

Preparing for the Job Market: a Sociological Primer F. Duina and N. Guppy

Getting a job takes work and preparation. Both begin when you turn your mind to why someone might want to hire you. Most simply, on entering the job market you are a seller. As a seller, you must have what buyers – that is, employers – want. This raises three separate questions that we answer in turn: What do buyers want? How do you acquire those things? And how will buyers know if you have them?

However, before proceeding, remember some basic sociology. Many people, and particularly economists, depict the labour market as a rational choice arena: a place ruled by reason, fact, and efficiency. Information is supposedly abundant, options are unlimited, actors know how to match their preferences with those options, and errors are rare. The result, according to this perspective, is the best utilization of talent in an economic system where employers and workers are both optimally satisfied.

But this description *does not match with the real world*. Actual labour markets are messy places: they are socially constructed spaces where power differentials, institutionalized regularities, class structures, asymmetrical access to information, fads, emotions, the education system, and many other factors shape the making of workers, the need for jobs, how recruiting is done, how pay scales are set, and much more. Furthermore, the market is largely bureaucratized and so increasingly ‘employers’ are Human Resource Departments. Therefore, what happens in the labour market, the matching of jobs to employees, is not determined by an efficient, rational exchange process. But it also means that it isn’t a complete lottery, it isn’t arbitrary. Knowing how labour markets actually function can prove truly valuable, helping you to be savvy, prepared, and ultimately successful.

What employers want.

Credentials

First and foremost employers look for credentials. Realizing exactly what this means matters. It is almost unheard of for employers to request a transcript of your grades, except to verify your graduation. Grades matter for graduate or professional school admission but they become much less important if your intent is to find a job after your Bachelor’s degree. When you graduate, employers will sort you into, or out of, their competition based first on a credential. If you have the right piece of paper, then you pass the first screen. This is credentialism 101!

Obviously, in professional fields people are only hired when they have specific credentials. Physicians need an MD and lawyers require an LL.D. or a JD. But the majority of jobs in the white collar world – those jobs that make up most of the massive service sector of our economy – require Bachelor’s degrees. And here most often the exact field of study does not matter, although obviously some jobs have specific requirements (e.g., history teachers typically have some history training, although not necessarily are they history majors; likewise, food inspection agents often have a science background although they are not necessarily chemists or agricultural scientists). In the language of sociology, there is a loose coupling between the academy and the labour market. In fact, most employers do not really

know what attributes and skill sets, exactly, they need their job candidates to have. They only have some rough ideas (the person must be 'smart', 'driven', etc.) and no specific profile: they have a need, but are often not quite sure exactly what that need is, or how to best fulfill it. While this looseness may seem confusing, it is actually good news for you: with good research (about the employer, the job, and your competition) and proper presentation on your part, you can convince employers that your skill sets are precisely what they are looking for, and therefore that you have what it takes to be hired (remember here Erving Goffman's writings on impression management and his theories of how a person can present themselves in multiple ways).

You should take, then, the idea of credentials with a big grain of salt. Understand what it means, and how your sociological imagination can help you shape what employers are looking for in the first place.

Let us now turn to two other things that employers demand: experience and skills.

Experience

Employers want experienced job applicants. Why is this? Again, most employers cannot offer a precise answer. Experience is a proxy for other things. Employers generally understand experience as signalling that people are more job-ready and thus require minimal training. If probed a little more, employers might tell you that experience indicates that you are more likely to have the discipline and work ethic necessary to thrive in their job. Working life has its own culture, a culture of time management, getting along with others, and discipline. Experience with work culture reassures employers. There are plenty of reasons to question the actual importance of 'experience' for any given job. But, as a smart sociologist, what you should remember is that expectations matter, regardless of whether it is a rational demand or not. Thus, rather than debating the merits of having experience, you should in fact remember the cultural necessity of gaining some work experience.

Skills

Employers are rarely interested in your specialized disciplinary skills. Again, they may only have a general idea of what skills are really needed for the openings on hand. However, every discipline provides you with a host of generic skills. Your task is to cultivate those skills that are most likely going to be appreciated by your prospective employer, and then advertise yourself along those lines. You will want to do this in a way that helps you stand out amongst other job applicants. At the same time – and this is very important – try and understand what you, as a person, really enjoy learning and doing. The idea that our private and professional lives should be totally separate, while helpful in some respects, is a potentially misleading cultural norm. We do not leave our 'true' selves behind when we enter the workplace. The job market is not made up of anonymous actors devoid of personality. The trick will therefore be to balance the need to build an appealing profile with your interests and passions.

With all this in mind, we can identify here a few truly critical skills:

Communications: written skills are critical but so too are your presentation skills. All white collar jobs demand reading and writing skills. Frequently you will be part of a team, expected to contribute ideas orally in team meetings. Being able to present ideas clearly and cogently counts. Learning how to be persuasive matters, and it is a skill you hone with preparation and practice. Framing and packaging matter. Assembling evidence is essential. And the job interview is an oral presentation!!!

Numeracy: being adept with numbers helps in almost any job. Max Weber's world of rationalization, where the metrics of quantification and predictability are front and centre, means that more and more jobs require you to be numerate. An ability to understand, and even better to assemble, charts, figures, graphs, and tables is an important asset.

Methods: being skilled in a range of social science methods enhances your ability to understand problem-solving. Identifying the problem – often its multi-faceted nature – is a skill in itself and this is one of the key things you learn when professors ask you about your research question, or your argument, or your hypothesis. Good, and diverse, methods training ensures you can ask good questions and understand the logic of finding nuanced, persuasive evidence.

Intercultural understanding: culture is about meaning-making. As cultures deepen and diversify, being able to comprehend others and their meaning-making is critically important to organizational success. Quite obviously, this is especially so in a globalizing world. Being practiced in diversity and inclusion is a core competency in the modern workplace. Given this, there are courses and job experiences outside the classroom (internships, summer jobs, etc.) that can help you develop, and later be able to advertise, your intercultural skills.

Critical thinking: the features of thought that signal critical thinking include a mind that is agile, creative, curious, nimble, nuanced, probing, smart, and subtle. These come with practice. They are developed by challenging yourself – moving outside of your comfort zone, both intellectually and emotionally. Smart students, and by this we mean students who will be successful, are those who choose courses with an eye to augmenting their skill sets. Building a course schedule that enriches your skill set is more important than building a course schedule that fits your social life (although having a social life is important, and employers value employees who are socially adept). Also, remember that many of these skills get honed outside the classroom.

At the same time, contrary to what one might think, it is very difficult to measure and quantify one's critical thinking abilities. More to the point, employers have no way of ascertaining how 'good' your critical thinking really is. They instead will gather data points about you from your resume, the way you talk, how you behave during an interview, and how you answer questions designed to test your analytical skills. This means that there are numerous, often subtle ways, of communicating to an employer (who may or may not be consciously focused on this) that you are indeed smart. Put yourself in the reverse role: how do you know that you are dealing with a 'smart' person when you interact with one?

Acquiring what employers want.

How, then, do you acquire all these things that employers want? We have mentioned a few ways already. If you have followed this article along, the message is in fact rather simple: be purposeful, careful, and strategic. Take charge of your university career by planning for its afterlife. Be the author of your own future. Have a game plan and stick to it wisely. When you need to adapt, do so. Most fundamentally, remember that your job search begins long before graduation.

Here is a simple analogy. In university life, you can be a tourist or a participant. Tourists watch the years flow by, living in the moment, enjoying the freedom and the distractions. Participants learn to love exploring knowledge, and they do it vigorously. They learn to be curious; they develop a hungry mind. Participants take control of their lives and author their futures by planning and implementing. Employers want participants. Over time you have grown intellectually, ethically, physically, and so forth. We are encouraging you to take more responsibility for your own growth; be purposeful about it, it's your life.

For a concrete example, think about the need for experience. How do you get great work experience? A good part-time job in a relevant industry is one way. Enrolling in co-operative education can also help, as can carefully chosen internships. Increasingly companies are using co-op placements and internships as ways of assessing potential employees. Take advantage of these university programs to gain experience.

Other forms of experience are also useful, although supplementary. Volunteering is recognized as valuable as it shows employers you are not too self-centered, you care about others, and you have experience working with others. Participation in athletics or the creative and performing arts is also useful. It demonstrates to employers that you have self-discipline, can work in a team setting, and are goal directed. Being involved with student governance, or with campus clubs, community organizations, or social movements can also be useful. You learn transferable skills in all of these places.

Notice the obvious here: university can provide you with experiences outside the classroom that are critically important to your labour market success. It is up to you to take advantage of them. But notice too, the less than obvious. The process of finding a job is really a societal – in this case, culturally-rich – affair: it is about expectations, becoming legitimate, and being sensitive to certain values and beliefs. Knowing how to make use of this social fact can give you a leg up in your search efforts (see the next article by Hirsh *et al.* on searching for employment).

Showing buyers what you have.

Your success in this next phase will depend upon how well you have done in the previous two phases. It really is impossible to turn a pig's ear into a silk purse. But if you have spent some time figuring out what employers want (and how they come to want something) and learning how to acquire it, then

selling yourself in the labour market is much easier. Display the “silk” that you have acquired. This is where Goffman’s impression management comes into play, or, in the lingo of the current job market, this is where you need to market your brand, where you need to show employers what is distinctive and attractive about employing you. Here, again, sociology is relevant: marketing is as much a social action as an economic one. At its core, you are constructing your image in the marketplace, reflecting and adjusting to its requirements and ambiguities, and ultimately shaping that very marketplace. Thus, to present yourself you should think ahead and plan carefully. Five tips in particular come to mind:

Do your homework: figure out some areas in which you might like to work and then learn about potential employers. Figure out how you fit with them and tailor your resume to speak to their needs.

Practice some ethnography: visit a workplace by contacting people in the human resources Department and ask if you can do an informational interview. Learn about the company and then ask intelligent questions about the organization and about the job search process.

Craft a good resume: create a short overview of your accomplishments and attributes. Set out your credentials and then highlight your experiences and skill sets. Do this with a clear understanding of who your target audience really is.

Have good references: ask your best contacts for a particular job opening to write you a strong letter of reference and/or to contact people they know who can help. Give them suggestions as to what to highlight in their letters or phone interviews so that your skills and experiences are well showcased.

Prepare for the interview: your experiences and skill sets are key, but ultimately when you are interviewing you are moving to another stage of the selection process. Other interviewees, too, have attractive experiences and skill sets. You must differentiate yourself in other ways. Remember what we talked about earlier: learn about your audience, communicate things about you without saying them, convince them that you are the person they are looking for (that is, make them realize that what they want is someone like you). Remember Goffman and impression management.

One final point is in order. The loose coupling between academia and the job market we discussed earlier has an additional implication. Many university-aged students do not know with any certainty what occupational jobs or careers they want to, or will, pursue. Their preferences are far from set or formed. It follows that you should approach the job search with flexibility. Worrying about finding the ‘perfect’ job is pointless. There are multiple good fits, and your desires and interests will in fact be shaped and stimulated by what is out there. The process of matching you to a job, in other words, is interactive. So, this means that you should be flexible in your expectations and what might actually work for you. Be ready to package yourself in different ways. If you think about it, the basic insight here is deeply sociological: just as the specific tasks of jobs are frequently not clearly delineated in an employer’s mind, a recent college graduate can present herself or himself to the world in different ways. Workers and jobs emerge interactively – i.e., through a fundamental process of social interaction.

Summing up

The job market is far from being the rational, efficient, and transparent clearing house where talent is matched, in the most optimal ways, with clearly delineated and specified employment opportunities. It is instead a social arena where a host of factors – from cultural to structural – shape how workers and employers ultimately find (and define) each other. To use a classic phrase from economic sociology, the job market is ‘embedded’ in society. Understanding and preparing for this is one of the best things you can do to ensure your success.