

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



Graduate Job Search

Stephen Ling

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About the Author

Stephen Ling lectures in chemical engineering at the University of Glamorgan. In his graduate career, he has changed jobs four times in twenty years, working for major UK companies including Fisons, British Gas and ICI. In the process he attended 50 interviews and received twelve job offers.

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Introduction

THIS BOOK IS directed at all graduates. You may be about to graduate, recently graduated but not yet professionally employed, or you could be looking for a change of job after several years' experience.

We are witnessing an increase in the graduate population at a time when the supply of suitable jobs is stagnant. There is increasing competition for those jobs that provide relevant professional experience. Further, loyalty to employers is declining, while job insecurity is increasing. There are no longer jobs for life. Experienced graduates are more and more willing to move jobs to capitalise on their experience. They are increasingly having to look for jobs when redundant.

In my graduate career, I moved job four times in twenty years. I worked for major companies including Fisons, British Gas and ICI. I attended over fifty interviews, securing twelve job offers. Most recently I experienced redundancy in a recession.

I am convinced that other graduates will benefit from my experience.

Please note that the book is equally intended for both men and women. To remain neutral I considered using 'he' and 'she' but this read clumsily. The book therefore uses the single pronoun 'he' throughout in the hope it will make easier reading.

PART ONE

THE PLAN

Chapter 1

A Plan for a Job Search

THE JOB MARKET is highly competitive. A professional attitude makes the difference between a job and no job, between a good job and an ordinary one, and between a job sooner rather than later.

This book should reduce the time and effort required to learn about the job market and how to sell yourself in it. You will still have to work hard to be successful. However, if you first recognise that there is much to learn about the job search procedure, you will do less work in the long term.

The job search is a selling exercise in which you are the product and the employer is the customer. You must examine yourself, the product, to see which employer would be interested. Also, since in selling situations the customer has all the power, you should identify what each individual employer requires and adapt yourself to provide it. Do not expect an employer to take you just as you are.

Before forming a job search plan, recognise that progress falls into discrete stages. At each stage you have to make a certain amount of effort to succeed. To fail at any stage means starting again.

At each stage of the job search the employer will ask questions. A great deal of effort is required to prepare answers. You need to understand that some questions are leading questions. Employers cannot ask directly everything they want to know about you. They will infer certain things

from other answers that you give, and the way that you give them. It is misleading when you do not know exactly why a question has been asked or what it is that the employer wants to know. Preparation is the key to success in this difficult communications exercise.

We all judge one another subjectively, making generalisations about personality traits based on groups of observations. This is also how employers weigh up job applicants. Most employers attempt to be as objective about the job selection procedure as they can. However, they are powerless to ignore the human and social aspects. After all, one of the most important things that an employee must do is to fit in and get on with his colleagues. Teamwork is very important, and hard to achieve.

Another important quality is that a candidate must *show* that he can do the job. Students expect their qualifications and training to prove this, but work experience is far more important in demonstrating ability. You need to practise talking about your experience and achievements in a way that shows you can do the job. Alternatively, you must convince an employer that you are capable of learning quickly.

Finally, candidates' appearance and values are expected to fall within expected norms. For certain jobs, men need to recognise that long hair and earrings on men will be noticed and taken into account when their appearance is weighed up. Your manners will be noticed and added to the equation. The longer your hair, the more acceptable you may need to be in other ways.

Perhaps the most frustrating part of a job search is the experience of repeated rejection, without knowing the reasons. I hope that the information provided in this book will allow candidates to review and reflect on their experiences in a positive way. A constructive learned approach will be successful in the end.

THE PLAN

If everything goes according to plan, you will

- identify how to convince someone to give you a job
- succeed in getting a job offer
- know how you did it, so as to be able to repeat it

The key to success is to work effectively at each stage of the job search.

Failure to have a plan invites failure to get the job. Unsuccessful interviews are unpleasant memories from which a candidate may wrongly conclude that he will never find a job. Worse, he might imagine that there is something wrong with him. Without a strategy, the candidate is less likely to succeed next time.

Someone who has a plan can review what went wrong if he does not get the job and can do better next time. He can put the experience down to chance, and therefore maintain high morale and self-esteem.

A structured approach to the job search is:

- preparation *then*
- opportunity *equals*
- a job offer

There are two reasons why candidates might, wrongly, look for opportunity before doing any preparation. First, they fear that opportunities are scarce and are afraid of missing one. They panic, making an inadequate attempt that is predestined to failure. Second, they are unaware of the preparation that is required and how to go about it.

It is important to recognise that finding a job requires much hard work. Done half-heartedly, it could take forever. The total effort needed becomes less the harder the job-seeker works. More effort for less time is the best approach.

It generates a choice of job offers. Employers are also impressed by enthusiasm.

The job search is a staged process.

1. Decide what sort of job to do
2. Prepare a CV
3. Obtain an interview
4. Obtain a second interview
5. Secure the job offer

The job search is like a series of hurdles. Getting the job requires a huge effort at each successive jump. A common mistake is to feel relieved after succeeding at one hurdle then fail to make enough effort at the next one. Candidates must never relax before the final hurdle has been cleared, else they face having to start again.

Stage 1: Decide what sort of job to do

What sort of job would you like? What things do you do well, and what things not so well? Many candidates will neglect this self-analysis completely. As a result they will lack direction and place themselves at a serious disadvantage with the competition.

If you are a final-year undergraduate you should ask friends and parents for their opinions about the sort of job they could imagine you doing. Perhaps give some thought to a higher degree at a different university. There is less competition to undertake higher degrees, and if you are academically minded, an MA or PhD at a prestigious university might be a worthwhile achievement. Consult your university careers adviser.

Preferably, final-year undergraduates should enter their final year with a clear aim.

Stage 2: Prepare a CV

The CV is an important personal sales document. Not to have one will disadvantage a candidate compared with the competition. Find the time and energy to do it.

The CV must be perfect. It develops as the job search progresses, as the candidate continually refines it. The best policy is to put effort into writing a good CV at the earliest opportunity.

Ideally, undergraduates should prepare their CVs before or during the October of their final year.

Stage 3: Obtain an interview

A good job, advertised nationally, attracts around 400 quality applications. Naïve candidates assume that if they make 400 applications then statistically they should get at least one interview. Informed or experienced ones know that this is not true. Anyone who continues to think that the law of averages has any relevance to a job search will take a long time to find a job.

Suppose an employer receives 400 applications. A person cannot read 400 CVs without mentally switching off. The covering letter is therefore crucial. If it does not sell the CV, then the chances of success are negligible. At this stage the candidate has to make an effort to prepare good covering letters relevant to each job that he applies for.

Sending out dozens of applications at a time is like using a shotgun. A shotgun fires lots of shot over a wide area but lacks sufficient power in any one direction. With the shotgun method you have to apply without knowing much about the jobs. A job hunt requires the opposite approach. Lots of power must be directed at a specific target. People resorting to shotgun tactics do so because they wrongly perceive that the job search is a numbers game. Unfortunately, employers are sensitive to it and do not like it. The employer needs to feel special. He wants to feel that he is the particular

employer and this the particular job that the candidate really wants.

Stage 4: Obtain a second interview

A search and selection agency may interview a dozen people for one vacancy, or about twenty for three vacancies. The agency then forwards four to six CVs, with interview notes, to the employer. Such agencies want to do a good job and to get repeat business. Their immediate concern is to prepare some notes on the candidate to forward to the employer. Help the interviewer to prepare a good set of interview notes, and improve your chances of a second interview.

What does a convincing set of interview notes contain? It probably includes the candidate's key selling points, his main achievements to date, and his reasons for wanting to work with the employer in question. It is impossible for a candidate to help someone to prepare these notes if he could not prepare them himself.

Where the employer carries out his own short-listing interviews, for example on the milk round ([see Chapter 10](#)), the principle is the same.

Success at this stage depends on hard work and preparation.

Stage 5: Secure the job offer

Failure at the second interview is more upsetting than failure at the first. Expectations are raised by initial success, only to be destroyed at the last hurdle.

A job search in a recession lasts about nine months. At first, the candidate may be incapable of effective action. Later, he gets some first interviews. By the time he reaches a second interview the stakes are high. Failing a second interview is agony, a definition of despair. The experience,

though, will teach anyone who has failed to prepare for an interview that he must prepare for future ones.

KNOW YOUR PRODUCT

Before you apply for a job, make sure it is really what you want to do.

Also, before you can convince an employer of your strengths, you yourself need to know what they are.

What things have you done well in the past? Are they the things that you enjoy doing and want to do for a living? Most of us like doing the things that we do well and which make us successful. However, we have to be realistic: very few people become top footballers, or get invited to host a travel show.

For those already working, to drag on with something you cannot do well is a misery. A long, hard think is needed. If you have already embarked on a career, the decision to change track is a tough one. Possibly such a decision follows the difficult admission that all is not well in your present position. Realising that you have been unsuccessful in a job is demoralising. But success is always relative, and a prerequisite for success is to have faith in ourselves. It is an emotional issue. Ask those you trust for their views on what you should do.

It is frequently supposed that a change in direction involves a drop in pay. If the possibilities are researched well enough the drop can be minimised. Normally, doing well at what you enjoy will make it worthwhile.

When you know what you want to do and what your strengths are, try to identify *where* you might work.

When you sell yourself, decide which aspects of yourself you will emphasise, and which you will avoid. Your CV, covering letter and performance at interview must all reflect your strengths relevant to the vacancy, and should not reveal your weaknesses.

In not revealing weaknesses, it is important not to tell lies. Conceal weaknesses by not allowing them to arise, not by deceit. Lies lead to trouble when you are found out. Plan to control the proceedings sufficiently well that the questions you might founder on never arise. This skill of presenting yourself in the best possible light does not come naturally, but with practice it is easy to develop.

Review your greatest successes: imagine talking to an employer about them; convince him that you could repeat them.

MARKET RESEARCH

Find out what is relevant first. You need to know about the company in order to plan which of your strengths you should stress in your CV, covering letter and interview. You should only stress relevant qualities and achievements.

There are a number of things you can do which will improve your chances of being offered the job, and of knowing whether to accept it. Read the newspaper, especially the business pages. Evidence of some knowledge of the relevant sector makes a good impression at the interview, but not if overplayed so that it becomes transparent. Read professional journals to discover which companies are doing well and which ones badly. If professional journals contain job adverts, look through back issues. Some companies show up as having a recruitment problem. Find out why.

Job advertisements often contain useful information. When replying to an advert, read it repeatedly to make sure you do not miss anything. Where adverts give a source of further information, follow it up.

Sometimes job adverts provide a contact name and phone number. The contact might be a junior person whose job is to provide information. Alternatively, it could be the person who will choose between candidates.

If you speak to a secretary or personnel officer, try to gather as much information as possible. Find out the names of the people you would work for. Ask for any reports, accounts or sales brochures that might be relevant. Enquire if the job is a new one, or if not who did it last and what are they doing now. How long has the job been advertised?

If the person you speak to is more senior, he might well be involved in the interviewing process. Remember that he will recall your telephone call when he makes his decision. Think of the most significant message that you have and get it across during the conversation. The best way to pass on information is in reply to a question, because it is then that the other person is listening most closely. The sort of questions that might allow you to convey something important are:

- How did you hear about the vacancy?
- What is your current job?

What will you say in reply?

Above all, sound interested in the job.

Even if the advertisement does not invite you to telephone, it is a good idea to ring the switchboard. Choose a quiet time of day, avoiding lunchtime. Explain that you are applying for a job, and ask for the names of the key people and their job titles. Find out if there is someone in the company who could send the annual report or other information. Switchboard staff are normally trained to be helpful. They are the first point of contact between the company and the outside world. At any subsequent interview do not mention that you phoned, but if it is discovered by those with the authority to give you the job, the interest that you have shown will be welcomed. There are too many candidates who appear not to care less about where they are employed. You should plan to give the impression that this is the company you would most like to