

Riding the Recession: the Student Guide

I overheard one graduate telling a friend that "None of us will EVER find work". Drama king? Perhaps. Pessimist? Maybe. A little overstated? Certainly. But if you are also thinking along these lines and feel that you need some tips on surviving (and thriving) in the current climate, read on.

IT MAY NOT BE AS BAD AS IT SEEMS

Harbingers of doom and gloom in certain sections of the media like to portray this as the end of the world as we know it. Yes, there has been an overall decrease in recruitment. Nonetheless, firms ARE still taking on graduates, and there are even staff shortages in some areas.

ALL THINGS MUST PASS

Even pessimists are suggesting that we will *begin* (my italics) to come out of this recession in 2011 – not too far ahead. That doesn't mean that normal service will be instantly restored, but it does demonstrate that this is a temporary state of affairs. After all, we've been there before. Evidence from earlier recessions (the 70s, the 80s, the 90s and the early 'noughties') suggests that well-qualified job seekers do eventually find what they want: how else would we now have staff in middle and senior management who left university in these lean periods? Cutbacks so adversely affected some organisations in the early part of this decade that many recruiters are thinking long and hard before making any swingeing curbs now.

THERE WILL BE MORE COMPETITION FOR FEWER JOBS

How can you stand out from the crowd and find pole position in the market place? And if push does come to shove and no jobs are to be had, what fallback strategies do you have? Objective thinking, tactical thinking and lateral thinking all have a part to play here. It's tempting to apply for each and every job that comes up, but the scattergun approach rarely works. Employers like targeted applications from motivated candidates with the 'right' set of skills. Anything else will be sifted out. So be realistic about your strengths and abilities. Remember that one focused application for which you can demonstrate knowledge, enthusiasm and the right 'fit' is better than any number of approaches that fail to meet these criteria. Look at www.careers.lon.ac.uk/sortit to find out how your skills and values might affect your career choice and your job hunting technique.

GRADUATE SCHEMES ARE NOT (AND NEVER HAVE BEEN) THE ONLY WAY TO GET A FOOT IN THE DOOR

Be proactive. Speculative letters to smaller firms, taking a temporary contract, starting one or two rungs further down the ladder are all proven ways of getting in and then getting on. Compromise is not the same as 'failure' especially when it leads to the same destination as your original plan.

'NO' NOW DOES NOT MEAN 'NO, NEVER'

You can regroup and reapply, so make the lull in the market work for you. Use time without graduate level work to improve your skills or gain appropriate experience. This needn't necessarily involve an expensive Masters course or a hugely oversubscribed internship, though these are possibilities. It might mean a short IT course, a certificate level professional qualification or brushing up on a language. It could entail taking a short-term job to pay the rent, but using the weekends to develop a background in

the sector where you really want to be. www.learnirect.co.uk gives you access to many different types of online learning. www.prospects.ac.uk has a whole section devoted to post-graduate study. www.hotcourses.com lists all kinds of study opportunities throughout the UK, while www.floodlight.co.uk focuses on provision in the London area.

SHORT TERM CASUAL EMPLOYMENT IS A BUFFER NOT A COMFORT ZONE

Be ready and able to step out of it when the time comes. Some graduates become so cosy in their call centre or retail role that it's hard to motivate themselves to move forward. Don't fall into this trap.

CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME

Voluntary work is a great way to help yourself while helping others. Apart from virtue being its own reward, this will impress recruiters. One senior HR manager for the financial sector points out that most candidates have the requisite academic and commercial background, but focussed voluntary activities give an extra dimension to your application. Most towns and cities have their own volunteer bureau or you can use www.direct.gov.uk to find specific types of placement in various parts of the UK.

IF YOU DECIDE TO FLEE THE COUNTRY, TRAVEL WITH A PURPOSE

Enjoy your time away, but try to find some work, however humble, in a relevant sector abroad. Again, if you can afford it, think about volunteering for a worthwhile cause. Charity work, especially overseas, says much about your strength of character and your ability to deal with the unknown, the unexpected and the downright uncomfortable. www.gapyear.com is a good starting point for finding out more.

HELP IS AROUND IF YOU NEED IT

Friends and family are obviously the first port of call in a storm, so be grateful for their practical and emotional support. However, they may not be fully aware of all the issues and their advice could be a little too subjective. Another perspective will come from professional careers advisers. Your university careers service may provide assistance once you graduate, although there may be a small fee for this. Go to www.gradclub.co.uk to find out what The Careers Group offers or to www.c2careers.com if you graduated more than two years ago.

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