

The Record

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Higdon: For graduates, how to boost chances of landing a job

By Leo I. Higdon Jr.

College seniors are always a little edgy this time of year. In the next month or so, they will complete their highest-level academic courses, which in many cases includes presenting an honors thesis, a complex research project, a musical recital or an art show. They also may be wrapping up a college sports career, turning over the reins of their campus club and preparing for final exams.

This year, mixed in with these ritualistic anxieties, is widespread concern over finding a job. The economy looms large, and competition for available jobs is fierce.

However, this year's graduating seniors — and all college students — have much to offer the global marketplace.

I met with a group of students recently to discuss strategies for finding a job in this market. I shared with them my Top 10 job search strategies for college students:

1. Take advantage of campus resources

Most colleges have a career center. Use it. The career center staff members not only have great leads on jobs and advice for job and internship seekers, they also maintain strong connections with alumni who often turn to their alma maters when hiring.

2. Think and act globally

Learn a foreign language. We live in a global society. Acquire expertise on the culture and history of other countries, spend time there if possible. Firms want employees who understand the countries where they do business.

3. Know yourself

Do a self-assessment. Talk to people who know you well — ask them to describe your passions, strengths, weaknesses. You may be surprised by what others see in you. Use what you learn to better describe yourself to potential employers.

4. Leverage your talents

Don't forget your social networking and technology skills. Today's students have an important advantage in their knowledge and use of technology, including Facebook, LinkedIn and other online networking interfaces — let potential employers know how you can connect them to new markets online.

5. Learn interviewing etiquette

It should go without saying to dress appropriately.

You're rarely wrong in choosing a suit — even if it's a casual job. Potential employers want to know you mean business. But it's not just about the clothes. Make eye contact, ask intelligent questions and always take advantage of the "Is there anything else?" question to summarize your qualifications and your aspiration for the job. Do informational interviews with alumni who work in the industry — their insights are important.

6. Tailor your skills to growing sectors

Expand your search beyond original boundaries. You may have had your heart set on working for an investment bank, but find your options limited in this economy. Look to other sectors where you can apply your skills, such as environmental consulting, health care services and government or public service, such as Peace Corps or Teach for America.

7. Don't get hung up on your first job

You will not stay in your first job forever. You can be less discriminating with your first job as long as you do work you enjoy and develop general skills. Whatever kind of job you take, do the best at it that you can and use what you learn to move ahead — whether that's within your current company or in an entirely new field.

8. Learn to network

Networking is an important life skill you will rely on throughout your career. And it begins on campus. Attend events where you can meet alumni, try to meet people outside your major or your residence hall, learn to make a proper introduction and learn to describe yourself in a concise and compelling way. Take advantage of student opportunities to join industry groups and associations to meet people in your field.

9. Do internships

A fall-back strategy is to seek out internships or part-time work in a sector that interests you. This gets your foot in the door and, once in a position, gives you an opportunity to prove yourself to potential employers.

10. Remain positive

Despite the negative news, people are hiring. You'll have to work harder and be more realistic when you get a job offer, but there are jobs out there. Just start early.

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