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Starting Your Professional Journey

Considerations and strategies for landing and keeping the job you want while setting yourself up for career success!

HER WEALTH

What should recent graduates focus on at the start of a job search?

Much of the job-hunting advice you get in college is about getting your resume in order. While resumes are important, we suggest taking a step back to figure out the kind of job you'd like to ultimately land. What are your strengths and weaknesses and where might they best be served in ten years? You want to find a job that puts you on the path toward your final goal. You may end up changing your mind later — that's okay! — but a longer-term goal will help to keep you motivated and productive.

What's the most effective approach to finding job opportunities?

The answer is networking, and here's why. When you submit your resume to a job portal, you're competing not only with the filter settings on that portal but potentially hundreds of other candidates aiming for that same position. It's hard to stand out when your resume is all the employer has. Besides, you're so much more than a one-paged, bullet-pointed outline of skills, and a letter with a short description of why you want the job.

Networking on the other hand, offers a human connection and the chance to let your personality shine through. Meeting like-minded individuals or others who have succeeded in ways that you hope to succeed is beneficial in so many ways. Not only does it bring you closer to potential job offers by showing others what you bring to the table, but it opens you up to different perspectives on what you might want in your career.

Along that line, it's also a way to access company intel, a job, or become exposed to other career possibilities that hadn't crossed your radar. You don't know what you don't know until you find someone who can enlighten you.

Hate networking? Consider yourself the ultimate introvert? You're not alone. You never know who else in the room might also be counting down the minutes until they can leave. One anxiety-reducing way to approach a room full of people is to go in prepared. Figure out who is going to be in attendance and target one or two of them to engage with. Having a goal for the conversation in mind can also be helpful – did you pick this person to engage with because s/he might be a good resource for a potential job path you're exploring? If so, what kinds of questions can they help you answer? How will you keep in touch with this person after the networking event is over?

Of course, there are also less physically draining ways to network. LinkedIn, email, phone calls, and texting are other ways to connect with people. You need to use your judgement as to which medium is the most appropriate for your connection. But it can seriously take the pressure off to send a quick congratulatory note and follow up question, knowing that there's little risk on the backend. Remember, it's only an email or LinkedIn message. Lean in and send it! You might be surprised at who's willing to help.

How do you negotiate salary for your first job?

Don't wait for the employer to bring it up. Do your research and come prepared for the conversation. You'll want to know standard pay ranges for the position in your industry based on experience level and geography. You'll also want to know the salary or range being offered for the job, if it's included on the job listing. Keep track of your data points and information sources in case the employer asks.

As with any first job, you may not have much to bargain with. Remember that experience can apply from one type of job to another and telling stories about situations that you've successfully navigated – whether in a professional setting or otherwise – can be extremely helpful in dictating your way of thinking. Everything that you've done up to this moment has made you into the person you are today, for better or worse. As an individual lacking much experience, you'll need to learn how to showcase your abilities in other ways.

Your networking can come in handy here as well. See if any of your contacts know someone with a job like the one you're considering, or know what similar positions pay in their own organization. They can also be a useful sounding board as you weigh how to tackle the salary conversation.

What are the factors that set someone up for career success?

A positive attitude is a must. That doesn't mean you need to be a cheerleader, but rather someone that other people want to work with: friendly, polite, organized, reliable, a team player, and capable. Taking responsibility for your projects and tasks is also important; even if someone else on the team contributed to a mistake, it's never good to pass around blame. Think about the type of interactions that you enjoy having with others. Fostering these positive interactions yourself will not only make your coworkers feel comfortable and confident in you, but it will also create an engaging and pleasant professional experience.

Another success factor is the ability to "manage up" — always with respect. Examples of this include taking the next step before your manager tells you to do it, keeping your manager apprised of the status of your projects, and making yourself valuable to your manager by coming up with potential solutions before enlisting them for help. Managing up can take time to learn how to do so don't be disappointed if you find yourself slowly figuring this one out. It's only too easy to spin your wheels when someone else knows how to get to the answer more efficiently.

Then there's your appearance. Think about how you want your visibility to come across to your clients, your coworkers, and even people you meet in the middle. What exactly do you want to portray to everyone with your clothing, your attentiveness, your eye contact? Also, take your cues from management: do they avoid jeans or suit up for client meetings? What is your manager's relationship with their phone when they are engaging with others? However they act or dress, it's probably a good idea for you to do the same. The adage of "dressing for the job you want, not the one you have" still applies even in business casual settings.

What are some career pitfalls to avoid?

First, don't underestimate yourself. Employers often advertise a long list of qualifications for a given job opening. Realize that this is a wish list and in many cases, they will happily hire someone who doesn't check all the boxes, especially when factoring in experience, goals, and attitude. Know what the standard qualifications are and apply if you have them.

It may sound intuitive, but it's also possible to be too eager to help. There's a fine line between being a team player and becoming the "go-to" for tasks that don't benefit or move your career forward. Roll up your sleeves when it's necessary but the rest of the time, maintain ownership of your role while actively executing your given responsibilities and demonstrating your value and capabilities.

Finally, remember this moment and pay it forward. Someday, someone will reach out to you asking for help and advice. Consider it an honor and respond accordingly. It may have been just as difficult for that person to reach out to you as it is for you to connect with a potential new contact now. And after all, no one succeeds in a vacuum; we all depend on others to grow and move forward.

Want to learn more on this topic? Listen to Her Wealth's Financial Life Cycles episode, "[Beginning Your Professional Journey](#)" featuring author of this piece, [Christine A. Crigler, CFP® CPWA®](#).

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