

Making the Transition from College to the Workforce

College graduation and landing your first job are great achievements. You should be excited about starting your professional career. Congratulations! However, the transition from collegiate life to working professional is a large one. You are bound to find new challenges in the transition to the working world that you did not anticipate while a college student. Here are ten final teaching points as you depart to help you make the transition from college to workplace.

1. Prepare to Make the Proper Exit

As your senior year—or final year of graduate school—winds down, it's easy to lose focus and dream of the fun stuff associated with graduation and life beyond commencement day. These distractions may include going-away parties and banquets, socializing with campus friends, or exciting prospects of your first *real* job. As important as your final days on campus may be, it's just as important to take care of business before you receive that diploma.

You should already be facing the demands of job-hunting and interviewing. For starters, practice and improve your presentation and communication skills as much as possible. Next, think ahead in terms of gathering information that will enhance your entry into the workforce. This includes gathering written references from esteemed professors, campus employers, career placement officers, internship mentors, and any coaches or leaders of academic clubs. It's better to do this now while they still remember you. If you think you may need another letter of recommendation in a few months, talk to them now. Whatever they can say favorably about your character, communication skills, academic proficiency, or motivation can be a part of your developing curriculum vitae. These are the positive attributes that employers look for when hiring entry-level employees.

Finally, as you exit the college community, make sure you leave with a clean slate in terms of financial obligations or unpaid parking tickets. Debts left unpaid may prove to be embarrassing in the future.

2. College Has Not Prepared You for Everything

An exuberant graduate will soon learn that college has not prepared them for everything they will face in the professional world. Many recent college graduates are unprepared for the emphasis placed on teamwork skills, the importance of dealing with all types of people and personalities, balancing work demands with family and personal life, and personal finance and budget issues. You must prepare both physically and emotionally for your transition to the workforce. Be prepared to face these challenges and make necessary adjustments in your lifestyle and personal habits.

Some college graduates mistakenly believe that superior academic standing translates into automatic favor on the job. Having a college degree does not entitle you to a job and most employers will not be as impressed with your grades or your education as you may be with them. In actuality, all new hires are basically on equal standing. Attending a well-known school or having an extremely high grade-point average is definitely a selling point in your favor, but not something you should solely rely to get a job. Focus less on why employers should be so impressed with your credentials and

more on how you can use your talent and skills to make a contribution to the employer's bottom line or the department's group effort. Be sure to state in the job interview how you will make a strong contribution. Once you're hired, your new employer will be assessing your ongoing progress and will want to know "What have you done for me lately?" Annual evaluations in the workplace are common and are directly linked to promotion rate.

3. Finding Employment May Not be Easy

The job market is cyclical and you may be entering the workplace at a time when it is very competitive. One job opening can get hundreds of resumes or applications. The harsh reality for many college seniors and recent graduates is that obtaining a job offer is a very time-consuming task—and it's even harder to obtain the ideal scenario of having multiple job offers. As most experienced job-seekers already know, you have to spend time every day looking for employment. It can often be a "full-time job trying to find a job". Therefore, use all available resources, track down all job leads, and follow-up on all leads and interviews.

A common mistake by college students is to place an over-reliance on the Internet and passive job-hunting methods to find employment. The Internet is important, but do not forget about the traditional method of networking—with family and friends, other students, alumni, professors, mentors, or former co-workers and bosses. Similarly, stay connected with organizations that can benefit you in terms of future networking. Obvious examples include alumni associations, academic clubs, sports teams, social groups, fraternities or sororities, and any similar professional organizations. Career success is not just a matter of doing well on the job. As much as anything else, it's a matter of smart networking when it's time for career advancement. Most industries or professions are tightly knit. Thus, it's a small world in terms of who knows who. By staying in the right communication loop, you can be aware of opportunities before your peers.

4. College Graduates Get Entry-Level Jobs

Another harsh reality in the transition from collegiate life to working professional is that a large number of the jobs available for college graduates are entry-level. These jobs often require hard work, long hours, and low pay. Most employers want to see all employees start at a certain level to better understand the business or profession. Recent college graduates should not reject such job offers because they sense that they are beneath them, but be cautious if you take the first job offer you get—and be realistic in your expectations.

As a reminder, during the interview process, get as much information as you can about the company and key personnel: public relations material, company brochures, newsletters, and similar material. Learn all you can. What the organization says about itself in print provides a good indication of its management philosophy and style. Furthermore, any connections you can make with current or previous employees will be beneficial. Obviously, ex-employees may have departed under negative circumstances and current employees should only say positive things about the company. Nevertheless, they can provide—at least somewhat objectively—insights into the inner workings of the company.

5. Be Prepared for Job Offers and Salary Negotiations

If you're one of the lucky college graduates, you'll get more than one job offer. Having more than one offer gives you the luxury of deciding if one—or any—of them is right for you. You should be prepared to negotiate the salary and any compensation or benefit package. Be as prepared as possible and have a clear sense of what you want before the offer arrives or negotiations begin.

If you do get more than one job offer, how would you decide? What's important to you? Your criteria should include salary, relocation, employee benefits, long-term career objectives, prestige, travel, company culture, vacation, company car, and family.

6. About That First Job

It's beneficial to have a vision of what you want your career path to be after graduation, but don't panic if your first job doesn't fit perfectly into your envisioned plan. Your first job may serve as a chance to gain experience, maturity, and confidence. Many recent college graduates change jobs after their first year out of school; sometimes it takes that long—or longer—to fully understand who you are and what you really want to do with your life. Your first job may be a stepping stone and not your true calling in life.

The days of working a 30, 40, or 50-year career at General Motors are over. Now the trend is for college graduates to change careers—not just jobs—multiple times over the course of their working life. So don't worry if that first job is not the perfect fit for you, but do start planning so you can make the transition to something more suitable for you. Keep track of your accomplishments, publications, and developing skills so that you can obtain that job you desire.

Furthermore, your major may or may not dictate the type of job you can work. Many jobs simply require a college degree. However, science and engineering tend to be the exception because they are more specialized fields. As most science graduates already know, this field usually requires an advanced degree.

7. Time Management

You may have thought it was difficult managing various classes, laboratories, tests, and other activities while in college, but it will be even more of a struggle to manage your time once you are in the professional environment. Most jobs require that employees be at work at a specific time, take lunch at a specific time, and even leave work at a specific time. As a college student, your day was less structured. This can be very frustrating for a new professional and the new time structure will require an adjustment. Show up late too many times or miss too many meetings and you'll soon find yourself unemployed. Your future with your new employer depends on how well you can manage your time.

Another big adjustment will be the harsh reality of vacation time. In college, you get long winter and summer breaks. Unfortunately, most employers are not that generous with time off. You will probably get two weeks of vacation in your first job and you can expect it to take years before you

accrue vacation time at a higher rate. Furthermore, because you are one of the newest employees, you may not have much choice as to when you can take your vacation.

8. Professionalism in the Workplace

College may be a time to try different things, be a little crazy, or act a bit irresponsible. But in the workplace, acting unprofessionally can get you fired. In the working world, the atmosphere and setting are much more formal and professional. Your employers and co-workers will judge you on your speech, attire, behavior, and motivation. It is up to you to show these individuals that you are intelligent, articulate, and professional.

To succeed, you must be seen as a member of a team that can be relied on to do the job. Deadlines are critical, much more so than in college. It may be beneficial to identify a supportive mentor who can show you the ropes and steer you in a direction that will enhance your long-term career goals.

Professionalism also encompasses dependability, motivation, initiative, and being a self-starter. Your first job will test your ability to be a team player, to collaborate with individuals from different cultures and backgrounds, to interact with diverse personalities, and to work on projects with strict deadlines. Staying organized and managing your time will be critical. You should have developed these skills in college. Now you must transfer them to the workplace if you want to be successful.

9. Starting Your New Job in a Positive Direction

Employers are looking for entry-level workers who not only have technological aptitude, but who also display enthusiasm, excitement, and drive. A new employee may be looked upon to bring fresh perspectives and new ideas to the team. Establish a reputation for being a good worker who is willing to learn. Most companies view the first three to six months as a honeymoon period for new employees. That's the time to get adjusted to the organization and to prove one's worth as a valuable worker. Demonstrating good work habits—along with showing a positive attitude—will go a long way in building a reputation for quality performance. Doing the minimum required might enable you to keep your job, but base-line performance won't lead to promotion.

To establish a favorable reputation, show yourself to be reliable, dependable, and hard working. Your supervisor will judge you on your work ethic, teamwork, ability to focus, ability to learn from your mistakes, and contributions to the organization or department. In return for paying a decent salary, your employer expects you to present a keen mind and well-rested body every day on the job.

Your new employer has a vested interest in your professional success—to the degree that your goals dovetail with those of the company. For example, many companies or organizations provide financial incentives for their employees to attain specialized training or advanced degrees. Other employers have professional development courses on such topics as time management, project management, business development, and proposal development. The purpose behind such training is to enable the employee to be a more effective contributor to the company's success. Therefore, give some thought to long-term goals that benefit you and your new employer.

In order to move up in the company, it's necessary to stand out from the crowd or competition as someone who offers something special. This could mean developing a skill that makes you valuable. For example, special laboratory, field, computer, management, or multidisciplinary skills may make you a contributor to more projects than your peers. Communication skills—both oral and written—are always a valuable component of a successful and fruitful career. Furthermore, receiving professional certification or licensure in your field, getting published, or performing community service may place you ahead of your peers. Senior managers always take notice of such achievements of aspiring young professionals.

10. Taking Care of Other Business

Making a smooth transition from college to the workforce concerns something else: getting established in a new community. You're likely to find that after the job hunt has advanced very slowly, events move rapidly once you've accepted an offer. With the offer accepted, find out if the company provides a moving or relocation allowance. For entry-level employees, it will probably be minimal. If the company has a relocation specialist, work closely with him or her to handle the appropriate details of the move and save valuable time. As much as possible, plan ahead, allow time to make the actual move, and get acclimated before starting work.

A successful career in the workplace is usually balanced by a fulfilling life outside the office. As you plant your roots in the community, find out about opportunities for entertainment, recreation, hobbies, and religious and social involvement. These outlets provide a buffer to the normal stress that accompanies a job. Being involved in the community can benefit you, directly or indirectly, in terms of career growth. For example, certain professions—such as consulting and law—typically require building up a clientele. One means to accomplish this is through informal contacts made within one's circle of influence. People you meet at a club, gym, community meeting, or worship service can turn out to be life-long friends, as well as sources of contacts that will benefit your career.

Finally, getting established in the community involves participating in worthwhile projects and causes. For example, consider volunteer or charitable work. This is personally rewarding and demonstrates that you are a concerned citizen who is willing to make a positive contribution in giving back to the community. After all, you've earned your degree and now it is time to take your rightful place in society and make a difference.

-Donald M. Hooper

Acknowledgments: Job-seeker articles by Katharine Hansen and Randall Hansen of Quintessential Careers helped provide content for this write-up. Recruitment and career articles by Calvin Bruce (THE BLACK COLLEGIAN Magazine) also helped outline this material.