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STARTING OUT

Ten Job Hunting Myths



The job market looks more promising for this year's college grads, but the perfect opportunity probably won't fall in your lap. Search smart by avoiding these common misconceptions.

By Erin Burt

April 7, 2005

The job market is improving. A recent study from the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that employers plan to hire 13% more new college grads this year than last year -- with business, engineering and computer fields taking top priority.

That's good news if you or someone you know is preparing to make the move from library stacks to a corporate cubicle. But it doesn't mean the perfect job will just fall in your lap. And misconceptions about job hunting, the working world and the entry-level employee's role can easily bog down a young professional's progress.

Improve your chances of finding your dream job. Don't get sucked into these ten common job-hunting myths:

1 | Finding a job after college will be quick and easy

Although the job market for this year's college grads looks rosier than last year, don't expect the job offers to come rolling in. Finding work may be a cinch for a select few, but for the vast majority, it will still take serious effort.

The length of your hunt will depend on a variety of factors, including:

- The job market
- Your location
- Your qualifications
- The amount of time you dedicate to your search
- Your interviewing skills
- The types of resources you use to find job openings

If it takes a while, don't get discouraged. The average job search lasts four months, according to outplacement firm Challenger, Gray and Christmas. To make ends meet in the meantime, you may have to take a less glamorous (and lower-paying) gig. A few of my friends have worked in call centers, flipped burgers or cleaned toilets for a couple months after graduation -- just until they landed a job where they could use their degree.

2 | The Internet is the best place to look for a job

"One of the most prevalent misconceptions in job hunting is that job hunting on the Web is some magic elixir that will result in employers lining up to interview you," says Randall Hansen, associate professor of marketing at Stetson University and publisher of *Quintessential Careers*.

While the Internet should probably make up one component of your search, says Hansen, it shouldn't be your only strategy. Only about 15% to 20% of all job openings are ever publicly advertised in any medium, and only about 5% of job seekers end up getting jobs through ads, Hansen says.

How does everyone else do it? Word of mouth.

"Networking is by far the most effective job-search tool you can use," Hansen says. When you're first starting out, you probably don't know many people in your field that can help in your job hunt, so this can present a

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- Join a professional organization or club.
- Subscribe to a trade magazine.
- Consider getting an internship.
- Find online discussion groups for your industry though groups.google.com.
- Set up [informational interviews](#) with experts in your field
- Keep in touch with college acquaintances in your major, especially those who may have graduated before you.

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The Internet may not be a total bust -- I found my first job out of college through an online journalism job board. But taking the time to weave a web of professional contacts could create more opportunities for you now and enhance your career options down the road.

Learn how to [use the Web productively](#) in your job hunt.

3 | I'll make at least \$40,000 at my first job out of college

As graduation nears, you're probably fantasizing about the wads of money you'll make as a member of the working world -- and how you'll spend your new-found cash. As such, you'll be happy to hear that according to the NACE, 2004/05 grads can expect higher starting salaries than last year's. There's nothing wrong with a little planning, but make sure your expectations are in line with reality.

Starting salaries for several fields featured in the NACE study averaged less than \$40,000 (see box to the right). The most lucrative majors were in engineering and computer fields, running in the neighborhood of \$50,000. But popular degrees such as business administration, English and marketing fell solidly below \$40,000. Psychology, liberal arts and biology grads averaged less than \$30,000 to start.

Although your degree and skills impact your salary, your location matters too. For example, an entry-level public relations specialist in Dallas typically makes about \$40,000. But in Los Angeles, the median salary runs \$4,000 higher, according to [Salary.com](#), which surveys employers about the wages they actually pay their workers. Check out our [salary calculator](#) to learn what your job's going rate is in your neighborhood. You can select "Entry Level" as the job category, or choose among 67 other fields to compare beginners' salaries in your field with positions you might qualify for in the future. You may have to start lower on the salary scale than you planned, and work your way up as you gain more experience.

And remember, just because you earn a certain amount doesn't mean that's what you'll take home. For example, a \$40,000 annual salary is reduced to about \$30,800 after federal, social security and medicare taxes are taken out. That's not counting state taxes and any money you might have withheld from your paycheck for benefits. Use the [paycheck calculator](#) from PaycheckCity.com to estimate your future take-home pay.

WHAT'S YOUR DEGREE WORTH?

Chemical engineering:	\$53,659
Computer engineering:	\$51,523
Electrical engineering:	\$51,113
Computer science:	\$51,042
Mechanical engineering:	\$50,806
Information science:	\$43,741
Civil engineering:	\$43,159
Accounting:	\$43,050
Economics/finance:	\$40,719
Nursing:	\$38,788
Business administration:	\$38,357
Marketing:	\$37,519
Political science:	\$32,296*
English:	\$31,113*
Elementary education:	\$30,364
History:	\$30,344*
Biology/life sciences:	\$29,629*
Liberal arts (as a group):	\$29,060
Psychology:	\$28,230*

Source: National Association of Colleges and Employers, Winter 2005 Salary Survey

* NACE Fall 2004 Salary Survey (2005 numbers unavailable)

4 | There's no room for negotiation with an entry-level salary

With some jobs, this may very well be true. But most employers leave some wiggle room in their offers to new employees, even those that are fresh out of school. The bottom line: You won't know unless you ask.

Bargaining over a job offer shows your potential employer that you are discriminating about where you work. But that doesn't mean the sky is the limit. Let's face it, you have minimal -- if any -- real-world experience. And a prestigious alma mater doesn't entitle you to more pay. Employers care more about what you can *do* for them. Use our [salary calculator](#) to find out what your job is worth, and then negotiate around that figure, highlighting your unique skills and talents that you'll bring to the position. And don't say that your salary requirements are a deal breaker unless you mean it.

But even if there isn't any room for an increase in salary, consider negotiating your benefits such as vacation time, work hours, signing bonuses, starting date, relocation benefits, etc. Many college grads get so excited just to receive an offer that they accept the terms outright. But you don't want to find yourself a week later wondering if you could have gotten a better deal.

5 | The person who gets hired is the one who can do the job best

If you've got the skills, you're a shoo-in. Right?

Not so, says Hansen. More often than not, it comes down to interviewing skills and your rapport with your interviewers. Your qualifications, education and experience will usually get you an interview, but then "you need to prove why you are the best person to fill the job."

Make a good first impression by showing up on time and looking clean and professional. Act confident but not cocky. Use concrete examples to illustrate your qualifications. Maintain eye contact and *relax*. For more pointers on how to master your presentation, check out the [job interviewing resource center](#) from Quintessential Careers. You'll find databases of interview questions, including one tailored specifically for [recent college grads](#).

goals. Besides, you can always go back to school later. For more information on whether grad school is for you, see [The Back to School Decision](#).

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Before leaving the interview, make sure you find out how to follow up, says Carole Martin, interview coach and author of *Boost Your Interview IQ*. For example, she suggests asking your interviewer: "I'd like to stay in touch and follow up with you in a week or two to see how the process is going and where I stand. How do you prefer that I communicate with you -- e-mail or phone?" You'll want to show your continuing interest in the job without becoming a pest.

6 | A well-designed résumé will boost my chances of getting noticed

A snazzy resume may actually be a hindrance. Most employers accept resumes via email, but many won't open resume attachments either out of laziness or fear of contracting a computer virus. Your chance of getting noticed: zilch.

The solution: Create two copies of your résumé. The first one should be a simple version you can paste into the body of an e-mail -- sans formatting. That means no fancy fonts, bolds, italics, underlines or special characters. Keep each line under 65 characters and replace bullets with plain old asterisks, says Kim Isaacs, director of [ResumePower.com](#). (See a [sample](#).) The second resume should be nicely formatted for you to carry in-hand to your interview. For more tips on how to get your résumé noticed, see [Polish Your Résumé](#).

7 | What I think of an employer doesn't matter as much as what s/he thinks of me

Of course you're eager to impress. But in your zeal to get hired, don't forget that the employer must pass *your* screening too. Many first-time job hunters overlook this key point until it's too late. Think about this: There are 168 hours in a week. If you spend 40 of those at work, that means you'll pass one-quarter of your week there. You better make sure you like the place.

Find out about boss's management style, the company's stability and any company problems. Ask about the challenges specific to your position, what a typical day will be like and opportunities for growth and advancement in the company.

Some employers may introduce you to your potential co-workers either on the initial or secondary interview. Chat with them about the work environment, and what they like and don't like about their jobs. If you haven't had that opportunity before the company makes you an offer for hire, ask for the contact info of a couple of people you would be working with and give them a call or send them an e-mail before accepting the job. It is important to impress the employer, but it's equally important that you're impressed with the job.

8 | If I plaster the Web with my résumé, I'll receive more interviews

Let's face it -- the sheer volume of résumés on the massive job boards like [Monster.com](#), [HotJobs.com](#) and [CareerBuilder.com](#) make it virtually impossible to get an employer's attention. In fact, job hunters such as yourself post thousands of new résumés each day.

And sending out your résumé en masse to every employer you can think of isn't a much better approach. On average, a company interviews only one person per 245 résumés it receives. You need to be more proactive in your job search and tighten your focus if you expect to get results.

Tailor your résumé and cover letter to target each job you apply for and follow-up your résumé with personal contact.

And you can still use the Internet in other ways to hone in on more promising prospects:

- **Check out job boards that cater to your specific field.** You can find a list of industry-specific job sites at [Quintessential Careers](#) or the [Riley Guide](#) sites. Or check out local job boards on [Craigslist.org](#).
- **Research a prospective employer.** Before applying for (and especially before going to an interview), you should spend some time on the employer's Web site. Make sure you understand the company and see if you can envision yourself working there. At [WetFeet.com](#), you can also get company profiles for thousands of firms.
- **Network.** One of the best ways to jump-start your career is to talk with people in your field to get career advice and find job openings by word-of-mouth. Search for an online discussion group through [Google](#) or [Yahoo!](#)

9 | If a company isn't currently hiring, I can't get an interview

One of the most powerful job-hunting tools is an **informational interview**. You can arrange an informal interview with people working in your field to learn more about working in the industry, get expert career advice and, most importantly, build a network of contacts in your field.

A friend of mine in college was interested in working in the insurance industry, and he'd heard good things about an employer in the area. It wasn't hiring at the moment, but he set up an interview with one of its executives to talk generally about a career in the industry. He took a copy of his resume with him, and the exec offered to keep it on file should an opening arise. Two weeks later, he was called in for an interview for an opening that the firm hadn't even advertised yet. And he got the job.

Not all informational interviews will result in a job offer, but they're time well spent. It may not pay off immediately, but later in your career, you may reap the benefits of the contacts you made and advice you received.

10 | If I don't know what I want to do after graduation, I should go to graduate school

An advanced degree could be the ticket to a new career or a stepping stone to faster advancement in your current job. But if you're using it just to buy time because you can't make a decision, it could be a complete waste of time, energy and money. Grad school should be used as a means to a well-researched end.

Peter Vogt, president of [Career Planning Resources](#) suggests asking yourself the question: "Are you going to graduate school for a purposeful reason or are you falling into grad school to get away from other things?" It's an awfully big investment, so you better make sure it's what you really want for yourself.

If you're finding yourself tempted the wrong reasons, get a job instead. Breaking out of the routine of school for a while could help you gain greater perspective about your skills, interests and career