

Chapter 13

Using Your Student Employment Experience in the Job Search

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Recent graduates report back to us that the most frustrating obstacle they face in finding an entry-level job is their lack of experience. Employers consistently prefer to hire the experienced performer. It's less risky. Experienced performers have a track record, a professional reputation. They are a proven commodity. Thus, employers, given a choice, will almost always hire someone with experience.

It's frustrating because it's the old chicken-egg cliché. "I can't get a job without experience, and I can't get experience without a job."

But what many new graduates don't realize is that they have experience, but it's experience for which they haven't given themselves proper credit. Let me explain.

Students usually have worked in a variety of jobs, in high school and college. But the jobs may have been menial, not related to career goals, and the student assumes these jobs have no value, that an employer would not consider them important. Wrong. Employers judge candidates on two levels. The two levels are the lower level (those qualities desirable in all employees), and the upper level (those qualities specific to a career field). In the back of every employer's mind is the "ideal" candidate. The ideal candidate varies by the career field and, to some extent, by the

individual employer's idiosyncrasies, but always there are those two levels.

The uppermost level consists of characteristics specific to a career field. Accountants are detail-oriented number crunchers. Salespeople are talkative extroverts with an aggressive self-confidence. Pick a field and paint the stereotype. The employer will judge all candidates against their individualized ideal stereotype. Of course, it's always best to have the higher level career-related experience.

But the lower or foundation level is important too. All employers want an employee who is honest, bright, prompt, dependable, hard-working, eager to learn, and easy to be with. And these qualities can be demonstrated on any job, even the ones that did not seem important.

I frequently help students with resumes. All too often the student lists education, classes taken and little else. They assume (wrongfully) that since they haven't had a co-op, internship, or other career experience, they have no experience to list on the resume. They assume that the employer will not be impressed with their jobs as a cook or pool installer, so it's dropped.

But what do employers see (and assume)? They see a resume that appears the student has never

worked; a person in their early twenties who has never held a job. So the employer jumps to conclusions. "Never worked. . . Lazy? Rich kid who has had everything handed to them? Health problems? Drug or alcohol issues?" The employer doesn't know. And there are plenty of other candidates who don't raise these questions. "Let's interview one of them."

So, at the very least, these jobs should be mentioned. If they're nothing special, just include a section such as: *Other jobs held include: Waitress, Cook, Lifeguard, Grocery Clerk.* It takes little space and eliminates the questions.

But let's look a little deeper. Could you possibly take one of these jobs and use it to illustrate either a basic lower level quality or a higher level, career-specific quality? Some examples will illustrate.

One student was a waitress. Her resume said: *Waitress—seated restaurant patrons and delivered menus, took food orders, served food, settled bill and cleared table.* I knew that. I've eaten in restaurants. Everything she described was implicit in the job title. Her description added nothing and gave me no clues about her. After a little discussion we came up with this description: *Waitress—managed tip pool for 8 servers, totalled and equally distributed all tips received at the end of each shift.*

An employer reading this might say, "Her co-workers trusted her with all of the tips. She's honest, trustworthy." A better impression than that first description? Of course. The point is that what you choose to describe and how you describe it will lead the reader to certain conclusions about your personality and abilities. Write with an eye to what conclusions you're creating. Student employment jobs can be used (if written properly) to illustrate any number of lower level qualities. Don't neglect them.

But let's not stop here. Student employment jobs might also be useful in demonstrating some higher level, career-related qualities. Here's another before and after example, this time from a student who wanted to be an accountant.

Before: *Warehouse Worker—loaded trucks with furniture for delivery to homes.* On the surface it

would appear that this job has nothing to do with being an accountant. Let's look at a revised description.

After: *Warehouse Worker—reviewed furniture orders. Loaded proper order onto correct delivery truck, responsible or accurate delivery of over \$70,000 worth of merchandise daily.*

I'd say that second person is accurate and detail-oriented, valuable qualities in an accountant. The job in the before and after is the same; only the description changed. The latter emphasizes parallels, duties that demonstrate a transferable skill.

We still recommend that you attempt to get as much career-related experience as possible. However, those jobs are fewer and harder to get. The student employment jobs may not be your life's work, but do not discount their value. If you present them from the proper perspective, there may be considerable value in them.

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