

18 tips for getting, keeping a job in tight employment market

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How can you land – and keep – a job?

University of Illinois students recently got advice from a College of Business panel that included an employer, a career adviser, two professors and a recent job-seeker. Here are 18 tips based on what they said.

1. Your job is to find a job, said David Sinow, a UI professor of finance. Stay structured. Stay enthusiastic.

"Eighty percent of getting a position is enthusiasm. Don't get discouraged," he said.

2. Don't underestimate the power of networking, said Julie Bartimus, vice president of the UI Alumni Career Center in Chicago.

Employers say the most effective tools for finding new employees are networking and referrals from other employees.

3. If you don't have a network, create one. Yoo-Seong Song of the UI Business and Economics Library said he grew up in South Korea and didn't have a personal network in the United States.

"I built my own network, and that's how I got a job at Accenture," Song said.

He joined several professional associations, then used their directories to make contacts with members.

4. Contact people who went to the same school you did. If you're a UI alum, take advantage of UI Alumni Association resources, said Patrice Yao, whose background is in human resources. Find out which alums work for companies you like, and drop them an e-mail.

Tell them you'd like their advice regarding the company or the line of work – and listen to what they say.

"Don't make it sound like you only want a job," she said.

5. Get involved charitably. Companies tend to be major leaders in charitable causes, Sinow said, and you'll find volunteering is a great way to meet people and add structure to your day while job hunting.

6. Take advantage of job search resources, such as the LinkedIn professional networking site, the CareerBuilder job search site and usajobs.gov, the federal government's official job list, Yao said.

Song suggested using libraries' online databases to find out about jobs worldwide.

7. Work on professional credentials while waiting to land a job. Maybe it's studying for your real estate license or preparing for the CPA exam, Sinow said.

8. Show employers you're doing things to improve yourself. "Read the newspaper every day," said Yao, who recently accepted a job with Deloitte Consulting after having been laid off by Mercer LLC, where she was a human resources consultant.

Yao said she's been asked in job interviews, "Tell me what's in the news today."

Sinow suggests reading global publications, such as The Economist or the London Times.

9. Find a business mentor you can look up to, Sinow said.

If you already have a job, make sure you have mentors inside and outside your company, Yao said. Stay in contact with recruiters after your interviews. Yao said she has declined job offers but told recruiters she'd like to stay in touch. Because of that, when she got laid off on a Tuesday, she was able to line up a job interview for Wednesday afternoon.

10. When you get a job, be sure to listen more than talk, Sinow said. There's a reason God gave you two ears and one mouth, he said.

"Don't make dumb mistakes. Understand the corporate culture that hires you. ... Tread lightly the first several weeks. Work hard. Work enthusiastically," he said. "The key is not making mistakes."

11. Find someone you admire within the company. After you've been there a few months, ask that person to share some of their thinking with you.

Sinow predicted the person will be so taken back and pleased, he or she will "almost become your sponsor."

12. Take responsibility for mistakes you make on the job, Sinow said. Bosses don't want surprises, said Bob Plecki, regional president for Busey Bank.

Explain your mistake to your supervisor and outline your plan for correcting it. But don't correct it on your own; share your plan and let it be corrected collectively, he said.

13. If you're employed but are suffering job-loss anxiety, take a strategic look at how you're positioned within the company.

Don't huddle and be afraid. That will limit your ability to do your job, Bartimus said.

Employers are looking for people to assume leadership and take risks. "You can't be afraid of the next call or next e-mail, or that will get in the way of you doing your job," she said.

14. If you have to describe your job loss to a prospective employer, remind the employer that layoffs generally occur by position – not because of personality or performance, Sinow said.

Many layoffs stem from the company's economic performance and have nothing to do with the individual.

15. If you weren't so hot in school, you can still look good by emphasizing other qualities, such as leadership skills, communication skills or working well with others, panel members said. Tell how you resolved a conflict or how you solved a problem working as part of a team.

16. In seeking a job, look around to see what sectors are growing. "It's not business. It's not consumers. It's the government," Sinow said.

There will be more regulation of financial services, so think about finding a regulatory position. If you're good at your job, those whom you regulate may want to hire you when things get better, Sinow said.

17. Don't get discouraged if you can't find a job immediately after college. Plecki said he got his bachelor's degree in 1982, when many economic statistics were worse than they are today.

He went back to the job he had during college – loading trucks – but spent a couple hours a day seeking a job in his field.

As an employer, Plecki said he looks for three things in prospective employees: demonstration of a good work ethic, a competitive spirit and communication skills that will help them work well with customers.

18. "Guard your integrity with your life," Sinow said, when asked the single most important piece of advice for job seekers. "If you can't tell it to Mom, you probably shouldn't do it."