

What Early-Career Professionals Need to Know When Navigating the Post-Covid Job Market



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The corporate complications of the recent global crisis haven't been distributed equally, with some sectors, demographics and job positions bearing a heavier burden. And while it seems more prudent (and more palatable) to fix our eyes on the task of recovery rather than measuring the magnitude of our setbacks, it's important to understand what each corporate cohort has been through, so that we can understand what they need as we move forward.

Early-career professionals, for example, have had a different

pandemic year than their senior counterparts. Entry-level roles were among the first positions shed; Glassdoor reported in June of 2020 that the postings targeted toward recent graduates had plummeted by 68% compared to the previous year. And of the early-career professionals that had found their workforce entry, 20% lost their employment within the first few months of the pandemic.

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Recovery in the job market has happened faster than many experts expected. But entry-level roles are experiencing a slower return, even two years after. And sectors like the service industry, in which young workers often earn hours, experience and references, have been more limited than others when it comes to working from home, re-engaging, or re-hiring. Not only do young job seekers face a shrunken job market, they're also dealing with a resumé gap that can make them feel less qualified.

The important silver lining is this: Early-career candidates will be entering a job economy in which they can be more creative, more well-rounded and more impactful than they would have otherwise. The task of recovery is asking every professional, established and otherwise, to contribute to their best and fullest capacity. The rate of change across all industries is unparalleled, and the need for new, unique perspectives is at an all-time high. For young workers who are able to overcome the aforementioned barriers to workforce participation, massive opportunity awaits. Below are a few proven techniques to get them started:

Understand that experience comes in all shapes and sizes

It's easy for eager candidates to be daunted by the experiential requirements included in a job listing. But it's

helpful for candidates to understand what employers are really looking for when they say “experience.” For entry-level roles, every employer calculates a training period. They don’t expect candidates to show up completely versed in the nuances of their role. Relevant time in another position is less to indicate competency, and more to indicate interest— does this candidate have experience in this kind of position? Did they like it enough to seek similar roles?

Too often, job seekers equate experience with workplace hours. But with this understanding, workplace hours can be supplemented in a number of ways. Low and no-cost training options are just a click away, and candidates can earn multiple certificates in an area of their choosing. Those training programs can be listed on a resumé, and they go a long way in conveying to employers that the candidate isn’t only interested in the role, they’ve shown the initiative and spent many unpaid hours practicing, training and learning more. Smart employers know that experience comes in many forms, and they’ll recognize a self-starter when they see one.

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Get creative with your references

In a similar way, candidates often limit themselves based on a lack of references. But references serve the same purpose for recruitment teams who are screening candidates; they help recruiters understand the existing competence of the candidate and the way they were able to perform in similar roles. An often misunderstood aspect of performance is soft skills, including communication, professionalism and creative thinking. Most candidates have a figure in their life that can speak to those skills, even if they don’t have a previous employer. Coaches, mentors or community leaders are more than qualified to give a voice to the candidate’s ability to relate

to their peers, accomplish their goals and navigate challenges.

To further supplement the reference section, bringing in a self-made portfolio is an incredible way to leave a lasting impression. A work sample can come either from previous work or from personal exploration. Web designers can bring printed portfolio booklets exemplifying home page designs. Coders can bring a printed proof of work, and graphic designers can bring an engaging display of projects they've worked on in the past. Arriving with a polished and physical portfolio directly addresses what the recruitment team is looking for – mainly, does the candidate show an appetite for this kind of work? And as far as competence, where do they currently stand?

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Develop your soft skills

With the current rate of change in the workforce, it's hard for any applicant to feel confident that their investments in education will map properly onto this new normal. A great way to tackle this shift, which can otherwise feel like a barrier to entry, is to invest in the evergreen skills that will always be transferable – strong listening, effective communication and interviewing etiquette. At this point in our recovery, a candidate that knows how to learn, train and re-train is a company's most valuable asset.

Employers, too, are learning as they go. Flexibility has been crucial to their Covid-recovery, and most teams are open to cultivating a flexible dialogue with new hires. They might have a model candidate in mind, but if they come face to face with an eager candidate who demonstrates interest, competence and a mastery of soft skills, they'll be motivated to move forward. Their job is to act in the interest of the company and build a valuable team.

Early-career candidates should avoid discounting their experience, including any relevant training programs or course materials on their resumé. They should get creative in the realm of references, and make sure their interview conduct and self-made portfolio answers the questions that a lack of references leaves open. They should arrive with thoughtful questions that show they're attuned to the current circumstance; they're interested in the larger project of the company, and they're thinking hard about the ways in which they can contribute. These are the kinds of things that render any resumé gap obsolete, and it's important for everyone that no talent is left behind in our collective recovery.

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