

Preparing for a Tough Job Market: An Open Letter to Students

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This spring 1.2 million of you will graduate, says the National Center for Education Statistics. By 2008, that figure will double. However, the economy is offering you few easy opportunities for your first job. Normally the recovery from an economic downturn is accompanied by an increase in jobs. Not this time. Two years into this recovery and we should be up by seven million jobs; instead we're down 2.5 million.

Yet productivity is soaring, which suggests that the economy is undergoing a long-term fundamental change. After all, previous upturns created jobs, so why not this one? You've been reading about this "jobless recovery" and no doubt wondering why this is happening, and whether you will be able to find work.

Here's what you have to keep in mind. Companies are contending with an intensely competitive business climate and with little control over their prices for goods and services, the solution to protecting their bottom line is to boost productivity while cutting costs. In the hard-hit manufacturing sector, for example, new technologies have enabled firms to produce more goods with fewer workers, or to shift operations to less expensive labor markets overseas (only to decline there as well.)

Now, however, more service-oriented "office" jobs are being outsourced to foreign companies, wages are being reduced, higher-paid personnel are being laid off, and part-time positions are increasing. This economic condition is unlikely to change soon. In addition, those of you entering the job market will be competing with laid off people who have more experience. And even though productivity levels tend to fluctuate, and the ratio of labor input to production output cyclically stabilizes and produces higher employment, in most fields the creation of new jobs will never return to historical levels.

So, what do you do?

1) Make yourself more marketable while in school. But being marketable doesn't always mean you must adhere to pre-professional programs or forsake other academic areas simply because they may not be related to your career. By focusing now on acquiring a sound well-rounded education that encompasses a wide range of key skills, attributes, and experiences, you will have a much stronger chance of success in the job market. And there are certain things you can do that will be immensely helpful in improving your marketability, regardless of what you major in or the profession you pursue. But the most important thing you can do now to increase your marketability is to take a broad-based, challenging, and varied curriculum, and adhere to the highest standards in your studies and activities. By not limiting yourself, you'll better develop your critical thinking skills and creative approaches to problem solving. In this increasingly unpredictable world of work, you'll be better prepared for change, complexity, and ambiguity if you learn how to learn rather than just what to learn.

2) Apply what you learn through internships or other work-related activities. These experiences can help you learn what you like and don't like, where your greatest talents lie, and what you're truly passionate about. So learn about different careers and the type of people they attract, and see if there's a match between their values and your own.

3) Take these combined experiences and build your resume while you're still in college. Along with your resume, include the activities you've organized or volunteered for, the jobs you've undertaken, or artistic works you've completed. Demonstrate the broad-based creative thinking that organizations look for, and provide a clear picture of who you are, what you've chosen to do, and the experience, talent, and potential you possess.

4) Hone your technology skills. You will need them. Technological proficiency provides you with an immediate advantage, regardless of the career.

5) Learn to network. This is a skill that will prove invaluable as you enter or move throughout the job market. Do your homework when job hunting, and use your school's career office and alumni network for contacts and information about different careers.

6) Learn how to work as part of a team, and develop solid team-building skills. And the more diverse the team members, the better — you might even consider an overseas experience to broaden your perspective. But remember that this experience should be seen as meaningful and educational — not as just another vacation.

7) Develop your communication skills to the highest possible level. Internships, for example, are one area where you can gain experience in making presentations; but regardless of the circumstances, learn to write and make presentations where you'll be critiqued. Try especially to put yourself in situations where you have to communicate with all types of audiences.

What these seven steps define is a well-rounded academic and co-curricular program. Follow these steps, and you will learn much about yourself, what you're good at, and what you enjoy doing. Follow them well, and you will build exactly the right experiences that will qualify you for any entry-level position in a tough job market, regardless of the career you choose. In the final analysis, it will be your education, your ability to think creatively, and your willingness to try new and difficult things that will enhance not only your marketability, but the quality of your life as well.

Lee Higdon wrote this article while president of the College of Charleston from 2001-2006.