

STRIVE AND SUCCEED: OR, HOW TO AVOID UNEMPLOYMENT

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RICHARD GALLAGHER

It is no secret that it is extremely difficult for liberal arts graduates to find employment these days. When an opening is available, the competition is likely to be fierce. The purpose of this essay is to consider some of the ways to look for a position, and some of the things you can do to improve your chances of getting hired.

A student who has already decided on a particular career necessarily has fewer options than the majority of liberal arts majors, who usually have only a vague idea of the type of work they would like to do. For those who are undecided, an excellent source of information on the current job market is the classified section of the Sunday New York Times. I recommend looking through it regularly for at least one year before you actively begin your job hunting. This will give you a clear picture of which industries offer the greatest number of opportunities, as well as an idea of salary ranges.

There are different styles of job hunting, and they can be divided into two broad categories -- the "pavement pounders" and the "ad answerers." The former group resorts to mass-mailings of resumes or makes random personal visits to companies in search of openings. The latter group scans the classified ads and responds only to the listings which seem to have strong possibilities. I opted for ad answering, because I didn't have the time to visit many companies personally, and mass mailing of my resume seemed too expensive. However, I know people in each category who were successful, so I am reluctant to recommend one method over the other.

Anyone who chooses ad answering will be almost obliged to deal with employment agencies. It may seem paradoxical, but business for many agencies

actually picks up when jobs are scarce. The reason is that most companies have relatively small hiring staffs. If such a company advertises an attractive position during a time of high unemployment, it is likely to be swamped with more applicants than it is equipped to handle. The solution is to hire through agencies, which screen all candidates for the company. A typical company-agency relationship works like this: When a company has an opening, it notifies one or more agencies with which it does business. The company outlines the type of person it wants, as well as the necessary work and educational experience the position requires. The agency then runs some classified ads, which usually describe the position in very general terms. From the respondents, the agency sets up interviews for those individuals who are most likely to be hired. For every referral who is hired, the agency receives a fee, which is usually ten per cent of the new employee's starting salary. In New York City the employer usually pays the fee, while the employee is generally assessed for it elsewhere.

All agencies are not alike, and there are some which should be avoided altogether. Some agencies require you to pay a fee in advance, which they promise to refund if they fail to find a position within a specified period of time. Quite apart from the fact that they have the use of your money for this period, many people have found that getting their money back is like pulling teeth. I would also be wary of agencies which run the same advertisement, week after week. You can be sure that it is a come-on, and the job described does not exist.

A good agency will work for you, but it is also working for the employer. No agency will refer you for positions where you do not qualify. Remember, you must convince the agency of your qualifications before you will even have an opportunity to see an employer. The agency's function, from the employer's standpoint, is to screen out the unqualified. An agency which refers deadbeats will soon lose the employer's business. By the same token, no agency will refer you forever, regardless of your qualifications. If, after three or four

interviews, no employer offers to hire you, an agency will probably write you off as a loser. At that point, you would do well to look elsewhere.

Perhaps the most difficult part of job hunting is the interview. The greatest resume<sup>1</sup> in the world will be of little help if you fail at interview time. Having been through it a number of times myself (and having learned a little by each failure), I recommend that you go to one or two interviews for jobs you really aren't interested in. This will help you overcome the jitters and also prepare you for future interviews.

All interviews are essentially alike. You will be expected to talk at some length about your background. Try to keep the discussion on a conversational level, as the interviewer will be trying to get to know you. Have specific answers to the following questions: "What salary are you looking for?" "How much do you expect to be earning in three to five years?" "Why do you think you'll do well in this job?" and "Why did you major in history?" The last question could be the greatest stumbling block for you, and yet it should be no problem at all. When an interviewer asked me that question, I was reminded of my relatives who used to ask me "what I was going to be" when I got my degree. I always answered in one word: "educated." Don't be defensive about being a History major! I told the interviewer who hired me that I majored in history because I enjoyed it. By all means, avoid such lame explanations as "I thought it would be a good background for a stockbroker." Any recruiter worth his salt will consider that an idiotic remark, and he will probably conclude that the person who said it is an idiot. Businessmen realize that college is not a trade school. They don't care why you majored in History so much as they want to see that you chose it as a result of a rational thought process. Above all else, be honest. The temptation to lie about your qualifications or interest in a job is great, especially when you need money desperately. However, remember that the questions are designed to weed out those who will not do well in the job. If, for example, you don't want to relocate

be frank about it. Otherwise you might find yourself being transferred a year later.

Of course, none of these tips will help you if you have no qualities to make you hireable. For some it is too late to improve their records, but for many others there is plenty of time to attain better positions in the marketplace. The benefit of good grades goes without saying, but in an era where a "B" is considered average, employers are looking at grades with more and more skepticism. The key is to set yourself apart from the crowd, by distinguishing yourself outside the classroom as well as within. Join clubs, get into the honor society, help out with CLIO, but get involved! Being a former President of the History Club was a tremendous plus for me, and yet I won the post by default -- nobody else wanted it! Employers want people with leadership potential. Most students have never held jobs which have opportunities for displaying leadership, so you have to do it on the campus.

The title of this essay was taken from a Horatio Alger story, in which the most important ingredient for success was luck. Luck may be even more important today, but there is much that you can do to improve the odds in your favor.

Strive and Succeed! The world's temptations flee  
Be Brave and Bold! and Strong and Steady be!  
Shift for yourself, and prosper then you must!  
Win Fame and Fortune while you Try and Trust!

Horatio Alger, Jr., 1890