

Graduating to industry

You've studied hard and shouldered the cost of education, but have you got what it takes to be hired?

Having sat through hundreds of job interviews as an employer and as a former recruitment consultant, I am always amazed by one aspect of recent science and engineering graduates. These young men and women have spent years of their lives in training and literally thousands of hours in study and have made an enormous financial investment, but have then spent no time or effort preparing themselves for the process of securing their first job in industry.

On the day that a graduate steps off campus for the last time, he or she joins the throng of other graduates from this and the previous year, and the masses of better-qualified immigrants doing exactly the same – all vying for the few advertised positions.

A small percentage will go to graduate programs. Some grads will take jobs outside their training. Many will take temporary or part-time roles. Some will go back to uni, hoping that a higher degree will make them more employable. (Outside academia, higher degrees without experience don't aid employability significantly, and a PhD can actually hinder a career in Australian industry.) But only a minority will find the treasured job during the first 12 months after uni – a permanent, full-time career position.

Yet I offer good news. Finding your first job doesn't have to be frightening, or exasperating, or disheartening. If you approach it methodically and put in as much effort to the job search as you would to the job itself, then you can fast-track yourself into your first career role.

All you need is to properly understand the process and what the employer or recruiter requires from you and what you bring to the table.

It's nothing personal

This is a business transaction. An employer must be able to believe that making the decision to hire you is worth the dispassionate investment. However, as a recent graduate you are basically a commodity. You more or less have the same skills as all of the other recent graduates, the same experience. Despite what you might think, you didn't actually learn anything at university that is much use to your potential employer. All you really learned was the language of science, a way of thinking methodically.

So you must find ways to distinguish yourself. When I screen candidates by phone, my two favourite questions are: 'Tell me something that I can't learn by reading your resumé', and 'I have 100 resumé's in front of me. What makes you different?' There is no right answer to either question, but both separate the analytical thinkers from the pack.

What makes you special? Do you have outstanding communication skills? Have you demonstrated that you want this job?

That last point is particularly important. An employer can't afford to care that you want a job. Every candidate wants that. The employer needs you to want this job, and for you to pay back the investment and costs of employing you through your productivity and enough longevity (say, two years).

Technical skills can be taught. Personality can't. Your ultimate advantage is you.

Getting started

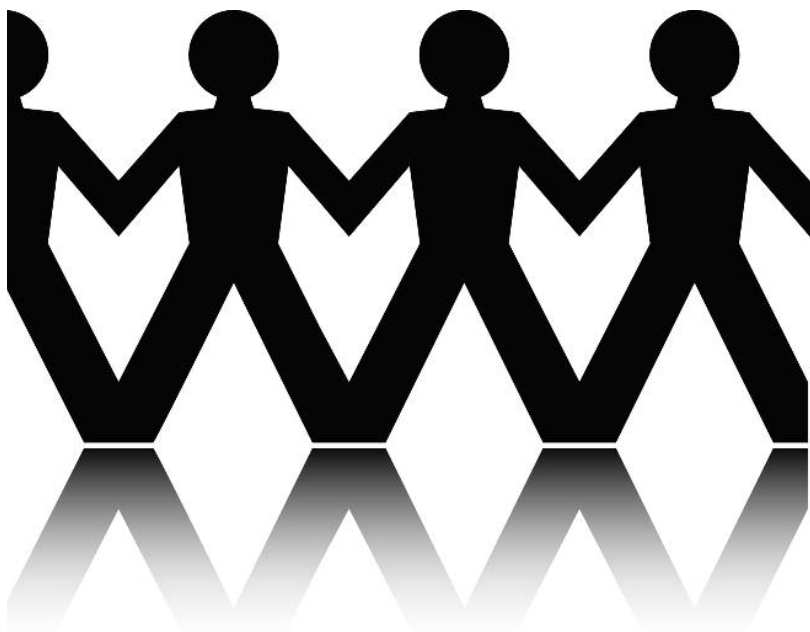
It all starts with your resumé. There are dozens of places that you can get resumé help, so I will keep my comments brief: if I can't find every important thing I need to know about you in 90 seconds with your resumé, then your resumé isn't good enough.

For a single role, I will receive 100 or more applications. On the first pass, I will reject 70 of those by simply glancing over the resumé's. I will read 20 more carefully before rejecting them. I will agonise over the last 10, call five candidates to assess their communication skills, and interview two.

Think of your resumé as the foot wedged in my door, which I can slam fast. So keep it easy to read. No fancy fonts. No blocks of text. Bullet points. Key information. Key skills and experience. And most importantly, adjust your resumé to suit every application you make.

You have probably heard that only about 10% of positions are actually advertised. That feels a bit low in my experience, but not implausibly so. So sure, check for the advertised positions, but also network your young butt off. Use whatever contacts you can find, your professors, your alumni association, your professional associations. Join RACI, attend events and introduce yourself around.

Five good applications are better than 100 rubbish ones. Employers recognise spray, and we reject it out of hand. Instead, use your network and the internet to research the company, its activities, structure and ethos.



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Carefully analyse the job ad. Every well-written job ad contains clues for you, direct or implied criteria that you need to answer, sometimes even deliberate tricks put in place by the employer to pre-qualify candidates.

Having analysed the job ad, write a covering letter to your (tailored) resumé, explaining in no more than 250 words why you want this role, how you satisfy the advertised criteria, and what makes you special.

Take your time and get it right. Between your research and your application, if you haven't taken four hours, you haven't been thorough enough. And mistakes in spelling and grammar are unforgivable.

Treat the process of getting a job as a job in itself. Work as hard at it as you would work to impress a new employer.

Interview hell

Few people enjoy interviews, but this is your key opportunity to distinguish yourself from other candidates. Here are some tips:

- Always arrive early, but don't go inside until a few minutes before you are due. Wait outside, then go inside composed and ready.
- Be well groomed. It does make a difference.
- Arm yourself with one or two intelligent questions about the company that demonstrate that you have done this research.
- Be energetic, happy and enthusiastic, even if something ruffles you.

- Keep your responses full, but concise. Don't wander.
- Think about what makes you unique, and be prepared to discuss it.
- Think in advance about situations from your past, examples of things that have gone well and things that have gone badly, and what you did to make them better.

Professional interviewers use behavioural-based questions, because the best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour. For example, 'Tell me about a situation when you had a problem with a colleague (at work or at uni). What was the issue? How did you resolve it?'

Of course, an interview is a two-way street. The employer would prefer that you ask questions to be sure that this truly is the job to which you want to commit the next couple of years of your life.

Your youthful energy is your strongest asset. Don't be afraid to show it.

Good luck!

Ultimately, a successful job search is much more in your own hands than you might realise. If you do your research properly, take your time to prepare your approach, and clearly define your individual advantages, then you can set yourself apart from the field. As with any business transaction, sealing the deal comes through understanding and delivering on the needs of the party across the table.

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