

Starting a Successful Job Search

by Katharine Brooks

It doesn't matter how or where you start — just start from where you are.

The job search: You've probably been thinking about it off and on for a while now. And whether you're just starting college or graduating in a few months, you can take steps now that will boost your chances of finding a job even in this challenging economy.

Sometimes the hardest part of a job search is just getting started. If you don't have a pressing deadline related to the search, it's easy to put it off for one more day while you focus on more immediate issues.

Job-Search Traps

Let's start by examining some reasons why people put off their job search and how you can avoid those traps.

1. "I don't have a goal — I don't know what I want to do."

Most job-finding strategies start with "set a goal." That can be a challenge when you don't *have* a specific career goal. Or, maybe you have several goals and don't know where to start. Don't let your lack of a goal hold you back. Just think about what you *might* like to do and move one step closer to that — if you change your mind, you can always change your search. What sounds interesting to you right now? What experiment could you craft to learn more about it?

2. "My major isn't related to any career — or I don't want the career that my major has prepared me for."

Your major doesn't have to relate directly to your career. Focus on what you have learned, what skills you have developed, and what knowledge you have gained that might be transferable to the job you'd like to do. Learn to articulate the value of your major to an employer.

3. "I went online to look for a job and there's just too much out there — I'm totally overwhelmed."

You don't have to read every web site, every blog, and every list of "20 typical interview questions" that you find on the Internet. Focus on key resources and keep it simple. This magazine is a great start. If you read the articles in here, you will learn most of what you need to know in the job search.

4. "I don't have time for a job search right now."

College is filled with distractions, but studies show that the earlier you start your search the greater the likelihood you will have a job at graduation — and earn more money in your first job than if you had waited. But searching for a job is roughly equivalent to taking an additional class — and who has time for that? That's why you need to break the search down into small activities you can do in a short amount of time. You probably don't have all day to devote to everything about the job search, so think about what you could do in 30 minutes or less. Reading this article is a great first step — and will only take you a few minutes. What can you do next?

5. "The job search is too scary — and there are no jobs out there anyway."

The job market has been especially tough in recent years, and we all tend to avoid things that are uncomfortable or challenging. You have two options: Admit defeat — and do nothing; or move forward as best as you can and see what happens.

The job market *is* tight, but jobs *do* exist. Try not to be unduly influenced by the media and generic job-market statistics that may not apply to your geographic area or your career field. You should also recognize that the entry-level market is different from the mid-career market, so try not to let general reports about employment scare you off. Some companies *are* hiring. Finally, remember that your first job is just the start of your career, so don't get hung up on finding the "perfect" job.

How to Move Forward

Have I convinced you? Are you ready to get started? It doesn't matter how or where you start — just start from where you are. Here are some ideas to help you move forward:

1. Use your career center.

It's an efficient and effective way of quickly gathering a lot of information about resumes, interviews, who's hiring, and so forth. In fact, a common refrain on alumni surveys is "I wish I'd used my career center." Ignore students who say, "I've heard the career center isn't all that helpful." Find out for yourself. Attend the career center's workshops or programs. Use the career center's resources. Take advantage of the center's walk-in hours, or set up an appointment. Tip: Always have a purpose in mind when you have a walk-in or scheduled appointment. Don't just say "Help me!" Know your purpose for the appointment. You'll have a better experience.

Do keep in mind that your career center can only help you so far. Ultimately, *you* will be the one sitting in the interview room, not the career center staff. It's a myth that the career center staff can tell you what to do with your life or that they will "find you a job." You will find the job: The career center can help you almost every step of the way.

2. Create your brand.

Make your resume and cover letter stand out by targeting them to each job. Link what you've done with what you want to do — especially if the connection isn't obvious to the reader. Prepare great stories to illustrate your talents and respond to those tough interview questions. Check your online profile and remove any "digital dirt." Set up a LinkedIn account for professional networking.

3. Ask yourself, "Where am I now and where do I want to be one year from now?"

Let's say you're currently a senior and you'd like to work in the field of marketing when you graduate. So, can you do that tomorrow? If the answer is no — what do you need to do first? Maybe it's writing your resume, or doing an internship, or taking a class, or identifying the companies that might hire you. Whatever steps you need to take, write them down (so they're not rattling around in your head annoying you) and work on them when you can.

4. Ask yourself, "When am I at my best?"

In other words, when have you been particularly proud of your accomplishments? They don't have to be grand, by the way. Sometimes an accomplishment is just the afternoon you tutored a child. How can you parlay your

"best" into an interview and your job? For instance, think about what skills you developed. Tutoring a child might have required patience and compassion. How might those traits be valuable in the job you're seeking?

5. Stay focused and keep it manageable.

Look for ways to make your job search as fun or interesting as possible. Conduct small experiments to learn what you want to do: Volunteer for an afternoon to see if you really are interested in working for an environmental cause. Write your resume while enjoying a latte in a coffee shop. Think of networking as a way to meet new friends and interesting people. Take a negative experience and create a story about how you overcame the challenges. Set a timer and tell yourself you'll just work for "10 minutes" on something. When the timer rings, you can choose whether to keep going or stop.

Finally, don't worry about rejection — it happens. In fact, I recommend you deliberately send a resume to a job you know you won't get. That will remove any sting from the rejection, and you can move forward knowing that all it takes is one "yes" to get started on a great career path.

Congratulations — if you finished this article, you're already on your way! Your future awaits.
