

Landing Your First Job

[Tara Weiss](#)

Spring is in the air and college seniors are pounding the pavement, trying to land their first job.

It can be a daunting task, but don't be deterred. You'd be surprised what recruiting managers like in candidates. "I'd rather have a kid who has a 2.8 G.P.A. and worked at the mall than a 3.5 but just sat in the dorm," says Jimmy Duncan, director of workforce planning and employee development at **Scana** (nyse: [SCG](#) - [news](#) - [people](#)), an energy holding company based in South Carolina. "If you go to school and you're working, you're showcasing the ability to multitask."

Those "soft skills" like multitasking, leadership and initiative are just as important--if not more important--than related job experience when it comes to scoring your first job. Are you a founding member of the campus chocolate club? Put it on your resume and explain why and how you started the group. Did you work your way from cashier to manager at the campus copy center? Put it down and detail your trajectory. Did you tutor high school students? Make sure it's on your resume.

In Pictures: Landing Your First Job

Also include social organizations like fraternities or sororities, volunteer groups or professional associations. They all show initiative and an applicant's ability to be part of a team. "Students may not think a retail job at the Gap or working as a waiter is relevant but it is," says Pam Webster, corporate recruiting manager at Enterprise Rent-a-Car. "That shows someone can balance time and meet goals." As for the part-time job, hiring managers say they're always impressed if you started on one level--like a cashier--and became a manager.

If your resume is particularly bare it's time to get some experience. "It's never too late to start building up the resume," says Webster. Contact local companies and inquire about part-time internship opportunities. If need be offer to work for nothing but the experience--it's invaluable. Or, get a summer internship right after graduation. Many companies eventually hire their summer interns full time.

This year's graduating seniors have one advantage: a healthy job market. The U.S. unemployment rate is 4.5%, nearly 20% below the long-term average.

Whether the job market is weak or strong, the key to acing this job search is tapping as many resources as possible. Psychologically, for most soon-to-be-grads that's the hardest part. But networking is also the most fruitful. "The easiest time in your life to network is while you're a college student," says Melanie Parker, executive director of the University of Central Florida's career services and experiential learning. "Who doesn't want to help a college student?"

First up should be your school's alumni who are open to being contacted. (Most career services centers have files of willing alumni.) Never come out and ask for a job. Instead, talk about what you're interested in, then ask for advice. The goal is to get recommendations of companies to apply to and contacts there.

Next, consider who you and your family know. If your parents have friends in the field you want to work in, call them up and tell them you're finishing college and ask for advice.

Other great sources for contacts and job listings are professional organizations and industry trade magazines. There's one for virtually every field. Many sponsor conferences and workshops; both ideal places to hear about job opportunities. They're also perfect places to make contacts and collect business cards.

Always ask for a business card. They'll come in handy when you're trying to make direct contact with hiring managers. A word to the wise: Avoid human resources if at all possible. These people are mostly responsible for screening out candidates. If you go through them you'll be just one of hundreds of applicants. Use your network or do research to find out who hires in specific departments and send that person an e-mail or a letter. Always follow it up with a phone call.

If you don't know who the department's hiring source is, call the company and explain that you're trying to send a business letter and you need the name and address of a certain manager. Don't lie, but telling them flat-out that you're applying for a job isn't likely to get you any information. They're likely to suggest you send your resume straight to human resources. The problem with that is, "HR people don't find out about opportunities until they're told," says Parker. Managers often first interview candidates that were recommended to them before turning to HR for help.

In practical fields--say journalism or accounting--try your professors. It's possible they used to work in the field and still have contacts.

Once you know who to contact at a company keep in mind that one resume does not fit all job openings. Do your homework and tailor your resume to each company.

Parker, the career counselor at the University of Central Florida sums it up this way: "You have to be persistent. Not stalker-like, but persistent."