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# How to Land Your First Job — Even With No Experience

Trying to get a job in your early career can be a challenge. Here's how to get started.

—Melissa Russell

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Blog

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8 minute read

Navigating the job market can be a daunting exercise, even for professionals with long careers and lots of experience behind them.

But whether you're a recent or soon-to-be college graduate or a [high school student contemplating the future](#), figuring out how and when to start your first job search is even more intimidating.

How are you supposed to get an entry-level job when you have little or no job experience? Even if you don't have formal job experience, you do have value to offer employers. These tips can help you land an interview and gain the early professional experience that will kick off your career.

## **What Does It Mean to Have No Experience?**

Generally speaking, having no experience in a job means you have not held any positions similar to ones that you are interested in applying for. But, even if you are new to the working world, you have likely gained skills in school, through volunteer work, or through internships that will transfer to the workplace.

If you are applying for a job that is listed as "entry level" companies already know you have limited or no experience. What they want are candidates who are intelligent and reliable and are quick learners who can soon master the skills needed to do the job.

If you are a high school student thinking about next steps, check out Harvard Summer School's [Career Pathways](#) courses, where you can learn how to prepare for a future career.

## **What Is an Entry-Level Job?**

Although entry-level jobs can vary by industry, for the most part these jobs are the first step on the career path. It is an entry point that either requires no experience

or minimal education and experience to apply. They are the lowest ranked jobs — compared to mid-level or senior-level roles — and are meant to help employees develop needed experience and skills.

It may be the first position you take as you begin your career, and there will likely be training involved. To find out about entry level jobs in your area of interest, go on a job platform and search “entry level” under a company’s name.

Even if a job posting asks for experience you don’t have yet, apply anyway! You might have a background interesting enough to qualify for an interview.

## **What Do Employers Look for in New Hires?**

A few important traits employers look for in new hires include:

### **Ambition**

Employers value employees with ambition because they are motivated and focused on what they want to achieve. If you have big dreams, let your future employer know. You’ll be demonstrating you are striving for something beyond just paying your bills.

### **Communication skills**

Employers want employees who show competence in verbal and written communication. Before you send in your cover letter and resume, or an emailed query, be sure your communication is clear, concise, and spell checked. If you land an interview, be sure to speak clearly and demonstrate active listening.

### **Dependability**

A dependable employee follows through on assignments, is punctual, meets deadlines, and has a strong work ethic.

### **Eagerness to learn**

Being willing to learn can help you expand your skill set, adapt to situations, and improve yourself. It also shows your employer that although you have a lot to learn, you're committed to learning and growing your professional acumen.

## **Positivity**

Positive people help create healthy work environments and are valuable team members. When you are positive at work, people will likely follow your example.

## **Teamwork**

Employers want people who can work effectively in a group, and are likely to ask in an interview how you work as a member of a team.

Learn more about Career Pathways



## **How to Make a Job Application Stand Out**

There are numerous ways you can optimize your job applications to improve your chances of success.

### **Inexperience can be an asset**

Don't try to hide your inexperience — embrace it! Show that you are motivated to learn by highlighting your other skills, such as those listed above.

For example, if you are interested in working in journalism or public relations, let your prospective employer know you developed strong writing skills in a challenging writing class. If you studied abroad, share how the experience enriched you and taught you about cultural differences.

Share brief personal anecdotes in cover letters and interviews that show how life lessons taught you to be dedicated, hardworking, and motivated; the very qualities employers are looking for in new employees.

## **Do your research**

Learn about the company you are interested in and tie their mission to your personal passions and life experiences. For example, if you want to work for a film studio, be sure to discuss how you loved movies growing up. Explain how that shared passion will enable you to learn quickly once you're hired.

## **Build your skills**

As you peruse job listings, pay attention to the skills employers are looking for and find commonalities. Do they all seem to use a specific database management system? If so, find out how to gain experience with that platform, through online training or courses at a local college.

If you are still in college or recently graduated, you might be eligible for an internship in an industry that interests you. Sometimes internships are paid or come with a stipend, and many times, they lead to a job offer with the company after the internship is completed.

A [2019 study](#) by the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that more than 70 percent of internships led to a job offer.

## **Earn a professional certificate or certification**

Professional certification can be an invaluable addition to your resume. In technical careers like cybersecurity, IT, or data analysis, holding industry-approved skills will show potential employers you are qualified to do the work — even if you have never held a job in the industry.

## **Network**

Networking involves building relationships with people in the industry that interests you. These people will be immensely helpful as you apply for entry level

positions.

## Resume and Cover Letter Tips

A resume is your opportunity to highlight the value you bring to an employer. A cover letter makes the argument that you are the best person for a particular job. Employers will have different needs, even for the same type of job, so it is necessary to customize your resume for each application to improve your chances of getting an interview.

Create a “master” resume highlighting the qualifications, experiences, and skills that make you right for this job, including relevant coursework such as computer science, math, economics, or writing. If you have a strong GPA and academic honors, list them. Additionally, if you have relevant volunteer or extracurricular experience — particularly if you held a leadership role — if you worked in internships or attended programs like [Harvard Summer School](#), include those as well.

When you are planning to apply for a particular position, read through the job description and note the skills, experiences, and qualifications they are seeking with those that match your own. Tailor your “master” resume by highlighting the specific skills and qualifications emphasized in the job posting. Mirror the language they use, whenever possible, to help get through an automated scanning tool such as applicant tracking systems.

Tailor your cover letter by elaborating on those same skills and experiences you highlighted in your resume. If you completed projects in classes that would be relevant to a future employer, briefly describe them. Relevant skills will likely vary depending on the industry you are interested in, but could include:

Research

Microsoft Office, Google Suite, or Adobe products like Word, Google Sheets, and Photoshop

Computer programming

Social media



Multiple languages

Public speaking

If you are having trouble identifying relevant skills, consider volunteering at an organization that could provide that necessary experience. This will also give you the opportunity to familiarize yourself with the day-to-day workings in the field and build relationships that will be useful to you later on.

## How to Leverage Job Boards

Many employers list entry-level positions on job boards such as [Indeed](#), [Zip Recruiter](#), [Monster](#) or [LinkedIn](#).

LinkedIn is a social media platform designed to connect people professionally and you can seek out recruiters at companies you are interested in, as well as industry professionals. The LinkedIn jobs section can give you insight into what sort of careers are available in industries that interest you, the types of skills needed, and the names of recruiters and hiring managers who may be willing to answer your questions.

You can also use LinkedIn to research relevant professionals to gain insights, research companies, set alerts for entry-level jobs, and find alumni from your high school or college to connect with. Consider using LinkedIn to help [build your personal brand](#) to show off what you can offer potential employers.

## Increase Your Value

Once you've determined what skills are sought out in your ideal first job, identify gaps in your experience so you can invest in becoming the ideal candidate.

Whether you're in high school, college, or recently graduated, [Harvard Summer School](#) may have a course that can help you build these skills such as [Web Programming with Python and JavaScript](#) or [Strategic Communication and Public Relations](#). If it's the interview you're worried about, consider a [Public Speaking course](#).

If you have yet to decide what career path to take, consider an exploratory course like these [Career Pathways](#) courses to find what's right for you.

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### **About the Author**

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Melissa Russell is an award-winning journalist and editor living in the Boston area. She has written for many news outlets as well as for websites, trade publications and other platforms.

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