

OCS Publications

The Senior
Job Search
Overcoming Anxiety

by
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Harvard University
Faculty of Arts and Sciences

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Your Harvard years have gone by quickly and, before you know it, you're thinking about graduating.

Whats next?

If you're like a majority of Harvard seniors, you're planning to look for a job. You may be thinking of your first job as a way to:

- start building your career
- learn about a field or industry
- try something entirely new
- develop transferable skills
- expand your credentials for graduate school
- experience another culture
- take a break from school
- start paying back your loans.

Your goals will help determine the kind of job you are looking for. Whatever kind of job interests you, the search involves the same basic steps, which are described here. Now is the time to start preparing!

I. Managing Senior Year

With coursework, a thesis, extracurricular activities, and fellowship and graduate school applications, senior year can be a busy time. If you add a job search to this mix, it may seem overwhelming and stressful. . . but it is doable! In fact, many seniors have found that with a little planning and perspective their year was not only manageable but enjoyable.

Some tips to manage the senior job search include:

- **Start as early as you can.** Starting early gives you more time to consider your options and to experiment. It also makes it easier to balance the job search with everything else you're doing. Feel free to make an appointment with a counselor whenever you start thinking about it; junior year is not too early.
- **Find out about key dates.** For example, if recruiting interests you, when are the orientation sessions? If you want to apply for certain fellowships, what are the deadlines? If you're applying to graduate school, when is the GRE? If you think about other important dates in your life (midterms, thesis deadlines, etc.), you can get a sense of what your calendar will look like.
- **Pace yourself.** As you probably find when you have a heavy courseload, it's usually a good idea to do a little at a time. In fact, it might help to think of the job search as a course or a part-time job. If you do it steadily, then you can take a break when you need to. You also want to think about priorities. When things pile up, what can you set aside or cut back on?
- **Break things down into smaller steps.** This is especially important if you're having trouble getting started. Instead of telling yourself "I've got to get a job," start by working on your resume. If that seems overwhelming, go to a resume workshop. If that still seems like it's too much, then surf around the OCS web site, www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu, and read the resume section. Keep breaking each task down until

you come up with something you can manage. Once you've done that, it will be easier to go on to the next step in your process.

- **Take care of yourself.** This may consist of a variety of things, depending on what you need at a particular time: finding support; giving yourself credit for what you've done; spending time with friends; eating well; getting

"If you don't set any guidelines then you are just seeing the big picture and you're always telling yourself that you don't have a job."

- Harvard student, '03

plenty of sleep; taking a break. Job hunting can be exciting and interesting, but it can also be stressful, so keep in mind the things that have helped you deal with stress in the past.

II. Some Common Concerns about the Job Search

Along with being excited about the possibilities a job search will offer, you may be nervous about "doing it right." The following are some common concerns:

- **This is the first time I've looked for a full-time job.** The search process is basically the same, whether you're looking for internships, summer or term-time jobs, or even applying to college. It consists of a series of steps such as assessment, exploration, and goal setting, which are described below. You've gone through these steps in the past and can use your experiences as a basis for this search.
- **I don't know exactly what I want to do.** You have plenty of company! Even though it may seem like everyone knows what they're doing—including your roommates—many

"There are a lot of people out there that feel exactly the same as you do, but no one says it. How scared you get, the pressures you get from sources you don't realize. Like your parents telling you about a job web site, and you just want them to be quiet."

- Harvard student, '03

seniors are unsure. It's perfectly normal to be weighing a number of options. By starting with self-assessment and going through the rest of the job-search process, you will learn more about yourself and potential opportunities, which will help you decide what to do next.

- **My future depends on getting the right job.** In fact, careers are increasingly fluid and unpredictable. Most people change jobs, and even careers, many times, and

graduates may stay in their first job for only a year or two. You don't need to decide on your long-term future now; rather, you can think of your first job as a way to meet some short-term goals and as a springboard to the next opportunity.

- **I don't think I have any marketable skills.** As a liberal arts student, you may take your abilities for granted. However, employers value the analytical, research, and communication skills that you've developed in your courses. Extracurricular activities, volunteer work, summer and part-time jobs, and internships are good ways to develop organizational, leadership, teamwork, and other kinds of skills, as well as to gain experience in particular areas, such as managing events or working with children.

- **I'm not sure recruiting is right for me.** Companies that recruit on campus are in a limited range of industries. If the kinds of opportunities represented interest you, the program is a very convenient, effective way to look for a job.

If you're interested in other firms or employers in fields such as the arts, education, government, health care, media, nonprofit, and public service, the recruiting program doesn't offer a

comprehensive set of opportunities. Organizations that have fewer openings and that hire as positions open up find that recruiting is not an effective way for them to hire.

Of course, there are always exceptions to the rule, and it is worth checking the recruiting schedule for employers that interest you. Furthermore, not everyone who goes through recruiting gets a job offer, or gets the offer they want. So even if you are going through the program, you should look for opportunities outside of it.

- **I'm not doing it the way everyone else is doing it.** Although this booklet offers some general guidelines for the job search, follow your instincts about what works best for you, which means taking into account where you are and how you do things. That also means not comparing yourself to other people; it's natural to benchmark your progress by what your peers are doing, but what works for one person may not work for another.

For example, you need to take into account the kind of search you're doing: If your friends are going through recruiting and have job offers by December, that doesn't mean you're behind. If you're looking for jobs in public service or the media, you may not hear about openings until February or March. (You do, however, want to start working on your resume, researching organizations, and networking earlier in the year.)

III. The Job-Search Process

The job-search process involves a number of steps. The following section describes these steps briefly and highlights issues that are of particular concern to seniors; for more in-depth discussions, see the other OCS career booklets.

In this presentation, each step leads to the next, but in real life the process is often circular, as well as linear. For example, the order below is self-assessment, career exploration, and goal setting, but a

chance conversation may lead to an informational interview (career exploration), which may lead you to rethink your priorities (back to self-assessment), and to set new goals (goal setting). If you keep an open mind, you can use new experiences and information to guide the course of your search.

If there's a secret to job hunting, it's **preparation**. Preparation means both **research** (about yourself, career fields, kinds of work, contacts, opportunities, organizations) and **practice** (writing resumes and cover letters, interviewing, negotiating with employers). As a general rule, the more you do, the better the outcome will be.

a. Self-assessment

What do you want to do? This question is crucial to a successful job search. Knowing what you want helps you to focus your search, make an effective presentation to employers, and not least of all, get a job that you enjoy and that will move you in the direction you want to go.

If this question seems too broad, it may help to break it down by asking such questions as: What do you enjoy doing? What do you value? What motivates you the most? What are you interested in? What sections of the newspaper do you always read? What are the courses you've enjoyed? What do you daydream about? You may want to meet with a counselor at OCS, and perhaps take the Myers Briggs Type Indicator.

Web Resource: Self-Assessment

<http://www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu/basics/process/selfassess.htm>

As with other parts of this process, you can build on your past experiences. If you've applied for jobs and internships, you've been through some version of self-assessment. However, it may seem a little more daunting this time, because you're thinking about a longer commitment. You may have been willing to try something for a summer that you don't necessarily want to do for a year or two. The

best advice is to be as thorough and thoughtful about your assessment as you can.

Keep in mind, though, that no matter how thoughtful you are, there is no perfect answer. Generally, a range of opportunities will fit your interests, values, and skills. ***And by choosing one option, you're not closing the door to other opportunities in the future.***

You may be tempted to skip this part of the process and do whatever “everyone” seems to be doing or what you feel you “should” do. Or you could focus on the jobs that you think you can get, rather than the jobs that you want. But self-assessment is a good investment, not only because it increases your chances of success now, but also because you will need to do it throughout your career.

If you're feeling stuck, try to figure out why. For example, you may feel that your experiences are so limited that you don't have enough information to decide what you want; you may feel overwhelmed by too many options and not know where to start; or you may feel the pressure of expectations (your parents', your peers', or even your own). If you're aware of what's getting in your way, you can address it. OCS counselors are glad to discuss your concerns with you.

b. Career Exploration

Information is critical to making a good choice and career exploration lets you test your ideas about what you want to do. You may be interested in teaching, law, or consulting, but how much do you know about being a teacher, lawyer, or consultant? You can find out by reading career resources, taking relevant courses, and talking to people in the field. See pages 12 & 13 for more information on informational interviewing. If you do an internship or have a summer or term-time job, you will not only learn about the field, but also develop skills and credentials that employers will recognize.

If you've already started exploring careers, you might want to think about how to use the time before graduation to further your exploration: Is there a career field you want to know more about, a particular interest you want to try out, or a skill you want to develop?

"A lot of students go to OCS because they have to find a job, as opposed to going to OCS to explore what they really want to do. But those are very different things."

- Harvard alumni, '00

If you haven't started, senior year is not too late. You may not have as much time to explore options, but you can use new experiences to build on your past ones. For example, an article about e-commerce may catch your eye the summer before senior year. You may not have any job experience, but you do spend a lot of time tinkering with your web site and

have designed sites for your friends. The summer is a great time to do some informational interviews; if you find you're interested in the field, you could do a part-time internship in the fall.

If you continue to do research and talk with people about work that interests you, you will be ready to respond to shifts in your interests and goals, which occur to most people over time, and especially when they are starting out in their careers. Even one conversation or one experience can alter your decision making.

c. Setting Goals

Once you've done this kind of exploration, you want to start becoming more specific and defining the parameters of your search. The following are some questions that will help you delineate your goals.

- **What field do you want to work in?**

Examples include the arts, business, education, government, health and medicine, media/communications, public service, and science and technology. Or you may be considering options within a field, for example, dentistry, pediatrics, or public health.

- **What kind of work or job function interests you?**

Job functions include administration/management, consulting, counseling, finance, marketing/public relations, organizing, and teaching. Many job functions go across fields. For ex-

ample, you can write for a print magazine, an elected official, or a dot.com company.

- **What kind of organization do you want to work for?**

Large or small? New or established? Nonprofit, government, or private sector?

- **What kind of money and lifestyle are you interested in?**

How much do you want/need to be paid? What kind of hours are you willing to work? What kind of work environment do you feel comfortable in?

- **Where do you want to be geographically?**

Your hometown or someplace new? In the US or overseas? In a rural, suburban, or urban area?

Along with these questions, you may also want to think about some broader considerations:

**What do you hope to learn
in your job?**

**What will make you excited about getting up in the
morning and going to work?**

**Where do you hope to be in two years
and how will this job help you
to get there?**

You can think of these questions as a mix and match exercise. Not all questions are equal; for example, you may be more interested in a kind of work than a field. It may help to rank the questions in the order of their importance to you. By compiling your answers, you will come up with a profile of the kind of job you want—a profile that may change as you go through the process of applying for jobs and interviewing.

d. Getting Your Job-search Toolkit in Order

Resumes and cover letters are the most tangible aspects of the search. As your first contact with an employer, you want them to be the best possible presentation of your experiences, skills, and qualities. They should always be tailored to the particular position you are applying for and show the relevance of your experience. In some cases, it may be obvious how to present your history for a job. If, for example, you want to work in public health, and you had a summer job at the Harvard School of Public Health, that information should be prominent in your resume, with a longer description of your responsibilities and accomplishments. In other cases, you may need to think in terms of transferable skills. If you're interested in a job that requires communication skills, then any experience you've had developing and using those skills should be included in your resume and highlighted in your cover letter.

RESUMES CAN INCLUDE:

work study
summer jobs
education
extracurricular activities
leadership roles
volunteer work
achievements & awards
research experience
...as long as it relates to the job!

What if you don't have any "stellar" work experience? Whether or not you've interned on Wall Street or Capitol Hill, a solid history of achievement says a lot to employers. If you've had summer and term-time jobs, then you've shown that you can be responsible and productive in the work world, and have developed some useful skills. A pattern of increasing responsibility shows that you've taken on new challenges. And don't underestimate the importance of extracurricu-

lar activities. Employers know that activities often offer remarkable scope for creativity, leadership, teamwork, skill development, and time management. Being on a team, for example, may not relate directly to a job that interests you, but it can show that you know a lot about working with others to set and achieve goals.

OCS offers resume and cover letter workshops, resume walk-ins, and counseling appointments.

Job applicants often make the mistake of spending a lot of time on their resumes and shortchanging their cover letters, but employers often decide whether or not to read a resume based on the letter. A cover letter should succinctly state your qualifications for and interest in a job and organization. In other words, it needs to address both why the employer should be interested in you and why you are interested in the employer. Doing some employer research will not only pay off in writing your cover letters, but also help you in your interviews and decision making.

e. Finding Opportunities

You can find opportunities in a number of ways, and most people use some combination of the following:

- **Listings:**

Internet: MonsterTrak at www.monstertrak.com provides a comprehensive list of employment opportunities for member schools, which include Harvard. To enter this password-protected search engine, you should select Harvard College from the list of colleges and universities and enter your Harvard identification number. Listings are differentiated on the search menu by Industry, Job Function, Location, and Job Type. You can use the control key to select multiple options.

One of the advantages of using MonsterTrak is that listings are from employers who are specifically interested in Harvard applicants. A major disadvantage is that listings don't represent

the full range of opportunities. For a wider range, there are a variety of sources. These include general job-search sites like *monster.com* and America's Job Bank (*www.ajb.dni.us*) and sites for specific fields such as *Idealist.org* for nonprofit jobs. If you're interested in a particular location, many sites are either searchable by location or focus on one, and many newspapers list their help wanted ads online. If you're interested in a particular organization, of course, you can go right to its web site to check for openings.

For an extensive listing of employment resources on the Internet, see the Riley Guide at *www.the.rileyguide.com* and the OCS web site at *www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu*.

A note about Print Publications: Most publications that have job listings are now available on the web, but if not, see the OCS Reading Room or your public library. Some key resources include trade and professional journals and newspapers, some of which are available at OCS.

- **Recruiting:** As discussed earlier, the On-Campus Recruiting Program is a very convenient, effective way to look for a job, particularly in the fields of consulting, investment banking, and high tech. If you're interested in the program, you need to attend one of the orientation sessions in September to find out how to use the eRecruiting system. Information meetings, which are listed on the Recruiting web site at *www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu/recruiting/index.html*, are an excellent way to find out about companies.
- **Networking:** Even if you scour every job listing you can find, you won't find out about most jobs for the simple reason that most jobs are not listed. There is a "hidden job market" of 65 to 85 percent of all jobs. In order to tap into this market, you will need to network in the fields and at the organizations or

Print Resource:

See the Informational Interviewing booklet
available at OCS

POTENTIAL NETWORK CONTACTS:

- Parents
- Parents' friends
- Friends
- Friends' parents
- Professors
- Summer employers
- Internships
- Co-workers
- Harvard alums
- Anyone else you know!

companies that interest you. Networking does not mean asking people for jobs; it means developing relationships with people to find out about their work, organizations, fields, and job-hunting tips. In the course of getting to know them, they may have information to share with you about openings, but you should never request it.

Most people build their networks through **informational interviews**, in which you arrange to meet someone to talk about their work. You can start to find contacts by asking people you know for suggestions. You may also have some contacts from informational interviews you did when you were exploring careers, or from internships and summer jobs.

Resource: The Professional Connection

A database of Harvard alumni who have agreed to speak with you about their careers. You can access it on the computers at OCS. If you're not in the Cambridge area, you can visit the Harvard Alumni Association's web site at <http://www.haa.harvard.edu> or call (617) 496-0559 for more information.

You can also develop contacts at the companies or organizations that interest you by writing directly to people who work there. Directories like the *Gale Directory of Publications & Broadcast Media* and the *Biotechnology Directory* list companies by field and staff members; a company's web site may have even more up-to-date information. As with any "cold calls," your yield rate may not be high, but you can uncover some valuable contacts.

Resource: Info

<http://www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu>

f. Interviews

For many people, interviewing is the most stressful part of the job search. If the search has seemed somewhat abstract up to this point, interviewing can seem all too real. But, as with everything else, preparation is the key to success. It involves all the preparation you have done up to this point—self-assessment, career exploration, goal setting, and writing your resume and cover letters—and taking it further.

In an interview, you should be ready to articulate why you are a good candidate in terms of what you know about yourself, the job, the company, and the industry or field. This is what the employer wants to know when you walk through the door. If you're not able to do this, then you should spend some time preparing until you are ready.

Questions are the core of an interview and you want to prepare both for the questions the interviewer may ask and for the ones *you'll* ask. Many interviewers draw questions heavily from the candidate's resume. You should be ready to discuss any aspect of yours, such as what you learned from an internship or enjoyed about a job, or why you became involved in a student organization. You also need to prepare for particular kinds of questions, depending on the job. If you are interviewing with consulting firms, for example, you should be well versed in case questions. Interviewers will often ask questions about their industries or fields to find out what you know about them.

**The Job Interview booklet has lists of
"Questions Frequently Asked by Interviewers"
and "Sample Questions that
an Interviewee Might Ask."
Pick one up at OCS!**

Since an interview is an opportunity to convey your strengths and accomplishments, it is not a time to be passive. You can help shape the interaction by coming prepared with your own questions, framing your responses to get across the information you want to convey, and taking the initiative to bring something up if you need to.

Any chance to be in an interview situation will help you to prepare what you want to say and to become comfortable with the process. A mock interview at OCS will give you the opportunity to practice an interview with a counselor and get some feedback. You can do practice interviews with roommates and friends, and even practice in front of the mirror. You can also “break the ice” by interviewing for a few positions that are not as important to you before you tackle one that you really want.

If your interview doesn't result in a job offer, don't feel it was a waste of time. Any interview can be a learning experience. What do you know now that you didn't know before? How can you better prepare for the next interview? Keep in mind that you can call an employer for feedback.

g. Making Decisions

Success! After all your work, you've been offered a job, or several jobs. You have two main kinds of information to help you make a decision: what you know about yourself, and what you know about the employer and job. What's the best match?

This is a good time to take stock again and think about your priorities. What do you most want to get out of your first job? What are you willing to give up in order to get other things? OCS has handouts that discuss how to decide on job offers, which include a list of questions to help you evaluate them. It also has information on salaries and how to accept offers.

It's important to think your decision through carefully, but also listen to your gut. If you're having a reaction—either positive or negative—you want to respect it and try to understand it. In the end, any decision is an educated guess, and your intuition can be a valuable aid in making the right one.

As graduation day approaches, you may be tempted to accept any job offer. But unless you want the job, it's probably a good idea to keep looking. Whichever job you choose, you may spend the next couple of years in it. By investing some more time and effort, you can end up

with something you feel good about. Even if you're still looking after graduation, you can finance your search with part-time or temp jobs.

Remember again that you're not deciding about your long-term future, just the next step in your career progression. Although it's important to find a job that fulfills at least some of your goals, your first job will in no way define your whole career; it may, in fact, lead in unexpected directions—which is all part of the adventure of building your career.

IV. A Note about Rejection

There's no denying that rejection hurts. If you've invested your time and heart on an opportunity it can be particularly painful when it doesn't work out the way you expected. However, it is important that you use this information to your advantage—for the next step. If you don't get the offer you want, step back and try to figure out why. Where is the rejection coming from? Is the company highly selective and particular about specific GPA requirements? Did you miss an opportunity during the interview to highlight your leadership skills?

By constantly evaluating all the feedback you get during the job search process, both acceptances and rejections, you will begin to see patterns and be able to ascertain what's missing or what you can do differently. You will become a better interviewee and a stronger candidate. Although it can be painful at times, try to keep in mind that this is a *learning* process—and eventually all of the blood, sweat, and tears will pay off.

V. Confidence

Any employer will tell you that confidence is a key asset in a job search. Confidence can be defined as a realistic belief in yourself based on experience. This belief helps you to take risks and to communicate your strengths and abilities in a clear, positive, and convincing way.

Most people develop confidence gradually by trying things out and finding out what works for them. By going through the steps described in this booklet, you can test your ideas and find out more about yourself (interests, values, goals, skills, strengths, and weaknesses) and your options (careers, jobs, and employers). The more you know, the easier it is to believe in yourself, face new challenges, and make choices. You also develop a set of skills as you go through the process, such as resume and cover letter writing, interviewing, and networking.

Your exploration will help you to define what it means to be true to yourself, including what your priorities are, what compromises you're willing to make, and what will make you happy. That will be a source of confidence and motivation not only in the job search but in your ongoing career.

OCS welcomes you to use our resources in your search, such as our web site, library, panels and workshops, mock interviews, and counseling. We encourage you to check in with us when you start thinking about your future plans. Good luck with your search!

Further Information

The Office of Career Services offers research materials, mock interviews, resume writing and interview workshops, and individual career counseling. More information about OCS can be found online at:

<http://www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu>

and at the office:

*Office of Career Services
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54 Dunster Street
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Notes: