

Making a Successful Transition from College to Career: Time for a Reality Check

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"[The real world] is a big change, more than you can ever imagine when you are sitting in the classroom thinking about the outside world!"

-- Anonymous business-school grad

For many seniors, the time leading up to college graduation and the start of a first job is often chaotic and stressful. You are trying to complete your college career without too much of a senioritis meltdown while dealing with the demands of job-hunting, interviewing, and facing the reality of the end of schooling (at least for the foreseeable future).

In all our discussions with college seniors and recent college graduates, eight issues arise time and time again as the keys to making a successful transition from life as a student to life as a productive employee. Understanding these issues and being prepared for them before they occur should help you make a smoother transition.

Are you ready for a reality check? Here are the eight critical issues facing you in the near future.

1. Time-Related Factors

Some students are very adept at planning their college schedules so they have only afternoon classes or classes only on certain days of the week, and it's these students that have a hard time facing the reality of going to work every day, five days a week, from as early as 6 or 7 in the morning to 6 or 7 in the evening. And it's not like the 8 a.m. class that you often skipped when you hit the snooze button too many times on your alarm clock; show up late once too many times and you'll find yourself unemployed.

Another time-related harsh reality is free time and vacation time. In college, you get used to taking long weekends away from campus -- on top of extremely long winter and summer breaks. Most colleges also have mid-semester breaks. Unfortunately, most employers are not that generous with time off. You may be lucky to get two weeks of vacation in your first job - but even with those two weeks, because you are one of the newest employees, you may not have much choice as to when you can take your vacation.

The final time factor is time management. You may have thought it was tough managing various group projects, tests, and other activities while in college, but it will be even more of a struggle to manage your time once you are working -- and your future with your employer depends on how well you can manage your time. "There is a huge difference in time management when you have to work 40+ hours and try to have a life on the side," a 2001 general-business grad told us. "I find myself scheduling dinner with people for weeks in advance. College didn't teach me working 40 hours. College didn't teach me a bedtime... but those are all things you learn with necessity. I think if I had worked during my college career... I would have learned that."

On the other hand, some students worked so hard in college that they actually find the working world -- where homework is not necessarily required -- a welcome relief. "I was very busy in college," said Anne Johnson, senior corporate relations coordinator for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, "so when I started working full-time, without homework and studying, I felt that I had a lot of free time. I tell people that I have had more fun since I graduated college than I did in all

four years of college. I have gotten involved in many activities too," said Johnson, a 2002 economics grad from the University of Dallas.

Your college experience may even have helped you learn to manage your time. "While I was in school, I was used to managing a full-course load while participating in a variety of extracurricular activities," a recent grad told us, adding, "someone once told me that being busy is not an excuse for neglecting your personal life because everyone is busy. I have tried to follow this thought and it seems to work the majority of the time."

2. Professionalism in the Workplace

Everyone knows that a certain amount of college is a rite of passage, a time to try different things, be a little crazy or irresponsible. In college, acting unprofessional might result in a bad grade or a lecture from an administrator or professor; in the workplace, acting unprofessionally can get you fired. "Getting the wrong answer means more than just a poor grade," affirmed a recent business-school graduate.

Professionalism also deals with dependability and being a self-starter. "There are some things that you just have to figure out or experience on your own. That's called personal accountability," a business-school grad told us. "A graduate will never have all the answers, and rightfully so. You should always have the zeal to seek out new knowledge and learn from your mistakes. That is what creates uniqueness and personal character."

To succeed, you must be seen as a member of the team that can be relied on to do your job. Deadlines are critical, much more so than in college. Whereas you might have been able to schmooze your professor into giving you an extension, you'll find in most faced-paced business environments, missing deadlines is unacceptable.

3. A Job or True Calling?

While it helps to have a solid vision of what you want your career path to be after graduation, don't panic if your first job after graduation does not perfectly fit your plan. Many recent college grads change jobs after their first year out; sometimes it takes that long just to fully understand who you are and what you really want to do with your life. For others, this understanding might not come until even later in life.

Another misconception among college seniors and recent grads is that your major dictates the types of jobs you can work. While there are some specialized fields, such as engineering, where you need to have a degree in that field, the vast majority of jobs in business simply require a college degree. So, focus your job-search not on the types of jobs you feel you must apply for, but on the types of jobs you aspire and desire.

Finally, all the statistics show that students graduating from college today will change careers -- not just jobs -- multiple, multiple times over the course of your working life... so don't fret if that first job is not the perfect fit for you, but do start planning so you can make the transition to something better down the road.

Keep track of your accomplishments and develop an awareness of the transferable skills you develop in your early jobs that you can apply to better jobs down the road.

4. College Has Not Prepared You for Everything

Believe us when we say that one of the most overwhelming issues we hear from recent grads is that college did not prepare them for many of the challenges they faced as they made that transition from college to career.

Many recent grads say they were totally unprepared for:

- The emphasis placed on teamwork skills

- The importance of dealing with all types of people and personalities
- Personal finance issues and budgeting
- Living on your own - or having to move back with your family
- Balancing work demands with family/friends/personal life
- Job-hunting skills, especially networking, interviewing, and salary negotiation

See comments on these topics and more in our [Real World section](#). You can be better prepared for some of these issues by meeting with a career professional in your college's career services office. Quintessential Careers also offers numerous articles and other resources on many of these topics.

5. Finding Employment Probably Won't Be Easy

Perhaps its because most of today's college students grew to adulthood in a period of unsurpassed prosperity and growth during the Clinton Administration, but it seems to be a harsh reality to many college seniors and recent grads that obtaining a job offer is very time-consuming and a lot of work -- and it's even harder to obtain the ideal scenario of having multiple job offers.

"One job [opening] can get hundreds of resumes," a business-school grad observed. "I have seen in past jobs when resumes came in, basically it was luck of the draw as to who got called in. So many people had similar skills, my employer literally went by things such as resume appearance or randomly choosing 10 out of 30 similar but great resumes. Its tough!"

As most experienced job-seekers already know, you have to spend time every day looking for employment. Use all available resources, tracking down all job leads, and following-up on all leads and interviews. Generally speaking, the more quality work you put into your job-search, the better your results.

One other common misconception of college students is the over-reliance on the Internet and passive job-hunting to find employment. The Internet should really receive only a small portion of your job-search time. Instead, most of your efforts should still be using the traditional methods of networking - with family and friends, other students, alumni (especially recent alumni), professors, former co-workers and bosses, etc. Don't take our word for it. [Read the comments of numerous new grads who discovered the value of networking.](#)

6. Don't Be So Full of Yourself

Having a college degree does not entitle you to a job, and it's best to prepare yourself now that most employers will not be impressed with your grades or your education as you are with them. "As a cum laude graduate, I thought I was entitled to a great job right out of college," a 2000 marketing grad told us. "Well after two years, with five jobs in three cities, I THINK I've found the job that I was expecting to get after graduation!" Attending a "name" school or having an extremely high grade-point average are definitely selling points in your favor, but not something you solely rely to get a job.

Focus less on why employers should be so impressed with your credentials that they should be hunting you down -- and more on how you can use your talent and initiative to make a contribution to the employer's bottom line. Be sure to tell the employer how you will make a strong contribution.

One of the reasons many career experts try to keep college graduates to a one-page resume is because there often is simply no need to go beyond one page -- except for the student to oversell his/her qualifications and for the employer to be unimpressed.

7. College Grads Get Entry-Level Jobs

One of the harsh realities that many new grads face -- especially in the bad job markets -- is that

a large number of the jobs available for college grads are, in fact, entry-level. These jobs often require long hours, low pay, and hard work.

Some recent grads have turned up their noses at job offers because of the sense that the jobs were below them; perhaps the jobs required helping stock shelves or traveling too much.

This advice is not meant to imply that you should take the first job offer you get -- or any job offer you get -- just be realistic in your expectations. Most employers want to see all employees start at a certain level to better understand the business -- with the college grads on a career track toward faster advancement. So, just do your research about employers before jumping to conclusions about the value of certain types of jobs.

Do be ambitious about moving beyond the entry level, but not at the expense of your current job. As another business-school grad told us, "Former co-workers of mine became so obsessed with finding a better job that they forgot about the responsibilities of their current positions."

8. Be Prepared for Salary Negotiations and Job Offers

If you're one of the lucky college grads, 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 not only to negotiate the salary and the entire compensation package, but also have a clear sense of what you want before the issue arises.

If you did get two or more job offers, how would you decide? What criteria would you use? What's important to you? Salary? Prestige? Company Car? Travel? Vacation? Benefits? Relocation? Company culture?

One recent marketing grad we know was trying to decide between two very different job offers. One was a sales position for a well-known company. The offer included a very high salary and bonus system, and company car. The downsides were a lot of time spent on the road, no clear career path, and a feeling of unease with the corporate culture. Her other offer was with a marketing communications agency as an account representative. The offer included a salary almost half of the sales one, with no bonuses and no company car. It did include a dynamic work environment, a clear career path, and a sense of strong fit with the agency's corporate culture. She was faced with the dilemma of going for the quick money or a longer-term career move. She chose the agency. Which would you choose?

Final Thoughts

Strive to get the best job offers from the best employers, but remember to temper everything you do with a realistic vision of what to really expect -- in the job-hunt and in getting job offers. Take to heart the advice from all the recent college grads that have come before you and been in your shoes -- and you'll be better prepared and more satisfied with your job-search.