

CAREER ADVICE FROM THE SEARCH FRONT LINE

The First Rung: Hard Truths for Your First Real Job Search

How to become useful, see through recruitment theatre and choose a first job that builds a career - not merely a payslip.

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My advice in one sentence: do not search for a job that proves you have arrived; search for a boss, workload and environment that will teach you how to become valuable.

Fresh graduates are surrounded by advice. Much of it sounds encouraging, photographs well at a graduation ceremony and fails the moment it meets the labour market. You are told to follow your passion, apply everywhere, sell yourself confidently and wait for a good company to recognise your potential. That is comforting. It is not a strategy.

After almost four decades in executive search, I am still surprised by how many intelligent graduates begin their careers with a poor map. Some arrive with an inflated idea of what a degree proves. Others have been frightened into accepting anything. Many have polished a CV without learning how employers actually make decisions. Their parents mean well. Their lecturers may know their disciplines deeply. Yet neither group necessarily understands how a manager thinks when a vacancy is costing money and a hiring mistake will become that manager's problem.

My continuing study of hiring and onboarding failures has reinforced an uncomfortable point: people with professional titles do not always run professional processes. Hiring managers can be unprepared. Recruiters can be transactional. Job seekers can perform confidence instead of demonstrating substance. Academic experts can mistake theory for current market knowledge. The answer is not cynicism. It is informed judgment.

The labour market does not award marks for effort. It rewards useful capability, credible evidence and professional behaviour.

The classroom contract has expired

At university, the syllabus tells you what to study, the lecturer explains the assignment and the examiner decides whether your answer is acceptable. Work is less orderly. The problem may be poorly defined. The information may be incomplete. The manager may be busy, inconsistent or wrong. You are still expected to clarify the objective, make progress and communicate before the deadline becomes a crisis.

Your degree matters, but it is not a warranty. It tells an employer that you have completed a course of study. It does not prove that you can write a clear email, handle criticism, organise ambiguous work, learn an unfamiliar system, speak to a customer or deliver when nobody reminds you. Those are the risks a sensible employer is trying to assess.

- **Can you learn?** Not whether you can memorise, but whether you can absorb feedback and improve without repeating the same mistake.
- **Can you be trusted?** Will you keep commitments, protect confidential information, admit uncertainty and tell the truth when something has gone wrong?
- **Can you make yourself useful?** Can you reduce work, solve a small problem or produce an output that someone else can rely on?
- **Can you work with adults?** Can you disagree without sulking, ask for help without surrendering ownership and work with people you did not choose?
- **Will the investment survive?** Will you stay long enough to learn the job and repay the time others spend training you?

This is why a graduate with modest grades, solid evidence and mature judgment can beat a higher-scoring candidate who speaks as if the employer should be grateful for the application.

Do not build your search around passion

Cal Newport's deliberately provocative advice, 'Don't follow your passion,' is useful because it corrects the order of events. Passion is often the result of becoming good at something worthwhile, gaining autonomy and seeing that your work matters. It is not always a reliable starting signal. Many graduates have not yet experienced enough real work to know what they will care about after competence develops.

Interests still matter. You should not choose work you actively despise or an environment that violates your values. But do not ask only, 'What am I passionate about?' Ask three harder questions: What could I become unusually good at? Where will I receive demanding practice and honest feedback? Which problems are valuable enough that someone will pay me to solve them?

Your first job does not need to express your identity. It needs to expand your capability.

Treat the first job as a paid apprenticeship

Your first job is not a life sentence, a final verdict on your status or proof that your degree was worthwhile. It is the first serious training ground in which your habits become visible. Choose it with the next three years in mind, not merely the next payday.

- **A manager who teaches.** The best first boss sets standards, explains context, gives specific feedback and gradually increases responsibility. A famous employer cannot compensate for a manager who withholds information and only appears when something fails.
- **Real work with visible consequences.** Look for responsibilities that produce an output, affect a customer, improve a process or support a decision. Endless observation and decorative project work do not build much career capital.
- **Portable skills.** Writing, analysis, commercial judgment, project discipline, technical depth, stakeholder management and problem-solving travel better than a grand title with little substance.
- **Exposure to how the business works.** Learn how revenue is earned, cost is controlled, quality is protected, customers are retained and decisions are made. Functional skill becomes more valuable when joined to commercial understanding.

- **Clear standards and ethical boundaries.** Pressure is not automatically development. A workplace that normalises deception, humiliation, unsafe practice or unlawful conduct is not giving you hard training; it is teaching you bad habits.

Salary matters, especially when family finances are tight. But the highest starting salary is not automatically the best offer. An additional amount each month can be expensive if the role leaves you with no supervision, no credible skill and no stronger option two years later.

Understand the recruiter before trusting the advice

A recruiter usually works for the employer. The employer pays the fee, defines the vacancy and decides whom to hire. That does not make the recruiter dishonest; it means you should understand the relationship. A professional recruiter can clarify a role, represent your experience accurately and keep a process moving. The recruiter is not your agent, therapist or long-term career guardian.

Most fresh-graduate positions are not true headhunting assignments because employers can usually attract many applicants directly. Do not wait to be discovered. LinkedIn is a useful shop window, not a career plan. Keep the profile accurate, searchable and professional, but spend more time building evidence and relationships than polishing slogans.

A HEADHUNTER'S REALITY CHECK

A good recruiter may open a door. You are still responsible for knowing where the door leads, preparing properly and deciding whether to walk through it.

Build evidence before you build a story

Employers hear the same claims repeatedly: hardworking, passionate, fast learner, team player and excellent communicator. These words are not evidence. Before applying, build an inventory of situations from internships, projects, part-time work, volunteering, societies and serious personal work. For each one, record the problem, your personal contribution, the difficulty, the outcome and what you learned.

- **Weak:** 'Helped with a university event.'

- **Stronger:** 'Coordinated 18 volunteers and three suppliers for a 400-person faculty event; rebuilt the run sheet after a vendor cancelled two days before delivery.'
- **Weak:** 'Responsible for social media.'
- **Stronger:** 'Created a six-week content schedule for a student campaign, analysed engagement weekly and increased registrations from 120 to 185.'

Use numbers when they are honest and useful, but do not manufacture precision. A credible description of a difficult task is stronger than an impressive percentage you cannot explain. Keep work samples where confidentiality permits: a short analysis, design portfolio, coding repository, presentation, process map or writing sample can do more than another adjective.

Your CV is evidence, not autobiography

For most fresh graduates, one focused page is enough. The purpose is not to record everything you have done. It is to help a busy reader see, quickly and truthfully, why your background may fit the work. Use a plain structure that can be read by both people and applicant-tracking systems. Tailor emphasis to the vacancy, but never copy keywords into claims you cannot defend.

- **Lead with relevance.** Put the most relevant education, internship, project, technical skill or result where it can be found quickly.
- **Write actions and outcomes.** Replace duty lists with concise evidence of what you personally did and what changed.
- **Remove vanity material.** An objective full of ambition, a self-awarded skill rating or a long list of basic software rarely improves your case.
- **Check every detail.** Dates, titles, grades, contact information and claims must be consistent. Careless errors invite doubts about work you have not yet had the chance to perform.
- **Use a professional filename.** 'Tan-Aik-Seng-CV.pdf' is more useful than 'finalCVnew2.pdf'.

A cover letter can help when it is requested or when you have a specific connection to the role. Keep it short. Explain why this organisation, why this work and what evidence makes the match plausible. Do not retell the CV or write a ceremonial essay about childhood dreams.

Run the search as a campaign, not a lottery

Sending the same CV to hundreds of vacancies creates activity, not necessarily progress. Build a target list across three categories: roles you can credibly perform now, roles that are a reasonable stretch and organisations where you want to learn. Research the work, the manager and the business before deciding what deserves a serious application.

- **Use several routes.** Combine company career pages, reputable job platforms, alumni, internship contacts, professional associations, former supervisors and carefully chosen direct approaches.
- **Network for information first.** Ask how the work is really done, what beginners misunderstand and which skills matter. A relationship built around curiosity is stronger than a message from a stranger demanding a referral.
- **Track the pipeline.** Record the role, source, date, contact, next action and result. A job search becomes less emotional when you can see the work in motion.
- **Keep learning while searching.** Improve one relevant skill, complete a work sample or study an industry problem. Time spent waiting should still increase your employability.
- **Do not stop at verbal encouragement.** Continue the search until you have reviewed and accepted a proper written offer and understood any remaining conditions.

A PROFESSIONAL NETWORKING MESSAGE

I recently graduated in mechanical engineering and am trying to understand how early-career engineers build strong experience in manufacturing. Your move from process engineering into operations caught my attention. If you are willing, may I ask for 15 minutes to hear what you wish you had learned in your first two years? I am seeking perspective, not asking you to find me a job.

Learn to recognise recruitment theatre

A job advertisement can be a wish list written by several people. An interviewer can be senior and still untrained. A panel can ask fashionable questions without knowing what a good answer looks like. A company can praise talent while taking weeks to communicate. None of this proves that the job is bad, but it does mean you must observe the process instead of being dazzled by it.

Do not confuse performance with professionalism. A candidate who recites perfect phrases may not work well. An interviewer who speaks confidently may not manage well. Your task is to gather specific evidence from both sides.

1. **What must the person deliver in the first 90 days?** Listen for concrete outcomes rather than a restatement of the job description.
2. **Why is the position open?** Growth, replacement, restructuring and repeated turnover tell different stories.
3. **How will I be trained and reviewed?** Ask who will teach you, how often feedback occurs and what happens when priorities conflict.
4. **What distinguishes strong performers here?** Specific behaviours reveal more than broad claims about culture.
5. **What is the manager's working style?** Clarify communication, decision-making, autonomy and escalation before you are living with them.
6. **What has made previous hires struggle?** A thoughtful answer shows self-awareness; blame directed entirely at former employees deserves caution.
7. **What are the actual conditions?** Clarify location, travel, working pattern, reporting line, probation, peak periods and any material expectation not written in the advertisement.

Red flags are patterns, not imperfections

One awkward interview, a busy manager or a delayed email does not automatically make an employer bad. Look for repeated signals. Respectful people can run an imperfect process. The greater concern is a pattern of vagueness, contradiction, pressure or contempt.

- **The role keeps changing.** The title, duties, reporting line or location differs substantially depending on whom you ask.
- **Nobody can define success.** You receive slogans about attitude but no practical account of what the work must achieve.
- **Disrespect is treated as assessment.** Stress questions are one thing; humiliation, discrimination and deliberate intimidation are another.
- **The employer wants substantial free work.** A short, relevant exercise can be reasonable. Production-ready work with commercial value and no protection may be exploitation.
- **Material terms remain verbal.** Pay, allowances, probation, working location or reporting arrangements are promised but avoided in writing.
- **You are pressured to accept immediately.** Urgency may be genuine, but a professional employer should allow reasonable time to read a significant commitment.

Interview to demonstrate judgment, not perfection

Prepare six real stories before any interview: a difficult problem, fast learning, teamwork, conflict, failure and initiative. Add an ethical decision if your field involves safety, money, data or public responsibility. Use the STAR structure when it helps, but do not sound as if you swallowed an interview manual. The valuable part is what you noticed, what you personally did, the result and what you would now do better.

When you do not know, do not bluff. State what you know, identify what is missing and explain how you would find the answer. Mature uncertainty is more credible than confident invention. Ask for clarification when a question is vague. Take a moment to think. An interview is not a speed contest.

A CREDIBLE ANSWER TO 'WHY SHOULD WE HIRE YOU?'

I am early in my career, so I will not pretend to bring years of experience. I can offer evidence that I learn quickly, organise my work and follow through. In my final-year project, I had to learn [skill], resolve [problem] and deliver [result]. This role appeals to me because the same discipline is needed here, and I am prepared to earn greater responsibility through performance.

Research the salary range, but do not make compensation your opening personality. If asked, give a considered range or ask for the budgeted range, while making clear that you are evaluating the whole role. Being flexible does not mean being uninformed. Being ambitious does not mean inventing competing offers.

Evaluate the offer that actually exists

Do not accept a job made of friendly conversations and future promises. Ask for the written offer and read it. Confirm the legal employer, title, reporting line, salary, allowances, benefits, probation, notice, work location, start date and any condition such as references, medical clearance or work authorisation. If something important was promised, ask for it to be recorded.

- **Manager:** Will this person teach, set standards and give access to meaningful work?
- **Learning:** What credible capability should you possess after 18 to 24 months?
- **Work:** Will you own useful output, or mainly carry a title and wait for instructions?
- **Environment:** Are expectations demanding but lawful, respectful and reasonably clear?
- **Market value:** Will the experience make you more employable beyond this one company?
- **Compensation:** Can you meet your obligations, and is the package fair enough in relation to the opportunity and alternatives?

Choose the first job for the professional it can help you become, not the impression its title creates today.

A respectful note to parents

Parents often finance the education, carry the anxiety and want to prevent a costly mistake. Their concern is legitimate. Their control can still damage the graduate. Do not call the recruiter, attend the interview, negotiate on your adult child's behalf or insist that status and starting salary are the only measures of success. Employers notice when the candidate is not managing their own life.

Help with perspective, transport, interview practice and a realistic household budget. Ask what the role will teach, who the manager is and whether the conditions are safe. Then allow the graduate to speak, decide and live with the responsibility. Confidence grows from handling consequential conversations, not from having every difficulty removed.

FOR PARENTS

Your graduate needs a secure base, not a substitute manager. Support the decision-making process without taking possession of the career.

Rejection is information, not identity

Hiring is a noisy human process. A rejection may reflect stronger evidence, an internal candidate, a changed budget, poor interviewing, chemistry, timing or a requirement that was never written clearly. Learn what you can without turning every decision into a verdict on your worth.

Send one polite follow-up after the stated timeline. Ask for feedback without demanding it. Review your preparation honestly. Then return to the pipeline. Do not suspend the entire search because one manager sounded enthusiastic. Until a proper offer is accepted and its material conditions are understood, interest is not employment.

The search is not over when you are hired

Many organisations, including impressive ones, do not onboard people well. You may receive a laptop, a quick introduction and little explanation of how work really moves. Do not confuse poor onboarding with permission to drift. Ask who can act as a practical guide. Keep notes. Confirm priorities and deadlines in writing. Send concise progress updates. Ask questions early, then record the answers so people do not have to teach the same point repeatedly.

At the same time, do not romanticise neglect or abuse as a rite of passage. A demanding manager can still be fair. Hard work can still have purpose. If the environment is unsafe, unlawful or consistently demeaning, seek appropriate advice and protect yourself. Street-smart professionalism means knowing the difference between discomfort that develops you and dysfunction that damages you.

Your first reputation is built from small promises kept consistently when nobody considers the work glamorous.

Fresh-graduate job-search checklist

Before applying

- ☐ Three target role families and a focused company list defined.
- ☐ Evidence inventory prepared from projects, internships, part-time work and other serious responsibilities.
- ☐ One-page CV checked for relevance, accuracy, dates, spelling and a professional filename.
- ☐ LinkedIn and public digital footprint reviewed for accuracy and professional judgment.
- ☐ References approached for permission before their details are shared.

For every serious opportunity

- ☐ Role, organisation and likely manager researched.
- ☐ Application tailored without exaggerating skills or copying unsupported keywords.
- ☐ Six interview stories prepared with clear personal actions, results and learning.
- ☐ Questions ready on 90-day outcomes, training, management style, performance and actual conditions.
- ☐ Follow-up date recorded; the wider job-search pipeline remains active.

Before accepting

- ☐ Written offer received and all material conditions understood.
- ☐ The first manager, learning curve and real work assessed - not merely the brand and title.
- ☐ Salary and benefits checked against personal obligations and realistic market information.
- ☐ Material promises confirmed in writing and contradictions clarified.
- ☐ Decision made by the graduate, with advice considered but ownership retained.

Take the first rung seriously - but not fearfully

Your first job matters because it establishes habits, references, skills and expectations. It does not imprison you forever. You do not need the perfect answer at 22 or 23. You need an honest first decision, a workplace where useful learning is possible and the humility to earn trust one assignment at a time.

Do not wait to feel completely ready. Readiness is often built after responsibility begins. Prepare carefully, ask better questions, keep your eyes open and choose the opportunity that gives you the strongest chance to become useful. The first rung is not glamorous. It is simply the place from which every higher rung becomes reachable.

Do not ask your first job to make you important. Ask it to make you capable - then prove that you can be trusted with more.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Further reading: Cal Newport, *So Good They Can't Ignore You* (2012), on skills, career capital and the limits of passion-first advice.