

# THE CONVERSATION

## Hints, tips and pitfalls for graduates in getting their first job

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There's more to getting a job than simply going to uni. Shutterstock

For many years now I've taken more than just a passing interest in how students can best position themselves to land a job after obtaining their degree. To assist students in their goal I run "careers advice" seminars, I liaise with industry and I maintain a jobs board highlighting relevant jobs in the local area.

What I've noticed during this time is an extraordinary divergence in how graduates go about getting their first job. Here are some hints and pitfalls I've noted that may assist motivated job-seekers in their quest.

### Your primary barrier to employment is unemployment

If you've never held a job before, employers will be wary of you, as there is no way of judging your basic work skills such as reliability, getting on with other staff, or responding effectively to feedback. These skills are vital, as the best training is rendered useless if it cannot be effectively applied in a workplace.

Employment (or even volunteer) history is best if it is related to the job you are seeking – but failing that, *any* work will do.

On a recent episode of Insight, a graduate felt entitled to stay on government benefits until he secured a job in his chosen career because any other work would be degrading.

Insight SBS

Compare his attitude to one of my graduates who waited tables for eight months before her dream job in forensic psychology came up (which she got). As an employer, who would you choose: someone who thinks they are too special to do work beneath them, or someone who has a strong work ethic and can adapt to whatever circumstances are thrown at them?

Be prepared to take on an insecure, low-paid position possibly tangential to your qualifications. Here's another cautionary example: Graduate A refused even to apply for a job on the grounds that it was only casual and the work duties were beneath him (precisely the same first job I had as a new graduate).

Graduate B took said job, was promoted six months later and is now on his way to a stellar career in psychology. One year later, Graduate A remains unemployed and may really struggle to get a foot in the door now.

## Resumes, referees and grades

At employment entry, **good results will help** distinguish you from the crowd. A cavalier disregard for accomplishment (**sadly encouraged by our modern education system**) suggests a lack of motivation, goal-striving and interest in self-improvement.

Write your cover letter and resume for the employer, not yourself. What does this employer want/need in an employee – and how can you give it to them? Letters or job interviews dominated by your expectations, enquiries re entitlements, a list of what you “can’t” do, or irrelevant yet potentially problematic personal information, will not be well received.

List some truthful positive qualities that will give a sense to a prospective employer where you might be best placed in their organisation. These are from my youngest two sons' first ever resumes: 1) I am fit and strong and happy to do work that involves physical labour or heavy lifting; 2) I get on well with others and am conscientious with an eye for detail.

Be succinct but not uninformative. For example, consider the difference between:

*data entry*

and

*data entry of biological information from paediatric patients into an SPSS file, basic data cleaning and analytical tasks.*

The first version tells an employer you can type; the second version tells them you can be trusted with sensitive data, basic analyses and which software program you can use.

Like it or not, social media is one of your referees. If you've posted pictures of yourself dancing naked on tables, tweeted offensive comments, or indulged in long rambling posts

about your nervous breakdowns, any worthwhile HR manager will find them.

Having a realistic appraisal of both your strengths and weaknesses is invaluable. It may come as a huge surprise to a number of job-seekers what their referees actually say about them. Why? Typically because of catastrophically poor insight on the part of the job-seeker, which raises further concerns about your ability to respond effectively to feedback.

If you have a history of short-term positions, consistently being let go, or difficulty obtaining a reference, seek honest feedback from a trusted source, and get help to change any problematic patterns of behaviour for your next position.

## Connect to the hidden job market

You would be amazed how many jobs aren't advertised, with employers fearing the tsunami of time-wasters they will receive. For example, I now have three local employers who contact me directly to see if I can recommend a student for their positions before they resort to advertising.

You absolutely can and will find success via door-knocking, networking and some plain old good luck: being the right person, at the right place, at the right time.



Graduate employment



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