



Graduate College Career Services Office

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THE NONACADEMIC JOB SEARCH FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS¹

Searching for jobs outside the academy is often challenging to graduate students. Because of today's tight economy, job seekers from all disciplines must expend extra effort to land a job. Graduate students should not despair--even in the tough times, there are always job vacancies, since organizations are constantly starting up, expanding, or replacing workers. The fact that you don't know about these jobs only means that they have not been advertised or that you're not using the right method to find them.

There is no magic formula for finding a job. A variety of techniques and strategies may be employed, and success varies with the individual. This document discusses a variety of techniques that should enhance your job search and highlights the practices that are most effective. The more intensive and diversified your job search is, and the smarter you are about using these techniques to your best advantage, the more likely you are to find golden opportunities.

Introduction to Job Hunting

Although it is tempting to jump headfirst into a job search, taking time to think, learn and strategize will optimize your results. The points listed below should be carefully considered prior to embarking on a job search.

Conduct a Thorough Self Assessment

If you haven't seriously considered what you want in a career, it is critical that you spend time engaged in self assessment before embarking on your job search. If you have not already identified the skills you can offer potential employers and the characteristics you value in a job, you will be unable to successfully sell yourself to possible employers. You will waste time pursuing jobs that are not a good fit for you skills, values, and interests. Information about self assessment can be found on the GCCSO Web site.

Be Proactive

No one owes you a job, and you certainly will not find one unless you take responsibility for the process. Be flexible and open-minded. You never know where an opportunity will lead, so take advantage of every opportunity that presents itself.

¹ Information within this document has been adapted from Richard Nelson Bolles, *What Color is Your Parachute?* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2003).

Be Persistent

Follow up on everything you do, and don't take "no" for an answer. If you submit your résumé via e-mail to a job posting, also submit a hard copy, place a phone call to the organization, and even stop by the organization (if possible) to reinforce your interest in the position. Although you don't want to annoy anyone, expressing a sincere interest in a position or organization is appropriate. Following up gives you more exposure, making it more likely that an employer will remember and consider you. Often the most memorable job candidate is the one who receives the offer.

Have a Plan

Consider your job search as a part-time to full-time job and structure your days and weeks accordingly. Set aside several blocks of time each week to focus on your job search. Assume a managerial role by setting realistic daily, weekly, and monthly goals, and strive to meet these objectives. For example, plan to make a certain number of phone calls, mail a specified number of letters and résumés, and follow up on a finite number of leads per week. Keep thorough records of all these activities, including an appointment calendar and a detailed log of calls, e-mail, mail, and follow-up activities.

Do Your Research

Researching career options and organizations is an essential step prior to beginning the job search. Without this knowledge, how can you be certain you are searching in the right places for the opportunities that will best satisfy your goals? And without having some basic knowledge about the organizations you are applying to, how can you possibly persuade them to hire you? Since research comes naturally to many graduate students and because most information is readily available on the Internet, career exploration and organizational research should not be an inordinately cumbersome process. Information about exploring careers and tools for researching organizations is available on the GCCSO Web site.

Go After the Organization, not the Job

Jobs constantly change and evolve, and being satisfied with your work environment is often more important than your actual responsibilities and tasks. If an appealing organization has a job available, but that position is not quite what you were looking for, you might still consider it. Here's why: once you have landed a job with an organization and established yourself, it is usually much easier to change positions within that organization. Getting your foot in the door, even in a position that is not quite what you want, may be an excellent first step to landing your dream job with an organization you really like.

Be Open-Minded and Flexible

Just because the organization or the job is not exactly what you envisioned, don't write it off automatically. Sometimes an unexpected opportunity will lead you to opportunities you had never imagined! Also, don't limit yourself by saying things like "I only want to work for a Fortune 100 Company." Small firms with fewer than twenty people can be extremely rewarding, and these firms actually create two thirds of all new jobs!

Be Realistic

It is important to maintain an optimistic, self-confident, and realistic attitude when looking for a job. Try to view your job search as a learning process and remember that you are also engaged in a matching process: you are looking for the right job as much as employers are looking for the right employee. Prepare for a long job search, especially during difficult economic times, and expect the process to last anywhere from four to eight months. Rejection is inevitable, so be prepared. Try not to take it personally and seek out feedback that will help you improve your search.

Manage Your Expectations

Although you may have remarkable skills and years of experience in graduate school, many employers may not consider this to be directly relevant to the job you are seeking. In fact, many employers are just now realizing the value of employees with advanced training. Without tangible work experience, you may have to start with an entry-level position. Do not let this discourage you. Although starting at the bottom of an organization may not be what you envisioned, sometimes it is the only way to gain entrance into a particular organization or industry. Employees with advanced degrees have sophisticated skills, maturity, and learn quickly; they consequently advance more rapidly within an organization than their younger, less seasoned peers.

The Easy Way Out: Posted Jobs

Responding to job postings in newspapers, journals, online, or at search firms is the most popular method of looking for a job, yet is the least successful approach, especially for those who are seeking high level, salaried positions. Because it is so easy to respond to ads, everyone out there does it! As a result, competition is exceptionally strong for the relatively few positions that are actually posted. A majority of salaried and managerial jobs are never even posted, so waiting to find the perfect job through an ad may provide bleak results. Although it is worth trying this method, it certainly should *not* be the only job search method you use, nor should you spend much of your time or energy on it. A list of sources for finding posted ads is available on the GCCSO Web site.

Online Employment Ads

Millions of people are on the Internet each day, and there are hundreds of job search sites out there that promise to match you up with your “perfect” job. It’s the easiest way to search for jobs nationwide, especially since you can do it from home and without expending much effort. However, recent reports indicate that there are currently sixteen million résumés floating around on the Internet and that the success rate for finding a job online is only about 4 percent. Such a low success rate suggests that this is not the best use of your time (note: success rates in high demand fields like information technology, engineering, or healthcare may be higher).

In addition to responding to online ads, there are also numerous Web sites where you may post your résumé, making it available to potential employers seeking qualified

candidates. Organizations generally use keyword searches to find résumés that interest them, so make sure you load your résumé with these (a list is available on the GCCSO Web site). Keep in mind that posting to such sites makes your personal information widely available to others.

Employment Ads in Newspapers and Journals

Responding to employment ads in newspapers and journals is a popular job search method, but not the most effective method due to stiff competition. Success rates hover at about 5 percent for those responding to newspaper ads and about 7 percent for individuals applying for positions advertised in professional and trade journals.

When responding to an ad, you should always include a cover letter that is tailored to the ad and follow up with a phone call within ten days. Other tips include:

- Be flexible; respond to positions that may be close, if not exactly, what you want.
- Watch for organizations hiring for a variety of positions. Even if they are not hiring for the specific position you want, consider contacting them because hiring *is* happening—they may also have a need for your skills.
- Do your research. Send your materials to the person indicated in the ad, but also send them to a person in the department where you are interested in working in order to potentially uncover unadvertised opportunities.
- Use regional, national and international sources (including newspapers), not just local ones.

Search Firms

Search firms, also sometimes known as headhunters, executive recruiters, or agencies, work for specific organizations that are seeking to hire employees. Since search firms do much of the preliminary screening of applicants, organizations are often more likely to choose this method for finding employees over some of the other methods discussed above. Nevertheless, search firms have success rates that range from 5 to 28 percent, with managerial and salaried jobs falling at the lower end of this range. Search firms should **always** be paid by the employer and not by you, and they should never have you sign a contract. Be selective when you are working with search firms; use only reputable firms and do not send your résumé to every recruiter in the area if you want to prevent multiple submissions of your résumé to the same organization.

Cold Calling: The Numbers Game

Cold calling is the process of approaching organizations and inquiring if they are hiring for positions that interest you. This can be accomplished by sending out résumés and e-mails, telephoning, or approaching an organization in person. Since you do not know whether a job is actually available, you need to contact as many organizations as possible to uncover these hidden opportunities. Statistics tell us that, on average, job seekers receive one job offer for every six interviews. Additionally, for every 100 unsolicited contacts made, a job seeker will receive between one and four interviews. Hence, to land a job, you may need to contact a minimum of 600 organizations. Some experts even estimate that as many as 1200 contacts may be necessary.

Although cold calling is research and labor intensive, it is a viable way to conduct a job search. While statistics say that merely mailing out résumés to employers at random yield only about a 7 percent success rate, going in person to an organization and asking for an interview yields a 47 percent success rate. Following up in person or by telephone can boost your chances of success considerably. Cold calls followed by personal contact can lead to a success rate as high as 69 percent. If you put forth the time and energy, it's very possible to land a job using these methods.

Targeted Mailing

A targeted mailing is done by contacting employers directly with a résumé and a personalized letter to inquire about employment possibilities. Since you don't know if these organizations are actually hiring, you are really trying to tap into their hidden job market. In order to conduct a targeted mailing, you must first spend time identifying organizations that interest you. Information about researching organizations is available on the GCCSO Web site. After you have determined these organizations, obtain the name and address of the manager who hires for the job or department of interest and send a personalized cover letter expressing your interest in employment. Request an appointment and indicate that you will follow up with this person by a certain date. Be reasonable about your time frame, since managers are busy and the U.S. mail can be very slow. Always follow up when you say you will.

Phone and E-mail Campaigns

Conducting a phone or e-mail campaign to inquire whether an organization is currently hiring can reduce the time you spend sending out unsolicited résumés and cover letters. Be careful, however, that the person you speak to on the phone or via e-mail really has the knowledge and authority to tell you if the company is hiring. If you are told that the organization is not hiring but you really have a strong interest in the organization, you may still wish to send a résumé or visit the organization personally. Contact as many organizations as possible to determine their vacancies, and follow up with a personalized letter and résumé if you are told that they are hiring.

Knocking on Doors

Believe it or not, it is possible to find a job by knocking on doors. Although sometimes impossible to do, it is incredibly effective to personally visit organizations where you would like to work (especially small businesses). It shows your commitment and interest to the organization, and it is a great way to uncover hidden job opportunities. Showing up in person at an organization you know to be hiring is also a good strategy. Try to talk directly to the person making hiring decisions. This is often fairly easy to arrange in smaller organizations. If you do not know who is responsible for hiring, do additional research or make a few more phone calls to determine with whom you should speak. Although it can be intimidating to walk into an organization and ask a stranger for a job, this is a technique that truly works.

Career Fairs

Career fairs are yet another way of meeting face-to-face with a potential employer. Career fairs bring employers who are currently hiring together with job seekers in one central location. Campus career fairs at the University of Illinois are generally open to all students and are an opportunity for you to speak with a wide array of employers within a short period of time. National career fairs are often run by professional organizations that act as a broker between you and the hiring company. At career fairs, you have the opportunity to give a recruiter your résumé and gather information about the company. You also have the chance to impress the recruiter in person, but usually only for one or two minutes, as you are competing against hundreds of other students to get “noticed.” If you do an impressive job of selling yourself, the career fair might lead to multiple interviews. A good strategy for graduate students might be to go to a career fair and distribute their résumés, but then to follow up directly with the organizations or recruiters with a phone call or personalized cover letter and résumé. A list of upcoming career fairs is available on the GCCSO Web site.

Winning Strategies-- The “Best” Ways to Find Jobs

Networking

It's not what you know, it's WHO you know! Networking is the number one way of finding a job, and according to recent statistics, nearly 70 percent of jobs are obtained this way. When you couple that number with the fact that many *other* job search techniques involve some degree of networking, it emerges as perhaps the single most important thing you can do to find a job.

What is networking?

Have you heard of the Six Degrees of Separation Theory? It states that every person in the world is connected to each other through no more than five other people. This means that through your informal “network,” you should be able to connect to many people who are either in the career field or in the organization that you are interested in pursuing. Networking is an honest effort to connect with as many people as possible who can assist you with your job search.

How to begin the networking process

The first step to networking is to build a list of your contacts. Your contacts should include almost everyone who you know: current and former classmates, current and former co-workers, members of organizations you are involved in, alumni from Illinois and from other universities you have attended, friends, neighbors, relatives, and faculty members. After you build this network, begin to talk to the people whom you know well and ask them whom *they* know. You will gradually start to find people who can put you in contact with others who can aid you in your job search.

How can networking help me?

Many people will tell you that they landed their first job through a contact rather than a job posting. Networking can help you in two major ways.

1. **Most job opportunities are never posted to the outside world.** By telling everyone within your network that you are seeking a job, you are automatically opening yourself up to the “hidden” job market. Ask everyone in your network to let you know if they know of any job opportunities in your desired field, and have them spread the word to everyone within THEIR network. All of the sudden, you have potentially hundreds of people keeping their eyes and ears peeled for job opportunities for you!
2. **Employers are much more likely to interview someone who is recommended to them by someone they trust than to hire someone about whom they know nothing.** If you find an organization you are interested in working for, activate your network! Start asking everyone you know if they know a manager in the ABC Department of the XYZ Company. Even if none of your contacts know such a person, it is still probable that someone within *their* network knows such a person.

A Few More Notes About Networking

- Networking must **always** be reciprocated. If you want people to help you, you need to help those who are trying to make contact with you or your network.
- Networking requires careful record keeping. To be effective, you need to know the name and some basic information about the contact who led you to the organization you are pursuing.
- Always maintain your network extremely carefully. Send thank you notes if someone helped you, holiday cards to stay in touch, and regular notes to update them on your progress.

Informational Interviews

Informational interviews are not job interviews, but rather are opportunities for you to spend a short amount of time talking to people who are in your desired field or organization. You obviously will need to network in order to locate people in your field or organization of interest before you conduct an informational interview.

When you conduct an informational interview, you have the opportunity to ask questions, gather information, and make contact with people who are extremely knowledgeable about their field or organization. In general, people usually enjoy talking about what they do and giving advice, and they are usually the best sources of information about what their job and organization is really like. Conducting informational interviews not only provides you with information about potential career opportunities, it also builds your network. If you conduct successful informational interviews and remain in touch with the people you talk with, they may also remember and refer you as they learn of new job opportunities. Conducting informational interviews is also a great way to practice your interviewing skills. Further information about conducting informational interviews is available on the GCCSO Web site.

Finding a Mentor

A mentor is someone who has goals and interests that are similar to yours, but is a few steps further along in his or her career path than you. This person may give you advice and guidance for achieving your career goals, and your interactions may be frequent. Although identifying the appropriate person to potentially serve as your mentor may be difficult, having someone with more experience who can help guide your career is invaluable. While conducting informational interviews, try to identify a person who could serve as your mentor. A relationship with a mentor can be very informal, but is generally a closer relationship than one you would establish from a typical informational interview.

Getting in from the Inside

The majority of vacant positions are filled internally. In fact, most jobs are never even posted to the outside world, and many employers would not even consider hiring someone about whom they know nothing. Hiring someone from the inside can be done in many ways: by promoting a current full-time or part-time employee, by hiring former full-time or part-time workers, or by hiring interns, volunteers, contract workers, or temporary workers. Employers like this strategy because it is very low-risk: they already have an established relationship and know the quality of the work of the person they are hiring.

Getting some experience in the field or organization you want to work in is the only way to find a job from the inside. Also, gaining some experience before embarking on a full-time job search is essential, especially if you are a graduate student who has had very few work experiences outside academia. This gives you more credibility and demonstrates your commitment to the field. It is also a great way to transition into the nonacademic world and gain some experience for your résumé. Although most graduate students are extremely busy, there are many ways to gain experience that might be conducive to your schedule.

Internships

An internship is probably the best way to gain experience with an organization. An internship is a short-term work experience that may be paid or unpaid. Internships often occur during the summer, but can also be done part-time during the academic year. Internships provide the intern with the opportunity to “test-drive” a particular field and simultaneously gain valuable work experience. The process used to find an internship is similar to the process involved in finding a full-time job, so this is a good opportunity to practice those skills.

The structure of an internship is generally agreed upon by both the student and the employer; it is important to develop a plan for any internship to ensure that the experiences you are given match your goals. Some companies permit flexible hours, particularly for unpaid internships. Any experience you can gain is valuable, so take advantage of these opportunities, learn as much as you can, and make as many contacts as possible.

Job Shadowing

If you are unable to spare the time or locate an internship, shadowing someone in the workplace can be extremely valuable. Job shadowing is similar to an extended version of an informational interview, and can range in length from a couple of hours to several days. The advantage to shadowing is that you really get to see what a typical day is like for someone in a particular field or organization, and it will provide you with topics of discussion in a potential job interview.

Other Ways to Gain Experience

If you are unable to arrange an internship or job shadowing experience, be creative and try to find other ways to gain experience. Some suggestions include:

- Find a part-time job in a company or industry that interests you. For example, if you want to work in banking or finance, a part-time job as a bank teller would provide you with meaningful experience and help you develop contacts.
- Volunteer for an organization to gain some experience and exposure. Nonprofit and government agencies are usually anxious for extra help and often can't afford to pay for it.
- Try doing some paid or unpaid consulting, projects, or even some administrative or secretarial work for an organization that interests you.