

Experience Is Not Optional; It Is Essential

*In the business world, everyone is paid in two coins: cash and experience.
Take the experience first; the cash will come later.*

Harold Geneen

If I had to identify the top three most universally frustrating career issues among college students, the notion of *experience* (or, more accurately, lack thereof) would surely be one of them. Indeed, one of the most frequent job-related questions I get from college students and recent graduates—whether I am meeting them in person or “talking” to them via MonsterTRAK’s Career Planning for College Students message board—goes something like this: Why do employers expect you to have experience when you need to have a job in the first place in order to *get* experience?

It is a fair question. But in the mind of an employer—someone who ultimately has to pay you (or whoever is hired) a good little chunk of the organization’s hard-earned money—it is also an irrelevant question. To the typical entry-level employers of today, experience is no longer the optional add-on it once was where candidates are concerned; to employers, experience is essential—and something they can and do demand of students and recent grads, whether you like it or not. Why? There are several reasons, all of which you can easily understand (though you still may not agree with them) if you put yourself in the hiring manager’s shoes:

Too Many Students and Grads Do Have Experience. We have reached a point now when most college students graduate with

experience of some kind, whether it is through an internship, a co-op, a job, or some other activity (see *Internship Is Just One Name for Valuable Experience*, p. 140). Thus, if you are one of the relatively few college students who approaches employers with no experience of any kind, you just cannot compete with most of your peers—and the employers know it. Remember: The test known as your job search is graded on a curve (see *This Test Is Graded on a Curve*, p. 199); employers will evaluate you not in *isolation from* other students or grads, but in *comparison to* other students or grads.

Students Who Have Experience Are Perceived as More Focused and Skilled. There may be very good reasons why you have no experience in your chosen field yet. Perhaps you double- or triple-majored and simply did not have the time (or the money) to do much more. Perhaps you were taking care of your family the whole time you were in school. Maybe you yourself were sick for a time during college and it was all you could do to get back on your feet and graduate. All well and good.

But employers tend to read the worst into your lack of experience. For starters, they will question your dedication to the field you are trying to get into. “If this student didn’t do an internship,” a public relations hiring manager might think to herself, “then how do I know he’s really into PR as a career? How can I be sure he is not dabbling and that he won’t quit on me three months from now?” More importantly, employers tend to question the skills and abilities of students who have no experience in their chosen field. To an employer, it is one thing to be able to write a paper or work on a team as part of a class, but it is quite another to be able to do the same things—and do them well—in a professional work setting where the stakes are much higher.

Students with Experience Are Seen as Needing Less Training. The more time and money an employer has to invest in training you (or whoever is hired) in the tasks of the job—not to

mention the nuances of the organization and the quirks of the people there—the more it costs to hire you. Thus, if you are a human resources management (HRM) major and you interned last summer in the training and development department of a *Fortune* 500 company—where, among other things, you developed PowerPoint presentations—you already know PowerPoint well enough to be a legitimate asset. For all a prospective employer knows, the other student who is competing with you for the job only fiddled around with PowerPoint for five minutes in a class one time—if she fiddled with it at all. Thus, hiring your competitor will cost the employer at least a \$395 “Basics of PowerPoint” course, not to mention a day or two of missed work for that new hire as she learns the software. Bringing you on board, conversely, will be as simple as showing you your computer, saying “there’s PowerPoint,” and telling you to get started.

In the eyes of employers, then, the more experience you have, the more you will stand out compared to your peers who are not experienced. Employers will see you as more focused and dedicated to your chosen field, and the less handholding you will need once you are on the job, the better. It all adds up, fairly or unfairly, to an entry-level employment environment where experience is required—and lack of experience will prevent you from being hired.

Highlight This: The days when you can graduate from college without experience are long gone. Get as much experience as you can during college, no matter what you need to do to pull it off. Experience is no longer optional; it is essential.