

JOB SEARCH TACTICS FOR NEW GRADUATES



ABOUT THIS REPORT

The *Job Search Tactics for New Graduates* report provides a comprehensive overview of the journey toward beginning a rewarding career. Enclosed you will find insightful direction and advice to prepare new graduates for the transition from student to professional.

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THE HIRING PROCESS



New graduates face a difficult challenge when entering the job market. There is a catch-22—most positions require experience to get hired, but as a new graduate, you have little or no experience. This challenge has been magnified since 2008 as companies have restricted hiring due to the economic downturn. When companies do hire, they focus on adding experienced talent that can step in and be productive from day one.

Fortunately, the job force still needs diversity of experience, no matter what the economic climate. Even in this tough job market, there are positions for new graduates.

To be successful, your job search needs to be well organized and active. There is little room for error and experienced candidates have the advantage of knowing what to expect in a job search. Fortunately, you can learn how the process works, and avoid the pitfalls many of your peers will fall into.

HOW COMPANIES HIRE

The hiring process can be slow. There are isolated occasions when the process progresses quickly, but these are rare. More often, a company will take at least a month and often between two and six months to fill an open position. As a new graduate, you can expect the process to follow that timeline. This is frustrating for all job seekers, but it is part and parcel of the hiring process. You need to be prepared for the time it will take, and start your job search early in your senior year. If you wait until May to start, you are likely to spend the summer unemployed or underemployed.

The hiring process typically begins with an open position or a newly created position. The company begins advertising the position and its goal is to attract as many qualified candidates as possible.

APPLICATION AND RÉSUMÉ SCREEN

Once a position is advertised, job seekers begin applying. The first screening step is an initial scan of the résumé. Some companies use automated systems to scan résumés for keywords and other details. Résumés that meet the search criteria are forwarded to a recruiter who reviews them. Résumés that do not meet the search criteria are rejected, without ever being read by a person. This makes it important to include details about key skills, experiences and education.

When résumés are first read by a human, the résumé screener scans the résumé quickly. Companies typically receive hundreds of résumés for every open position. Recruiters cannot spend much time on any résumé. Most résumés will be scanned for 15 to 30 seconds and rejected. The reader looks for a few critical attributes at this stage. Usually this includes the experience

level, highest education level and a couple of key skills. If the candidate has these attributes, the résumé will be read more thoroughly. If the candidate doesn't, the résumé will be rejected.

The next step is a more thorough read of the résumé by one or more people. By this point, as many as 90 percent of candidates have already been rejected. The reviewers will take the remaining selection and choose the top candidates who should be phone screened. This assessment is much broader and deeper than the initial 30-second screen. The recruiter looks for a number of different skills, noteworthy accomplishments and experiences that set the person up for success in the position.

Phone screen

The company usually moves forward with a phone screen. This is an interview by phone. Phone screens can be short and unstructured, or long and structured. Many focus on a few specific areas. The interviewer asks about specific skills or experiences, and clarifies anything confusing about the résumé. The main goal of a phone screen is to validate the conclusion from the résumé assessment. This is done to select the best candidates for a face-to-face interview.

First face-to-face interview

Candidates are invited to face-to-face interviews to assess their background and potential in greater detail. The style and structure of these interviews vary greatly from company to company and from interviewer to interviewer. It is essential to prepare for this interview by researching the company you are interviewing with and planning how you will respond to questions. Some interviewers focus on specific aspects of the candidate's background, and develop questions from the content of the résumé. Others use a behavioral interview and experience-based questions. Still others focus on aptitude questions designed to assess a candidate's reasoning ability and creativity.

Second face-to-face interview

Most companies have two rounds of face-to-face interviews. The first round is often with the primary hiring manager. The next round is often with senior managers. The second round of interviews may be structured, but often are less structured and more conversational. The interviewer often assesses a candidate's personality, values, attitude, work ethic and overall fit with the corporate culture.

Reference and background checks

Most companies will wait to conduct reference and background checks until they are preparing to make an offer. At this stage, a decision is usually made on who will be hired, and a background check is performed to make sure there is nothing major that would prevent the candidate from being hired. In some

cases, the company extends an offer, but makes it contingent on the results of the background check.

Offer

The company will extend an offer to the top candidate. Other candidates may not be notified of the rejection yet. This allows the company to move to its second choice if the first rejects the offer. Usually, an offer will be made by someone from human resources, since the offer will contain a number of benefit details that are best explained by an expert. The company will expect a quick response—within a day or two at the most. Candidates are expected to assess their interest in the position throughout the process.

Hiring process variations

The hiring process is far from universal. Each company is different and the process varies. Some companies have only one round of face-to-face interviews. This is more common with lower-level positions, and many graduating students will see this. Other companies have more than two rounds of interviews.

One common step that many companies include is assessment testing. Companies test for specific skills, general aptitude or psychological attributes. These tests can occur at any stage. Some are used as a pre-screen before interviews are scheduled, while others occur at the middle or end of the process. For aptitude- and skill-based assessments, it helps to practice similar tests in advance.

One way companies commonly hire graduating students is through events organized by a school's career services department. Often this is a condensed process, and allows for faster hiring decisions.

What companies look for

It is important to understand what a company looks for when hiring. Many job seekers fail to understand what is important to hiring managers, and do not properly highlight their own potential as a result.

Hiring managers assess candidates for three primary attributes. First, the candidates must be capable of meeting the minimum expectations for the job. Second, the candidates should have the potential to contribute additional value and exceed expectations. Third, the candidates must not create problems within the team or organization. Many candidates focus on demonstrating an ability to do the job. This is important, but every candidate who is interviewed is likely to meet this expectation or they wouldn't have gotten so far in the interviewing process. It is the other two criteria, adding additional value and not causing problems, which are often the deciding factors when a hiring decision is made.

A candidate's attitude, work ethic, values and professionalism play a big role in the success of the candidate. Hiring managers do not want to hire someone who is capable but proves to be toxic to their team. This is often the worst candidate for the job. Not only does the candidate fail to add value, the candidate undermines the value of others.

Assessing the values and attitude of a candidate is difficult, but can be accomplished in an interview. Hiring managers strive to understand how job seekers approach situations, and how they behave on a daily basis. The aptitude and long-term potential of the graduate is also important. The company may hire for an entry-level position, but they assess candidates for the potential to get to the senior level because they are making an investment in that employee. This makes work ethic and aptitude critical. The candidate will be expected to exceed expectations and provide significantly more value to the company. It is the potential for success and long-term growth that motivates a hiring manager to employ a candidate.

One of the least important attributes of graduating college students is technical skills. This varies by career field, with technical skills more important in highly technical fields—but generally technical skills are not the defining criteria. If a company wanted the most technically capable person, it would never hire a new graduate. The company would hire someone who is already doing the same job.

This is not intuitive to most college students. They just spent four years developing technical skills and gaining technical knowledge within their major, and spent tens of thousands of dollars on this education. And yet, the technical skills are not the most important criteria for getting a job. The education indicates the aptitude of the job seeker, demonstrates a level of commitment and work ethic, and teaches a candidate how to learn. It is these attributes that are valued by employers. Technical skill is less important because the company knows the candidate can be trained. In all likelihood, it will be necessary for the company to teach technical skills to a recent graduate. No matter how rigorous an academic program is, there will be differences between the theory taught and how the company puts those theories into practice.

The understanding that classes are only a small part of what makes a new graduate marketable is important for job seekers. Below are some of the attributes that are most critical to hiring managers:

- Attitude
- Aptitude
- Work ethic

- Values
- Communication skills
- Professionalism and maturity
- Technical skills

Keep this list in mind as you write your résumé and cover letter, and as you prepare to interview. It will help you identify experiences that demonstrate your potential outside the classroom.

JOB SEARCH STRATEGIES



Technology has opened new strategies for finding jobs, and has made other strategies obsolete. Choosing the right approach is essential. The strategy you choose will affect your odds of success.

The first place to look for a job is with companies to which you have some personal connection. Ideally, you have gained some experience through internships. Summer internships are a great way to gain experience, and to build a relationship with an employer. These employers are much more likely to want to hire you if you worked hard and had a good attitude during your internship.

The next place to look is your college career center. Targeting companies that come to your campus to find employees offers a much better chance of success than picking companies at random.

After taking the above steps, there are three primary strategies you should consider: networking, job boards and unsolicited applications.

Regardless of the strategy you choose, it is essential you get an early start. Do not wait until May to start your job search. Try to line up a job long before you graduate. Many companies extend job offers months ahead of graduation, with a start date shortly after graduation. The offer generally comes with a requirement that you must graduate, and there will be an expectation that you maintain your GPA, but if you meet the company's criteria, the job will be there when you graduate.

Job searches can take months. Even a fast-moving process is likely to take at least six to eight weeks. If you wait until graduation to start looking, you are likely to be unemployed all summer.

NETWORKING

Most people do not understand how to network effectively to find a job. Networking is more than calling people you know to tell them you are looking for a job. While it is important to get the word out on your upcoming graduation, there must be more to your networking strategy. You need to engage the people in your network, and this requires a continuous dialog. If you plan on staying in the same location as your school, the networking process is easier. You can meet with people face to face almost any time. If you are moving to another part of the country, networking will be tougher, but still possible.

Start by finding people who have contacts and a network of their own. People who are well connected in the industry you are pursuing are great, but don't just stop there. You don't know who will ultimately be able to help you, so build as large a network as you can.

Try to meet with the people in your network. This can be a lunch or breakfast meeting, or just getting together for coffee. Your goal is to ask for advice. Most people want to help.

When you get together, ask questions. Ask each person for an impression of your résumé. Ask what careers they think are best for you. Ask what companies they think would be good to start with. Ask what interview questions they would ask you. You will get a wealth of information and advice. Each meeting will give you something different. The more meetings you have, the better prepared you will be. Take notes at all of the meetings.

After the meeting, put the advice into practice. It is unlikely every bit of advice from every person will be actionable, but it is likely some of the advice will be useful. Act on this advice and follow up. Thank the people you met for their time and advice, and let each person know how you used the advice they gave you. This will demonstrate that you are committed to working hard to help yourself. People are more likely to help you in the future if you show them respect and use the advice they give you.

In addition to getting some great advice and job search tips, some of the people you meet may refer you to specific companies and opportunities. This will help focus your search efforts on opportunities you can pursue quickly.

The biggest benefit of networking is the information you can gain on specific companies during your job search. As you research companies, you can ask people in your network if they have any contacts. If you develop a large network, one of your contacts is likely to know someone at the company you are researching. That person can give invaluable advice and information about the company's hiring practices, values, culture and what the company looks for when hiring. This will allow you to tailor your approach to the company and improve your chances.

JOB BOARDS

Job boards are some of the easiest places to look for a job. Jobs are advertised, and all you have to do is follow the instructions and apply. Because this is so easy, there is a lot of competition. It can be difficult to stand out.

The first step is to make sure you have a well-written résumé. Your résumé is your sales pitch, and if it isn't strong, you will have little success. You also need to customize your résumé for each job. It is difficult to be successful with a one-size-fits-all strategy. Tailor your résumé to each position.

There are thousands of job boards. You will need to use several to maximize your chances. Although companies want to promote ads as much as possible, it is not feasible to post ads everywhere. You have to be selective. It is not possible to check every job board.

To select the job boards you will check regularly, start with job aggregators. Indeed.com and Simply Hired are great sites that pull job postings from thousands of job boards. These websites allow you to search the majority of job postings at once.

Next, search the big job boards such as CareerBuilder and Monster. These sites have a large number of job postings and make it easy to search for positions.

You should also look at industry-specific sites. For example, the APICS Career Center at apics.org is a great site for operations management positions. You should search regional job sites, too. These will help you identify positions in your target geographic area.

Finally, create a list of companies you want to check on a regular basis. Set a schedule for checking these company sites every few days.

By developing a comprehensive strategy, you will identify the best jobs for you. You should focus on those. You do not want to get bogged down applying for positions that are not close to your goals.

UNSOLICITED APPLICATIONS

You are likely to identify companies you want to work for, but that do not have open positions matching your background. That is not a reason to give up. You can apply even if the company isn't seeking candidates. This strategy will require a lot of work to develop a strong cover letter and customized résumé, but if you really want to work for a particular organization, the effort is worth it. You need to do your homework on a company; find out what they look for in candidates, and learn as much about their values and culture as possible. You then need to determine how to submit your résumé. You can send it to the HR department. This will get your résumé to a recruiter quickly, but it may not be the best way to apply. Your goal with an unsolicited application is to be considered for a role that isn't open to you. The recruiter in human resources is likely going to focus on finding candidates who exactly match existing requirements. Your résumé is unlikely to fit, especially if there isn't a job posting matching your background.

You can approach a hiring manager directly. If you know what department you want to work in, you can send your résumé to that department manager. If the manager is impressed with your background, this can motivate the manager to consider new graduates for a position.

To send an application to a manager, you can send a hard copy by mail, you can send an email or you can submit the résumé through a social media site.

LinkedIn is great for identifying managers in a company, and you can submit your résumé directly.

Unsolicited applications can be an effective strategy, but it is likely to be a slow process with a low success rate. It requires sending a résumé to a company when you don't know if the company is hiring or if they want people with your background.

RÉSUMÉ ADVICE FOR NEW GRADUATES



A résumé is a sell sheet. It is designed to convey the potential value you offer an employer, and motivate the hiring manager to learn more about you. This requires you to present examples of past successes to separate yourself from your competition.

Most job seekers list their degree and work experience on their résumé, but don't provide details about accomplishments. The result is everyone with the same experience level looks the same. For graduating college students, this is a big problem. How do you separate yourself from your peers? There are likely to be a lot of students, from your school and others, who have the same degree. Your GPA may be better than most, but that is only one detail. No matter how high your GPA is, there are others who will have a GPA at least as high, if not higher. How are you different from every other student graduating in your field?

The key to standing out from your competition is showing how you will add value to an organization. This can be demonstrated through your aptitude and work ethic. It can be shown through a rigorous curriculum and challenging electives. It can be shown through involvement in extracurricular activities. Regardless of the specific activity or experience, the key is to show how you went above and beyond expectations.

Companies do not want people who will do the minimum and go home. They want employees who consistently exceed expectations and add significant value. Your résumé needs to demonstrate a pattern of success at adding value.

RÉSUMÉ STRUCTURE

The first choice you have to make in writing a résumé is structure. There are three primary structures: chronological, functional and a hybrid of the two. Chronological: A chronological résumé focuses on the work experience of the job seeker, with jobs listed in reverse chronological order. This résumé works well for experienced job seekers who want to emphasize work experience. While the structure is adequate for graduating college students, they typically have little or no experience, and it can be difficult to effectively develop this style of résumé.

Functional: A functional résumé focuses on specific practical areas.

These are categories of skills that are relevant. For example, a person may organize information around their leadership skills, communication skills, analytical aptitude and technical skills. This approach allows the job seeker to tailor specific skills and goals to an organization. This is a good option for graduating college students who have little or no work experience, but can demonstrate skills through other pursuits like extracurricular activities.

Hybrid: A hybrid résumé includes elements of both a functional and chronological format. There is a section with work experience, although the details in this section are fewer than in the chronological structure. There are also sections for key functional areas, but these are shorter than what would be on a purely functional résumé. This is a great structure for graduating college students who have a little work experience and want to highlight the skills that set them apart from their peers.

REQUIRED DATA

An effective résumé must include some basic information. Without this information, the document is likely to be discarded by hiring managers. The required information provides an overview of your background, and gives a hiring manager the ability to understand the basics of your background and experience.

The required information is not a comprehensive list of everything you should put in your résumé.

Education: You should include the degree earned, the school and the school's location (city and state), and when you graduated or will graduate. For graduating college students, this often requires putting in a projected graduation date. It is also helpful to include your major, minor(s) and GPA, but you can choose which information is valuable.

Work experience: Your employer, job title and dates of employment are essential. It is important to show any experience you have. The experience does not have to be applicable to your career field. As a graduating college student, employers do not expect you to be experienced. The jobs you have held are an indication of your work ethic. You want to show that you are reliable, hardworking and committed to your career, and your experience can help do this.

Objective: Indicate, either directly or indirectly, the type of job you are pursuing. This can be in the form of an explicit objective statement, or it can be conveyed through the experiences you emphasize.

Skills: Show the marketable skills you possess. This can be difficult, since you need to know what a hiring manager is seeking. Fortunately, job descriptions can help you identify the most critical skills.

Accomplishments: Although many résumés do not have any accomplishments and they aren't usually a requirement, every job seeker should consider accomplishments an absolute requirement. Accomplishments motivate a hiring manager to want to learn more about you. They show the value you provided in the past, and demonstrate your potential. Accomplishments

should be specific, and detail what you did and what results you delivered. Ideally, the results will be quantified.

CUSTOMIZATION

Even after you write your first résumé, you are far from finished. Every application you send should be customized to the position. This is a basic sales technique—but many job seekers send the same résumé to every hiring manager.

Imagine a company that has a sales strategy where they send every prospect the same generic proposal, without any customization. The company is going to struggle. Now consider what top companies do. They run multiple advertising campaigns at once, with each focused on a different attribute and demographic. You need to do the same thing with your résumé.

Everything on your résumé can be customized, but fortunately, most of it doesn't need to be. A lot of basic information stays the same. The amount that needs to change is relatively small.

Objective: Your objective should adapt to the position you are pursuing. It would be a huge mistake to say your objective is to work in purchasing and submit it for a sales position.

Branding statement: Your résumé should include a clear brand. Often this is the first line or two of your résumé, and focuses on your most marketable attributes. Your branding statement should be adapted to match the position you are pursuing.

Accomplishments: Ideally, you have a number of accomplishments to emphasize. Select the accomplishments that best match the position you are pursuing.

Skills: Each job requires a different combination of skills, and your presentation of your skills should match the job. Select the top three to five skills to emphasize based on the job description and other information you can learn about the job.

OTHER RÉSUMÉ WRITING ADVICE

One of the mistakes inexperienced job seekers make is to use personal pronouns in their résumé. A résumé should be written without personal pronouns. This is an unusual style of writing most people do not use frequently, but it is essential in a résumé.

This style typically omits the subject from each line. For example, a job seeker detailing fast food experience might write, "Managed the night shift with a crew of six." This is the preferred style of writing and omits the personal pronoun "I."

Watch out for technical terminology and abbreviations. Some terminology may be so technical in nature that recruiting professionals who have never worked in the industry may be unfamiliar with the terms. Even seasoned industry professionals may not be familiar with the latest terminology used in schools. Each company develops its own vocabulary. For example, many companies refer to machinery by the manufacturer's name. Using the technical name of a type of machine may confuse the reader. The most difficult part is identifying what is an unusual technical term.

A good way to check how a term is used is to Google it or search for it on a job board. If the term fails to appear in any job postings, it is unlikely to be valued by hiring managers. To check if you have used jargon that is confusing, have people outside the industry read your résumé and see if they understand it. Many HR managers do not know all the terminology for the industry, yet often they are the ones who screen résumés first.

Graduating college students need to present as many skills, experiences and accomplishments as they can. Without a lengthy track record of employment, they need to highlight elements from their background that demonstrate their potential. There is a wide range of details that should be considered:

- Certifications
- Foreign languages
- Honors and awards
- Involvement in professional groups
- Significant research projects
- Study abroad experience
- Significant technical skills

Each of these areas can be a separate section on a résumé, or the information can be included within other sections.

INTERVIEW ADVICE FOR NEW GRADUATES



It can be difficult to differentiate between candidates using only their résumés. This makes interviews critical. Candidates' communication skills, attitude and professionalism have a huge effect on their odds of getting hired.

There is a job search secret most people do not know: The most experienced candidate is rarely hired. The candidate who gets the job offer is the candidate who does the best job of communicating their potential. This can make interviewing skills as important as technical skills and experience. If you can communicate in a clear and direct way, and demonstrate your potential through your past experiences, it will help you land more job offers.

Most job seekers struggle to communicate effectively. There are a number of reasons for this. Many job seekers have difficulty understanding what they need to do to prepare. Others fail to practice their interviewing skills. Some job seekers are intimidated in an interview and do not relax. Still others have poor communication skills. Regardless of the cause, most job seekers perform far worse in interviews than they should.

As a graduating college student, you have an added challenge—this is likely your first major job search. You do not have past interviewing experience to help you get up to speed. Fortunately, you can work to develop your interview skills and perform well in interviews. You can gain an edge on your competition and land job offers.

INTERVIEW STRUCTURE

Although every interview is different, the vast majority have the same three-part structure. The first part is the ice breaker, where the interviewer asks a broad, general question about your background. This question is often a variation of "Tell me about yourself." Most job seekers struggle with this. It seems like an easy question, but is deceptively hard. You need to present your professional background, accomplishments and skills in a focused way that conveys your potential.

A good approach for graduating college students is to talk about your skills, values and motivations. This approach will focus on skills directly related to the job, and provide information on the attributes that fit the position. The attributes that are likely to be most important include your attitude, work ethic, integrity, aptitude, drive and commitment to success. Emphasizing some of these can help create an impression that you will be successful in whatever you do. You also want to show your passion and desire to pursue the career you are trying to enter.

After the “tell me about yourself” request, the main portion of the interview starts. This is the question-and-answer stage. In some interviews, this can be friendly with a lot of back-and-forth dialog. In other interviews, it will be more clinical, with the interviewer asking a question, you providing an answer, and the interviewer moving to the next question. Regardless of the style, this is where you need to provide details about your background. Make sure you emphasize your accomplishments.

The final stage of the interview is the part of the interview where you ask questions. In almost every interview, you will be given a chance to question the interviewer. It is essential that you prepare questions in advance. You always want to ask questions, and failing to do so is an indication that you are unprepared and uninterested in the position.

There are a few styles of questions you can ask. First, you can try to learn more about the hiring process. Asking what the next steps will be is a good question. You can also ask about the person who was in the position previously. This can give insight into what the hiring manager may be looking for, and the future of the role. Second, ask a question or two about the challenges of the position. This can help you understand what is most important to the hiring manager. Third, you can ask questions about the company and its future plans.

STORYTELLING

One of the most powerful interview techniques is storytelling. You need to be able to relate specific experiences that demonstrate your skills and abilities. Many companies have adopted behavioral interview techniques. This interview style questions the job seeker on specific examples of the job seeker’s experience. The questions take the form of “Tell me about a time when you...” To answer a behavioral question, you need to be specific. The question asks for a specific time when you were in a certain situation, and without a specific answer, you might be unsuccessful in the interview.

The premise behind behavioral interviewing is that past performance is the best predictor of future performance. In other words, how you have acted in a situation in the past is a good indicator of how you will act in the same situation again.

Behavioral techniques are especially useful with graduating college students. Because students have little or no work experience, it is helpful to assess how the student has performed in situations that are similar to work situations. In particular, these questions are good at assessing a job seeker’s work ethic, integrity, conflict management, leadership, teamwork and other attributes. The challenge of behavioral interviewing is the requirement to be specific.

If you have not prepared for a behavioral interview, you are likely to perform poorly. It is difficult to come up with a number of thoughtful, specific stories from your background on the spot. You must think about these in advance. There is a simple formula for preparing for behavioral interviews. Develop a variety of anecdotes from your background. Put the anecdotes in the form of situation, action and result. This format creates a clear structure that is easy to explain and easy for the interviewer to follow. Ideally, you should have at least 10 anecdotes prepared that you can adapt during an interview. These experiences should cover a range of topics. This will give you material you can use to answer almost any question.

The anecdotes you prepare should demonstrate your skills, abilities, attitude and accomplishments. One critical area to prepare is your experience working on a team and dealing with conflict. In a company, you will have disagreements with coworkers, but you will be expected to work through these disagreements professionally. Showing you have been in conflicts where you were able to resolve your issues and work to produce a beneficial result helps a hiring manager understand how you might behave. Hiring managers want to hire a star performer, but they are even more concerned with avoiding individuals who have bad attitudes and will become toxic to their teams.

The anecdotes you develop can relate to professional work, schoolwork or extracurricular activities. Someone on a sports team may have great examples of leadership ability. Different clubs and groups can provide an individual with opportunities to coordinate the activities of individuals in conflict. Juggling work and school can help show your work ethic, commitment and ability to hit deadlines. The key is showing the situation you were in, how you acted and what positive results you achieved.

AREAS OF IMPROVEMENT

Many hiring managers will ask about your failures and weaknesses. This is a topic most job seekers struggle with unnecessarily.

You can have success talking honestly about your areas of improvement if you can explain what you learned and what you would do differently. Job seekers get hung up on a question about areas of conflict because they assume the hiring manager will hold it against them. The hiring manager is looking for candidates who recognize that they are not perfect, and who can honestly discuss conflicts and what steps they have taken to overcome challenges. The best way to do this is to show how you have learned from your experiences. Add a “lessons learned” component to your situation, actions and results when you talk about your experiences. You can talk about what you would do differently and how this would be better. As a college student, there

should be many examples from your background where you have learned and grown. For example, many college students start out not understanding how important it is to work ahead in their classes. They wait until the last minute to do everything. They find that although this worked in high school, the workload in college doesn't allow procrastinating. Students then learn to plan, schedule and organize their work so it can be accomplished effectively. This is an important lesson for many students. Students learn to take an area of improvement and turn it into a strength with planning and organizational skills. Students can also turn a conflict, such as low grades early in a college career, into a success.

RESEARCH

It is absolutely essential that you research every company you interview with in advance. Many hiring managers ask candidates directly what they know about the company. You must have a good answer. Failing to research is perceived as a sign of disinterest in the position or a poor work ethic. Neither is a good impression.

When you research the company, there are several pieces of information you should find. First, you need to know what the company does. Learn about the company's primary products and services, and the markets it works in. Second, research the company's values and history. The "About" page on the company website is a great place to find this information. Third, research the position so that you understand the basics of the role. Fourth, if the company is publicly held, review its financial information. You want to know if the company is profitable, how it is growing and how big it is. Finally, read the company news. You should be aware of any major initiatives at the company.

GOING TO THE INTERVIEW

When you go to an interview, it is essential to be prepared and present a professional image. Start by arriving early. Plan to arrive at least 15 minutes prior to the interview. If you have a significant distance to travel, plan on arriving 30- to 60 minutes early. It is far better to arrive early than to arrive late and flustered.

As you prepare for an interview, print the driving directions the day before. You don't want to learn that your printer is out of ink when you are running late. Print a few extra copies of your résumé to take to the interview. You should always have a copy of your résumé with you at an interview. Although it is rare, there will be times when one of the interviewers does not have a copy of your résumé. The interview will go more smoothly if you can provide a copy. Your attire should be professional. For most interviews, this means wearing business attire. Stick with conservative styles. Your clothes should reinforce a professional image. Other than that, any impression your clothes leave on an interviewer is likely to be a negative one. There are companies where the daily

dress is casual. Unless you have been specifically told it is not necessary, stick with business attire. If you suspect that a company prefers more casual dress, ask the person who scheduled the interview what is appropriate.

When you go to the interview, it is a good idea to take a portfolio or briefcase. This is a professional way to carry a notepad and pen. It also gives you a place to put extra copies of your résumé.

You should have the contact information for the company and hiring manager with you. If something unexpected comes up, such as a major traffic jam, accident, car problems or something else outside your control, you must call the hiring manager as soon as you know you will be late. Let the hiring manager know what the situation is, and that you are doing everything you can to get there.

The better you prepare, the more relaxed you will be at the interview. A minor problem, such as unexpected traffic, can cause a tremendous amount of anxiety that will affect your interview performance.

THANK-YOU NOTES

You should always send a thank-you note to each interviewer after an interview. Thank-you notes are considered proper etiquette and reinforce the impression that you are diligent, organized and have good attention to detail. To ensure you have the names and addresses of your interviewers, ask for a business card from each interviewer at the end of each interview. If the interviewer does not have a card, ask about the correct spelling of their name. Many names have unusual spellings, and it is better to take a few seconds to ensure you have them right.

You can send the thank-you note by email or mail a hard copy. Fewer candidates send thank-you notes by mail today, so this gives you an opportunity to differentiate yourself. You should send the note either the same day as the interview or the following day. The content of the thank-you note is not critically important. The key is to send the thank-you, and make it a professional, formal communication. If you are unfamiliar with the format of a business letter, do a web search for business letter writing to get an idea of how to structure the letter. You want to convey a sense of professionalism. The most common structure for a thank-you letter is in three parts. In the first part, thank the interviewer for meeting with you. This is typically only one or two sentences long. Second, reinforce a key theme for why you are a good choice for the position. This is the longest section, but is still short, perhaps two to five sentences. Finally, conclude with a statement of your continued interest in the position.

MOCK INTERVIEWS

One of the most important things you can do in a job search is to prepare for your interviews. If you are unprepared, you will miss opportunities and lengthen your job search. The best way to prepare is through practice, but few job seekers practice their interview skills. A mock interview is a practice session where you simulate a real interview. This will allow you to work on your interviewing skills in a situation where mistakes are not costly. The key to a mock interview is creating an environment that makes you feel like you are interviewing.

Mock interviewer: Choose a mock interviewer who is experienced with interviewing and hiring, and whom you respect. You want someone who will intimidate you a little. Many job seekers experience a lot of anxiety and fear during an interview. Often this anxiety is a greater challenge to overcome than any of the questions. If you can simulate this anxiety, you will do a better job of staying relaxed in a real interview.

Location: Choose a mock interview location where you are outside your comfort zone. Conducting the interview at a person's office, a meeting room at a library or classroom building, or at the interviewer's home is far better than conducting it in your home. The more the environment has in common with a real interview, the better it will prepare you.

Questions: Do not select the interview questions for your mock interview. One of the most important elements you should practice is reacting to questions you did not expect. This requires the interviewer to develop a list of questions that you have not seen. Some interviewers do this well, while others find writing questions difficult. Ideally, you want to simulate that moment of panic when you're blindsided by a question you never thought of. Learning to stay relaxed and work through an unexpected question is a critical skill.

Feedback: You need to empower your interviewer to give you honest feedback. You are going to make mistakes. That's the point of the mock interview—to make mistakes and learn from them. You must be open to feedback. Whatever impression the interviewer gets, you did something to create that impression. Inexperienced job seekers often chalk up negative feedback to the interviewer misunderstanding something they did well. This is a common mistake. To be effective, it is essential the interviewer hears and understands the message you are trying to convey.

Recordings: If possible, record a mock interview and the feedback. Many job seekers are surprised by their interview performance when they watch or listen to it. This will also help you listen attentively to the feedback, rather than focusing on taking notes.

If you conduct a series of mock interviews with an experienced interviewer, you will make dramatic improvements in your interviewing skills and outperform the majority of your competition. Remember, it isn't the most qualified candidate who gets the job offer, it is the candidate who does the best job of communicating their potential.

APICS CAREER RESOURCES FOR ENTRY-LEVEL PROFESSIONALS

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