

Get more than a degree

Be Employed When You Graduate

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Be Employed When You Graduate

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Be Employed When You Graduate

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Preface: The Digital Corps

This book is based on experience. For the past seven years, I spent most of my time building the “Digital Corps” at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. Technically, the Digital Corps is just another on-campus student job. But my staff and I work hard to create a unique workplace that prepares students for the fast paced interdisciplinary workforce of today. In short, we want students to be employable when they graduate.

I realized that even though students were skilled, talented, intelligent, experienced, and well educated, they didn’t know how to get a job. So, I developed a series of simple workshops for the Digital Corps students that repeats each year and aligns with the academic calendar. That is where this book comes from.

In our office, Digital Corps student employees work alongside talented and dedicated, experienced professional staff so they have several years of work experience before they graduate. Everyone sees the short films, websites, mobile apps, electronic publications, large multi-touch interfaces and other digital artifacts we create for on- and off-campus clients. But I and my staff see the students as our most important product. Quite simply, the goal of the Digital Corps is to make sure Ball State’s smart, savvy students are employable. It’s a win for everyone involved.

Although we focus our energy on developing innovative creative professionals, I’ve found the techniques in this book work equally well across professions. Note that I am not saying, “major.” We focus on the skills needed to function effectively as an employee. This is different than your formal course of study. Unless your career objective is to be a professor, the professional world is very different than the academic world.

Over the past five years, I’ve had 187 students go through the Digital Corps. I check in with many of them frequently to refine this process. I ask questions like: What helped you? What skills do you

need that we didn't teach you? Are you happy with your job? Do you feel prepared for the challenges you're encountering? The information I receive directly from the alumni goes into refining the workshop curriculum for the following year. Having done this for more than five years now, I am confident that the material presented in this book is up to date and provides the basic information you need to know to get a job. My goal is to keep it fresh and updated each year when I get new insights from the most recent alumni.

I'm extremely proud of the work I have done with the Digital Corps. However, we all wish we could do more. The world of higher education is changing rapidly. But if you're a student now, it won't change fast enough to help you. Ball State is an extraordinary place to both work and learn, but not everyone can be here. So, I hope this book will pass along the lessons we've learned so that all students can find similar success.



Chapter 1: Start the process

Whether you're a traditional student or not, all institutions of higher learning have the resources you need to get a great job when you graduate (or to get into a great graduate program). This book focuses on helping you learn the skill of choosing, finding, and getting a job that will launch a great career.

The purpose of this book

This book is designed to teach you the skills you need to find employment when you graduate from college. And not just any employment, but employment that will bring you happiness however you define it. Quite simply, getting a job is a skill that must be learned and practiced like any other skill. But where do you learn these skills? How do you learn these skills? Although most students pursue education after high school to get a job, most universities and other higher education programs are not designed to lead directly into employment. The entire structure of a large research university is designed to create new knowledge. For a student, this creates a mind boggling quagmire of requirements that are frustratingly confusing and frequently disconnected from the “real world.”

At the same time, colleges and universities of all sizes are filled with smart, passionate people who are dedicated to students. There are tremendous resources that you are paying for, and you should take advantage of them to make sure you’re as employable as possible when you graduate. The real challenge is that these resources are not always easy to find. They’re spread across the entire campus from your faculty and departments to non-academic units and staff that provide a wide range of student services. (In fact, it is so confusing I have included an entire chapter devoted to helping you understand the basics of thriving – or at least surviving – in your undergraduate experience). You also must learn how to communicate your entire lifetime of relevant experience to an employer. You must stand out from the crowd in a good way.

To be blunt, it is up to you to get the most out of your college experience. But, it’s hard to do that without a guide. That’s what this book is about. It draws on some principles of design thinking and over five years of experience helping students find meaningful employment in our current challenging economy. There are some deep thought exercises, but there is also a lot of practical advice. This book isn’t about getting any job. It’s about choosing, finding, and preparing you for the job that you want, the job that will launch you

into a meaningful career that you can be proud of, that will bring you personal and professional fulfillment, and will allow you to live the life that you want.

How you choose to use this book is up to you. Some of the information is going to be painfully simple, and you will either use it or not (such as making sure you know where to park your car for your interviews). However, other stuff requires a lot of thought. You can just read through the book to get your mind thinking about how you're going to conquer the workforce, and then apply the lessons to your own life as the challenges come up. Or, you can tackle it section by section and spend your walk to class thinking about the exercises and questions presented in the section you just read. The important thing is to not procrastinate. Worst case scenario, at least make it your bathroom reading so the information gets into your brain on a regular basis!

It's up to you

Just like reading a book about playing the piano won't turn you into a virtuoso or watching YouTube clips on throwing a football won't get you a job in the NFL, this book by itself will not get you a job. You must thoughtfully apply the skills outlined here to your college career and to your job hunt. You will have to research and think. You must invest some time into practicing. And, you have to accept the fact that you won't get it right the first time.

Still reading? Sorry that it's not magic. Getting a job is as much a learned skill as anything else. That's the problem. By the time you graduate from high school, you've spent over 15,000 hours in classes. How much of that time was devoted to "job hunting skills"? Even looking at your life, you will spend a lot more time perfecting whatever skill your job requires than you will learning the craft of getting a job. It's like going to buy a car. The car salesman at the dealership has more experience than you do in negotiating a sale. But, if you still need to buy a car, what do you do? You muddle

through, the best that you can, and hope that you can get a good deal. Honestly, I've seen students put more planning into a party than into a job interview. That's probably not the best approach for securing a job that could launch your dream career.

In his book *Outliers*, Malcom Gladwell focuses on the idea that 10,000 hours is "the magic number of greatness." In other words, if you had spent 66% of your entire academic career through high school graduation focused on practicing the skills to get a job, you would be a master of getting a job by now. That is obviously an absurd concept because getting a job is not as important as doing the job well. But, getting a job is usually the harder – and certainly the more intimidating – part.

Michael Pollack is a Vanderbilt student who rose to YouTube fame for playing the piano while Billy Joel sang "New York State of Mind." Billy Joel was doing a Q&A at the school when Michael coyly said it was his dream to accompany Billy Joel. Billy Joel after a moment of thought said, "OK," and Michael Pollack came up on stage and wowed everyone (including Billy Joel) with his amazing piano skills leading to multiple TV interviews and other performances.

If you do some YouTube searching on Michael Pollack, you'll see that he's been playing at bars and wowing audiences since he was a kid. In other words, he is an overnight sensation to most of the world. However, he didn't wake up the same day he boldly asked Billy Joel if he could accompany him and decide to take up playing the piano. He had been preparing for this moment through years of practice.

Whenever you see an actor or musician or someone who just "comes from nowhere" to become famous for some talent or skill, what you're really seeing is the result of hard work. They had to practice, fail, learn, and improve so that when their 15 minutes of fame arrived, they could take full advantage of it. That's one of the great aspects of YouTube. You can usually find the practice history of an "overnight" sensation with a few quick searches.

The point is that everyone practices. You also must practice if you want to get it right. To others, it will seem easy. But you'll know the real reason why you have succeeded.

The skills here apply to most jobs and majors

You've probably noticed by now that this book hasn't discussed any specific profession yet. That's because the frameworks and exercises presented in these pages work across job boundaries. Regardless of your career goals, the process is the same. Academicians make their money by finding nuance and differences between things. That's part of the reason why universities are so confusing. Each academic department is different, and they each expect you, the student, to connect the dots in your head between all your general education requirements and all your different major classes. So while you will undoubtedly learn some of these skills in your college experience as part of the requirements to graduate, there is no single class that brings all the different skills together. For example, a résumé requires some basic design knowledge. A successful interview requires some concrete communication and storytelling skills. And, the negotiation that comes following a job offer requires some understanding of business, management, and finance. At a university, those are spread across four or more academic departments. In reality, you don't need a deep understanding of each; you just need a bit of knowledge about each of those areas so you can apply it to your particular situation.

That's why this book is focused on general techniques and questions you must apply to yourself and the job opportunities you are focused on. Once you learn to think this way, you'll find that you can use many of the principles, thoughts, stories, questions, and maxims presented here in a wide variety of situations. What you're learning here is a broad approach to solving the problem of getting a job that touches the wide range of skills you need to acquire.

How this book is organized

I have organized this book like a brief and much less expensive textbook. In many ways, it is the missing class in college. Each chapter focuses on a topic and should be tackled in order so that you work through this system properly. There are some exercises and

examples spread throughout the book to help guide you in this process of learning and self discovery.

Be Employed When You Graduate starts well before you fill out a job application. The first chapter starts with some self discovery to help you figure out exactly what career you want. Then, you design a plan that will get you to that goal. From there, you will refine your ability to tell your own story, learn how to network and find opportunities, get and nail an interview, and negotiate a job offer. Then, I'll briefly touch upon some other topics, including freelancing, grad school, and how to manage this new career of yours effectively to get that next big job opportunity.

This is a broad book designed to provide you with some simple guidance that makes you think, not to be a deep dive into each specific skill set with 10,000 hours worth of content. If you feel particularly weak on a chapter, I will point to other resources at various points throughout this book where you can go to learn more. Know that, personally, I feel more practice is more important than more reading. That's why I include specific exercises and questions to work through so you can gain the needed skill.

Fundamentally, this book isn't about sending out 1000 résumés and then hoping someone gets back to you. It's about winning the job you want. You don't need to put in 10,000 hours to master the skills presented here. Even practicing once or twice will make you significantly better. That's what this book is about. When you get that interview, you don't want to be thinking about this stuff for the first time. Just imagine reading a book about hitting a baseball and being placed in a batting cage with a 90mph fast ball heading your way, and swinging the bat for the very first time. Whether or not you get your dream job is based on whether you can hit a home run on that first swing. Wouldn't you feel more comfortable if you got a few practice swings first?

The honest truth

Most people are not good at talking about how much effort something like getting a job requires. Once you get the job, you're so excited that you rarely take the time to self-analyze and ask, "Why did I get this job? What made the difference?" and then pass that information along to others. Also, this information is usually hard to come by. For legal constraints, time restrictions, and other reasons, employers don't give feedback to candidates who get rejected. So learning these skills can be very difficult. The job hunt requires nuance and situational awareness. For example, you're just getting started with your second interview with your dream job. You feel a bit more comfortable with the potential employer, so you want to make a joke. Is that joke going to work? Or is it going to fall flat? Is it going to show you have personality and will get along well in the office? Or, is it going to show that you're not serious enough for the job? Maybe you want to make the joke because you're afraid the employer is thinking you're too serious, and you need to make a joke to show that you'll fit in with the office culture? Only you can make that decision in that moment. But, it could mean the difference between getting the job or not.

I believe in the transformative power of an education. There literally is no better investment you can make of your money and time. But higher education is not employment training. I cannot emphasize this enough. That is why the Digital Corps students I work with have been successful. We have supplemented their education with "employment skills" they were not getting before the program started. Of the 187 students who came through the Digital Corps so far, 100% are employed and 80% are employed in the field of their choice (including highly competitive careers such as Hollywood and Silicon Valley startups). This is a great statistic for students from a mid-sized Midwestern university. This book shares the system I created that has helped make these students so successful.

I have done my best to keep this book simple. But getting a job is really hard. There are few hard and fast “rules.” As I mentioned earlier, my goal is to provide some simple guidelines that will aid you in making the tough decisions you have to make as you navigate a challenging job market. Even if you have in-demand skills, or you pursue professional graduate degrees such as law or medical school that will make it easier to find a job, you still want to be in a location, company, and situation that you are happy with.

Lastly, if you’re reading this book, I assume you are in school or willing to pursue an academic goal like a bachelor’s degree or a certificate. Most students pay a lot for school, but don’t get their money’s worth. I want to change that. College is expensive, but it’s a great investment if you take full advantage of all the resources available to you.

I’ll be blunt. If you buy this book and don’t practice, I get the money anyway. So be savvy. Don’t throw your money away. You invested in the book, so at least work through the exercises once. If there is a job opening, someone’s got to get the job. It might as well be you.

According to *The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2012*, 87.9% of students selected “to be able to get a better job” as “very important” in deciding to go to college. I encourage you to check out the report at <http://www.heri.ucla.edu/> if for no other reason to see how your goals and interests line up with those of your peers across the country. Remember, these are the students you will be competing against for jobs.
