

Business Basics

When They Require Experience And You Have None

Tara Weiss, 06.10.09, 6:00 AM ET

It's a refrain new college graduates hear from prospective employers all the time: "You don't have enough experience." But how do you get experience if you don't have any?

First, you may be surprised at all the experience you do have but don't realize and don't use to your advantage. Consider all the things you did during college. Many new grads already have what recruiters are looking for. They just need to recognize it and package it properly.

Bill Warner, director of sales and recruiting at the pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca, oversees all the hiring of interns and recent graduates for sales and operations positions there. He says one of the best resumes and cover letters he's seen recently came from a woman who described how her position as rush chair at her sorority had given her the leadership and project management skills she needed to work at AstraZeneca. She told of the unique challenges of dealing with rush rules that were changed that year, how she managed the process, calculated how many new members to bring in and got all the other parts of the job done as well.

Warner, impressed, offered her a job even though she had never worked in pharmaceutical sales before. "They do have experience, but they struggle with the bridge from what they've done in college, how to link it to the position they're interested in," he says.

On the other hand, Warner was surprised when an intern who was editor in chief of his university's newspaper barely mentioned it on his resume. The intern didn't emphasize the role--how he managed a staff, worked with outside vendors and balanced the newspaper and his schoolwork. That's just the kind of experience that impresses recruiters, Warner says.

Be sure to anticipate that hiring managers, or even just people you network with, may say you don't have enough experience. Be prepared with a rebuttal. "Don't stress your work experience as much as your skill set," says Tarek Pertew, co-founder and director of marketing at the career Web site MyWorkster.

Sometimes, though, your skill set can only get you so far. If you repeatedly hear that you lack a specific technical skill for the jobs you want, take classes to gain that competency. Add those classes to your resume as you continue your job search. "It shows that you have ambition," says Pertew.

Another way to gain technical competence is by volunteering your professional skills in the service of a nonprofit. For instance, if you're looking for a position in public relations or marketing, volunteer to help an organization in those areas. Not only is it an ideal way to enhance your skills, but you'll expand your circle of networking contacts too. Ask the professionals you work with there if they know of any opportunities in your field or anyone you should meet.

Volunteering anywhere improves your resume, but if you can work with a nonprofit that has connections with a company you want to work for, that's even better. It shows you've researched the firm, and it's a way to network your way to employees already there.

Also, apply for temp work at staffing agencies that place people in your intended field. That way, you can gain experience and meet professionals to add to your networking circle, and a temp job can sometimes lead to full-time work.

"Temp agencies are still hiring, because companies are still waiting to see how things will unfold in the third and fourth quarters," says Joanie Ruge, senior vice president of Adecco Group North America, a human resources services firm. "They may have openings for which they can't bring someone on full time. Temp workers give companies flexibility as they wait to see supply and demand. As the market turns, they'll look at the temps first when they're ready to hire permanently."

Meanwhile, join your industry's professional association, and attend its monthly meetings and conferences. Also, join a committee in the association, and take a leadership position, since that way you can meet some of your field's most active professionals. That's an ideal way to network with people who know of job openings. Don't be intimidated because you're younger than them all. They'll be impressed with your eagerness to break in to the field. "It shows you've got initiative and leadership abilities," says Joe Ruffolo, a career coach at 360jobinterview.com.

The key to finding a job in this economy, particularly if you don't have much professional experience, is networking. Whether you're volunteering, temping or attending a summer barbecue, have a 30-second elevator pitch ready to share with people who ask what you'd like to be doing professionally. That's a brief explanation of what you'd like your next job to look like and what you've done in the past, whether it's school, internships or full-time work.

Sometimes you just have to take a job. If there's a position you can get as an executive assistant or manager at the Gap, go for it. The trick will be to successfully market the skills you learned on that job when you meet a hiring manager for the job you really want.