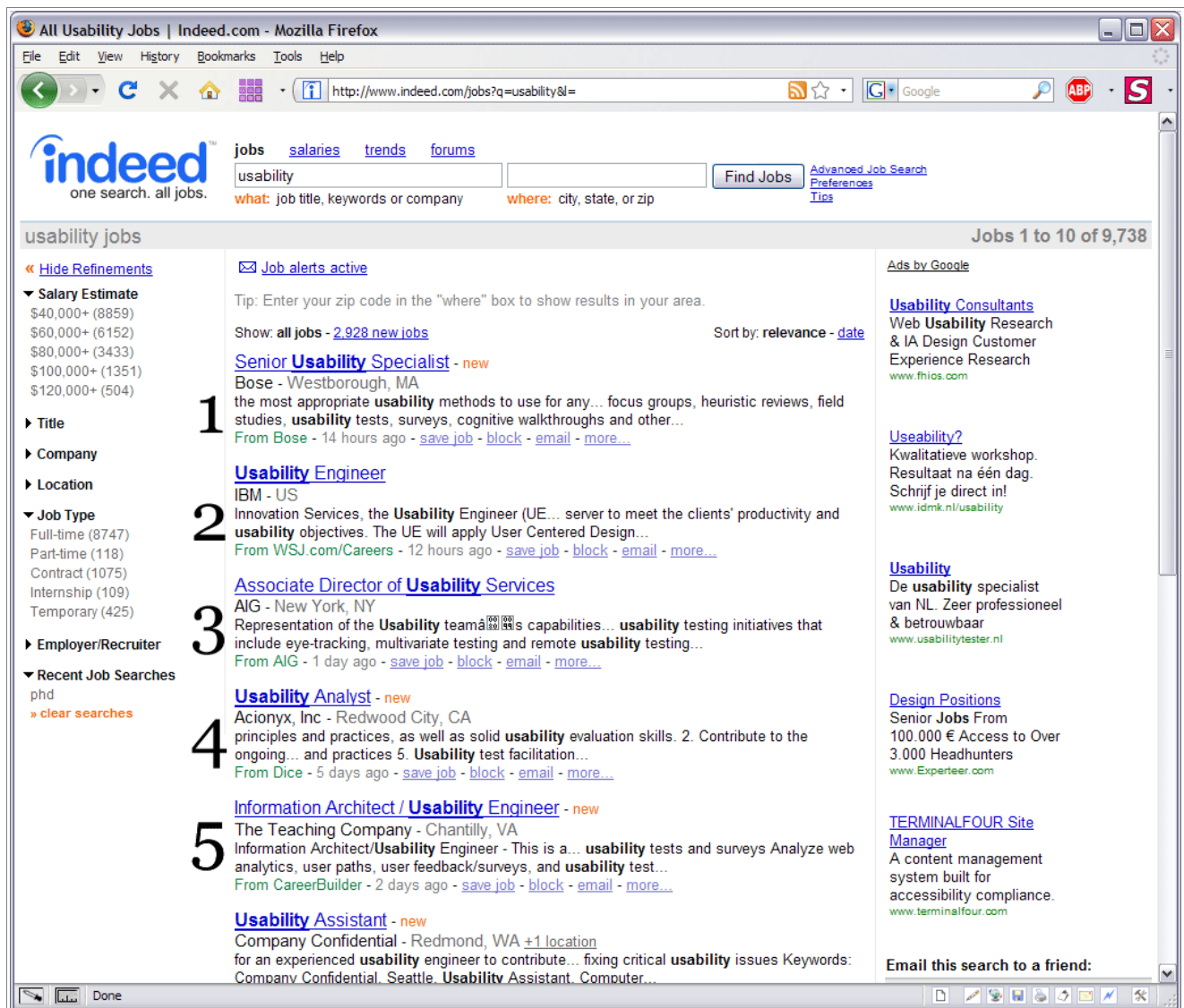
A clickable title is a standard requirement in SERPs. All sites meet this requirement. Take care that the link is presented as a link. Look at the job description at the right: do you think that the title ("Specialist Microsoft/VMWare") is clickable? It is, but it doesn't look like that.



**The title is clickable, but does it also look clickable? (werkenbijdeoverheid.nl)**

#### 4.4 There are at least 4 vacancies visible (screen resolution: 1024 x 768).

We have stated that on a screen resolution of 1024 x 768 a minimum of 4 vacancies must be fully visible without scrolling. Indeed.com provides us with a good example: there are 5 job descriptions visible.



On a screen height of 768 px we can see 5 jobs (indeed.com)

Some sites place a great header, a menu, sub menus, paid results (dressed up as top vacancies, but everyone knows ...) and banners above the results, which diminishes the number of visible vacancies to 0, for example Intermediar (see image below).

We advise reducing this ballast above the results.

The screenshot shows the homepage of intermediair.nl with a search bar and navigation menu. The search results for 'communicatie ICT' are displayed, including a list of top jobs and a detailed view of a specific vacancy for 'COMMERCIELE PRODUCTMANAGER B2B Online Verticals (M/V)' at VNU media.

**intermediair.nl**  
Nu met 6034 vacatures voor hoogopgeleiden

1 JULI MEDIA PLAZA.

Home Zoek RSS Nieuwsbrief Adverteren Weekblad Contact Voor de pers Sitemap Service VOOR WERKGEVERS

**Zoek direct vacatures** | **Oriëntatie** | **Sollicitatie** | **Ontwikkeling** | **Bezoek ook:**

Home / Vacatures zoeken >

Niet ingelogd (([inloggen](#))) om je cv's en vacatures te beheren [Help ?](#)

Mijn account | **Vacatures zoeken** | CV's | Mijn vacatures

Snel zoeken | Uitgebreid zoeken | Bladeren op functie | Mijn opgeslagen zoekopdrachten/ e-mail alerts

**Vacatures: communicatie ICT**

Zoekresultaten | Huidige zoekopdracht  
201 resultaten gevonden Alle trefwoorden (volledig): **communicatie ICT** Land: Nederland

Nieuwe zoekopdracht **ZOEKEN**  Alleen de titel [MAAK E-MAIL ALERT AAN](#)

Zoekopdracht wijzigen | Mijn opgeslagen zoekopdrachten/ e-mail alerts

Weergave  resultaten per pagina op basis van  [RSS](#) [XML](#) [?](#)

**SPOTLIGHT VACATURES**

<a href="#">COMMERCIELE PRODUCTMANAGER B2B Online Verticals (M/V)</a>	Haarlem	23-04-2008	<a href="#">VNU media</a>
GEZOCHT: COMMERCIELE PRODUCTMANAGER B2B Online Verticals (M/V) Wij VNU Media is uitgever van 15 crossmedia brands. Onze merken zijn leidend. Onze events toonaangevend. Groei, vooruitgang...			
<a href="#">inloggen om vacature op te slaan</a>   <a href="#">lees verder</a>			
<a href="#">Functioneel Beheerder</a>	Eindhoven	06-06-2008	IAK Verzekeringen B.V.
Omschrijving De functioneel beheerder ondersteunt en optimaliseert het gehele werkproces binnen de Business Unit Particuliere schadeprocessen. Je inventariseert daarvoor de gebruikerswensen,...			
<a href="#">inloggen om vacature op te slaan</a>   <a href="#">lees verder</a>			

**Zoekresultaten** Overzicht: [beknopt](#) | [Uitgebreid](#)

1 - 20 van 201 Pagina 1 van 11

Funcietitel	Plaats	Geplaatst	Bedrijfsnaam
Security Specialist	Heerde	13.05.2008	ADC

**Topbanen** [RSS](#)

- Senior inkoper Equens nederland b.v., Utrecht
- System engineers (3fte) Equens nederland b.v., Utrecht
- Innovatieadviseur bouw &... Syntens, Groningen
- Manager m/v fulltime Besturenraad, Voorburg
- Directeur/bestuurder m/v Maatschappelijke dienstverlening veluwe, Harderwijk

[vorige 5](#) | [volgende 5](#)

On a screen resolution of 768 px height there is not one vacancy visible (intermediair.nl)

If paid results are above the organic results this is often the result of an internal struggle in your organisation between the people who think that job seekers have first priority and the sales men who want to sell banners and paid places. If the site is your responsibility, it is always difficult to cope with different views and interests. Just keep the long term in mind and take care of your end users, the job seekers. If they like your site than your site will be successful. And if your site is successful advertisers will come. It is not the other way around. Choose the long term.

#### 4.5 Each result has a summary from more than 100 characters.

A short summary is a prerequisite for easily scanning the results. Results without a summary provide too little information and include the risk that people will click-through on a result that is not useful.

**Usability Specialist**  
 The Epitec Group - Dearborn, MI  
 Experience with Software **Usability** Evaluations (Heuristic Reviews) Familiarity with multiple authors/principles on the subject of **usability** CSS, XHTML Degree...  
 From [HFCareers.com](#) - 9 hours ago - [save job](#) - [block](#) - [email](#) - [more...](#)

**Clear summary (indeed.com)**

One third of the sites did not provide (directly) a summary. As you can see in the example below only a title gives a job seeker very little information.

	INFORMAT Informat	<b><u>Front-end Developer</u></b> Baarn	25/07/2008
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**A result without summary (stepstone.nl)**

Our advise is: provide a summary.

#### 4.6 The date format is universal

Stepstone and 5 other job boards present their jobs with a date format that is not quite clear, see the example below. When you see 12/10/2008: do you know what date it is? US people think it is the 10<sup>th</sup> of December, for European people it means the 12<sup>th</sup> of October. A complicating factor is that most software originates from the US and we regularly see a Dutch site using the American date format.

	StepStone BV	<b><u>Application Developer / Technical Consultant</u></b> Leiden	12/10/2008
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**Date is not clear (stepstone.nl)**

The date should be written in a universal format that is clear in what date it represents. In most cases the solution is to write the month in letters, not in numbers. It should be something like June 6 2008, 6<sup>th</sup> of June 2008 or 6 June 2008.

<b>Webmarketeer (24 upw) - Almere</b>	Unique Nederland Almere, FL 1314	12 okt
<a href="#">+ Uitklappen</a>	<a href="#">Kaart bekijken</a>	<a href="#">Vacature bewaren</a>

**Right date format makes date clear (monsterboard.nl)**

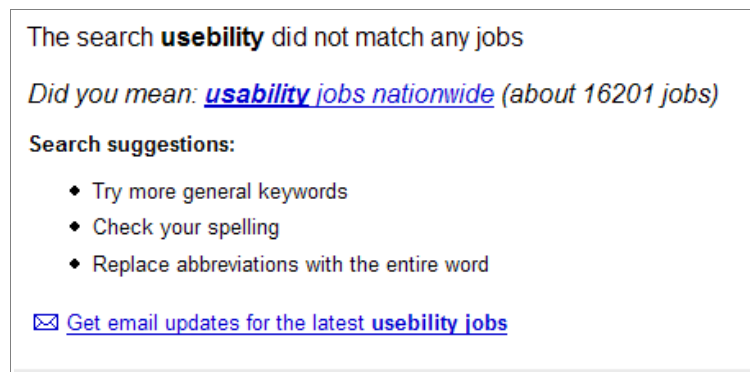
#### 4.7 The site shows tips for better search with 0 results

A "0-results-page" is a special SERP page. It is always a frustrating page for the visitor, but the most frustrating part will be if there is no help at all. So, take care of your visitor, take him by the hand and advise him on how to get back on the rails again.

The 0-results page should contain:

- The search box with the search query.
- Suggestions for better search, for example to broaden his search with less keywords or more general keywords.
- Suggestion to check the spelling of the keywords.
- If available, other ways to search, for example advanced search or category search.

More sophisticated are (Google-like) spelling suggestions (see image below).

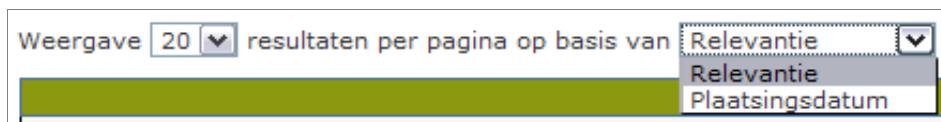


**Suggestions on a 0-results-page (indeed.com)**

Only 3 of the 9 sites provide a sufficient 0-results-page.

#### 4.8 Results can be sorted by relevance and date.

In a normal search engine the results are sorted by relevance. With vacancy sites it is more common to sort results by date, where the latest vacancy is shown at the top. We recommend both sorting methods be available.



**Results can be sorted by relevance ("Relevantie") and by date ("Plaatsingsdatum") (intermediair.nl) Although the sorting possibilities are good we recommend the use of a radio button in stead of dropdown options for this requires an action from the visitor before he can see the options.**

More sorting methods could be used, but most of them are not very fruitful. Sorting the results by title seems to be pointless: if you search for a job as secretary you will not easily find the job "Part time secretary".

#### 4.9 The elements of paging are big enough.

Most searches give a lot of results. Most job boards divide the results on several pages and they use paging to connect their pages to each other.

The text or images of the paging must be large enough to make them easily clickable.

In almost all cases only the number of the page is clickable. The size of a single number is about 90 square pixels (about 8 px width and 11 pixels high). This is a small area to click on, especially if your hand coordination is not optimal. We recommend enlarging this area by using CSS. In the example below we have enlarged this area to 500 square pixels.

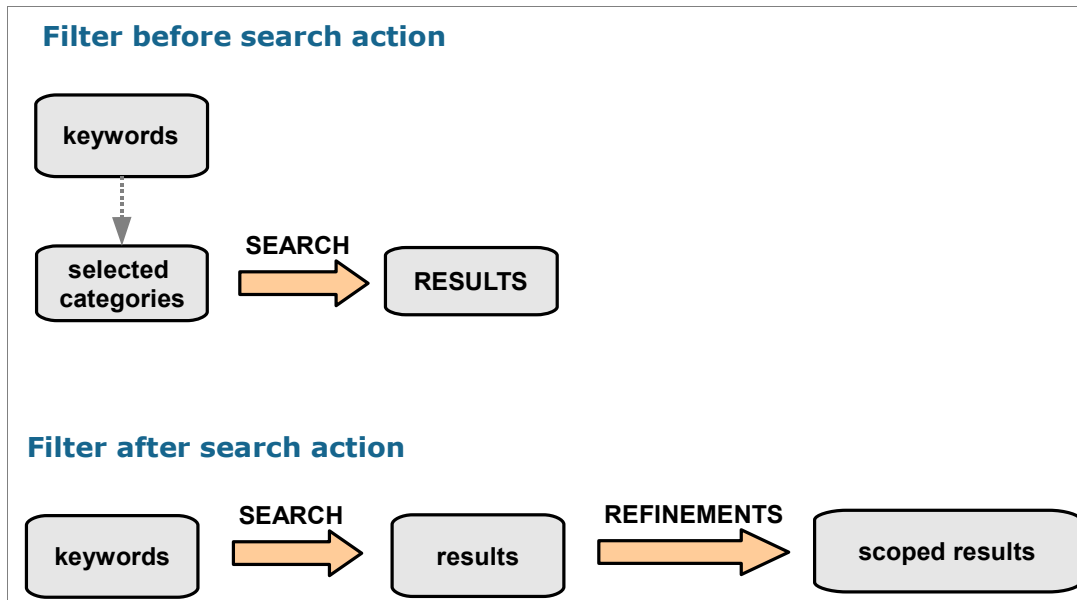


**Clickable area is enlarged with a box around the numbers**

#### 4.10 Refinements can be made easily.

A filtered search can be achieved in two ways:

- **Filter *before* the search action:** you can scope the search by choosing certain categories before you start your search. This can be combined with the use of keywords, but that is not necessary.
- **Filter *after* the search action:** you refine your results after the search action



Different ways to filter your search

As we stated in the first article, people like to search without any hard thinking. Therefore we assume that people like to refine their results *after* they have searched, because this requires less thought.

A great advantage from filtering after is that you can see the number of results so you can estimate if you will find any results after refining.

Job boards cope with refinements in a different way. Four of the nine job boards offer refinements, the other ones do not offer them at all. A good example of refinements is found on Indeed.com (see image on the right). They show refinements on the left side of the site, but also show the number of vacancies that will be found after refining.

▼ Salary Estimate	
\$50,000+	(12012)
\$70,000+	(8588)
\$90,000+	(4542)
\$110,000+	(1840)
\$130,000+	(543)

Refinements with number of vacancies (indeed.com)

Another smart thing they do with the salary estimate is they do not use closed "from-to"-categories, but open "higher-than"-categories.

AcademicTransfer and Werkenbijdeoverheid.nl use both filters before the search and try to solve the problem of finding no jobs with a fancy counter that counts the jobs after you have selected a category. Unfortunately the counter works slowly or not at all and it gives different results with the same search filter. That is the risk of bleeding edge technology and we recommend to replace

it with filtering after the search (refinements).

We advise using refinements after the search. Additionally we advise:

- Refinements presenting the number of vacancies if the refinement is used.
- If necessary and possible use "higher-than"-categories in stead of "from-to"-categories.

#### 4.11 The results agree with search query (no false positives or false negatives)

False positives are results that do not fit the search query. False negatives are results that meet the search query, but are not shown (see table on the right).

In both cases, it is a bad thing for a job board. Presenting false positives frustrates visitors, because they find results that do not meet their search query. For example they find a job on chemistry while they were searching for a job as an architect.

		Results	
		yes	no
Fitting with search query	yes	✓	✗ FALSE NEGATIVE
	no	✗ FALSE POSITIVE	✓

Having false negatives means that you do not offer the jobs to a job seeker that are available in your system. That is also bad for the job board.

We saw a lot of false positives disguised as top vacancies or new vacancies or something else. In all cases the sites presented them above the results. These sites pretend that these vacancies were top for the job seeker, but in most cases the jobs were not, as they did not fit the search query. Top vacancies are no top vacancies, these are paid results and are placed on top because they have top priority for the salesman who sells the ads.

**SPOTLIGHT VACATURES**

[COMMERCIELE PRODUCTMANAGER B2B Online Verticals \(M/V\)](#)    Haarlem    23-04-2008    [VNU media](#)

GEZOCHT: COMMERCIELE PRODUCTMANAGER B2B Online Verticals (M/V) Wij VNU Media is uitgever van 15 crossmedia brands. Onze merken zijn leidend. Onze events toonaangevend. Groei, vooruitgang...

**vnumedia**

#### A spotlight vacancy: a disguised advertisement? (intermediair.nl)

Again you can ask yourself: in the long term, what is the goal of your job board and who is the main audience? And is it wise to say it is top where it is not, because it is not connecting to the search query? You better present them clearly as sponsored jobs or some variation on that.

We do not report about this criterion as it was quite difficult (time-consuming) to be sure that a site did or did not violate this rule. Nevertheless: the statement is clear.

## 5. Conclusions

The Search Engine Results Page (SERP) is a difficult page to make user friendly. It is a loaded page with a lot of information and it is a tough job to make it usable. Nevertheless, there are some sites that present a fairly good SERP.

We listed 11 requirements for a good SERP. In our study we assessed 10 of them on the 9 job boards. We have defined several improvements that can be made.

There are some easy-to-fix improvements, for example the use of a summary with each vacancy or the use of a universal date format. Some requirements will be more difficult to implement, like the use of intelligent refinements.

However, we can conclude that for job boards there is still a lot to improve.

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### Next articles

In the next articles we will discuss the detail page (result page), personalisation and the overall functionality of the boards.

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