



You've earned your degree and landed your first job. Now it's time to sit back and relax, right? Wrong. The truth is the hard work is just beginning. Your degree and your first job are the foundation for your career – but what you learn and what you do from this point on will be the building blocks to your success.

Today's corporate world is highly competitive and moves fast. If you don't want to get left behind you have to do everything you can to keep yourself valuable and attractive to your employer. That means viewing the world as one big classroom – and gaining as much knowledge, experience and skills as you can along the way. Here's how.

Join a Professional Group

If you thought your days in the clubhouse were over, you were wrong. You probably joined and contributed to social, academic, and athletic groups in the past because they offered you something – friendship, fun, inside information, organized social events, and the potential to learn and experience new things. As a professional, there are similar groups available to participate in, such as professional associations.

Professional associations are organizations that represent people who share a common background in a particular field or industry. These groups provide their members access to networking and social events, professional development activities, and career services. In addition, they may also conduct research about the field or industry; raise money for and organize charitable work that is somehow related to the field; work to attract people to the field by offering college chapters, mentoring or scholarships; or lobby at the state or federal level for legislation that benefits their particular field.

Professional associations also provide these benefits:

- **Camaraderie** – Meet and network with other professionals in your field.
- **Mentors** – It's not uncommon for professional associations to provide an applicant pool for mentors. Some even offer formal mentoring programs.

- **Career Advancement** – You will meet people at different companies and likely get inside information about who is hiring and what you need to do to get the job. Many professional associations even maintain a job board on their Web site or in their newsletter where current openings in the field are listed.
- **Professional Development** – Most professional organizations offer a variety of development opportunities, from educational seminars, to professional training and certification, to mentoring and internship programs. If you want to get specific training and education in your field, your professional association is the place to look.
- **Information** – Most associations maintain Web sites that are full of valuable information. They may also distribute newsletters, reports, magazines, white papers and other publications. A lot of associations conduct research and make the information available to members. Some even have libraries and archives.
- **Experience** – Most professional associations are run, at least in part, by members. As a result, your professional association may give you the opportunity to gain leadership experience by serving the association as secretary, treasurer, president or in another capacity. You can get public speaking experience by offering to present at meetings or writing experience and a publishing credit by authoring an article or column for the association newsletter. Many associations have other volunteer opportunities as well, where you can gain diverse experience.
- **Resumé Development** – You can add your membership in professional associations to your resumé. You can also include any significant work with the association (served as secretary, for example, or appeared before the legislature on behalf of XYZ association). A professional membership is a great way to fill out your resumé early in your career.

If you are interested in joining a professional association and need some assistance in locating one that will meet your needs or requirements, consider the following suggestions.

- **Do Your Homework** – Search the Internet for associations that are relevant to your field and check out their Web sites to see if they offer what you are looking for.
- **Contact Your College** – Speak with your college’s alumni or career center as they often work with a variety of professional associations.
- **Ask Around** – Ask your co-workers, supervisors, professors, and others in your field what associations they belong to.

- **Contact the Association** – Most associations have a membership chair you can e-mail, write or call for more information. You'll likely receive a membership packet, with information about the association and its benefits and an application and other necessary materials for membership.
- **Attend a Meeting** – The best way to see what kind of people belong to an association and how it is run is to drop by a meeting. Most will allow potential members to attend one or two meetings before joining. When you attend the meetings, introduce yourself to people at the meeting and inquire about their opinions of the association.
- **Ask for Special Rates** – Though the cost of normal membership should not be prohibitive, many associations offer a discounted membership for new college graduates. If you have the foresight, you should even look into joining a professional association's student chapter before you graduate – many associations will waive initiation costs and other fees for members who were previously student members.
- **Participate** – Just joining an association isn't enough. To get the benefits, you have to participate. Attend meetings, volunteer for committees, leadership roles and other work, and get to know the members.
- **Consider Dual Memberships** – By all means, start with one membership. But remember that there may be several worthwhile associations in your particular field, or that are relevant to your career. For example, there may be a trade organization for your field that you want to join, but you may also consider joining the Minority Business Association or Women in Technology Association.

Get Certified

Professional certification is available in nearly every professional field. In some fields – like nursing – certification at some level is mandatory. In others – like public relations – it is completely voluntary. Certification, especially if mandatory, is sometimes offered through government agencies, but is more often offered through professional associations or college programs.

Certification usually requires candidates to take a series of classes, seminars or lectures and pass one or more exams that test their knowledge of their profession. Certifications may also require you to have a certain number of years of service in your profession, may mandate that you volunteer hours of service, and may require ongoing education and testing to maintain your certification. Certification provides a number of benefits, including:

- Helping employers evaluate potential employees during the hiring process.
- Motivating employees to continue their professional development and stay up-to-date in their field.
- Giving consumers a way to judge the expertise and credibility of service providers (for example, consumers should choose a contractor to renovate their home who is a Certified Master Builder, as certified by the Homebuilders Association of America).
- Helping employers evaluate employee performance and set performance goals (for example, your raise or promotion could be contingent on receiving a specific accreditation).

Even if certification is not required, there are many good reasons to pursue certification in your field. Certification will help you stay up-to-date on the latest advances, research and ideas in your industry; it will demonstrate to your employer and others that you take your profession seriously and are committed to growth and learning; it will help you develop new skill sets, knowledge and talents; and it will inspire you, motivate you and help you set both short-term and long-term goals for your career and professional development.

Continue Your Education

The most successful professionals understand that staying competitive in their jobs and in the marketplace means continually learning new skills and information, from running the latest software, to mastering the latest management philosophies, to acquiring the accounting skills it takes to run a multi-million dollar department.

After graduation, it's understandable that you may need a short break from studying. But don't rest on your laurels for too long. Committing to learning demonstrates to your employer that you are willing to learn and open to new opportunities – plus it helps you acquire skills and knowledge you need to do your job better and advance to more challenging roles. And you don't necessarily have to pursue a PhD to learn what you need – one-day seminars, six-week classes, even an hour spent at a lecture will add to your expertise. Provided below are just a few options to consider to obtain further education:

- **Community Colleges** – Community colleges offer both credit and non-credit classes. You can brush up on your business writing skills, learn a new language, try your hand at graphic design, get certified in

computer programs, learn the latest management strategies – and more. You won't earn a degree, but you'll learn a lot.

- **Colleges and Universities** – Perhaps you have decided that what you need to succeed is another degree. Check out area colleges and universities for available options.
- **Trade or Vocational Schools** – There are trade and vocational schools for just about every skill. For example, there are secretarial schools where you can learn shorthand and keyboarding, technology schools where you can get computer skills, and culinary schools that offer classes in event planning.
- **Professional Associations** – As outlined earlier in this chapter, professional organizations can offer certification programs, professional development seminars, and a variety of other learning opportunities. Check out networking groups, trade organizations, and specialty professional clubs like women's or minority business societies.

Although continuing your education can be very rewarding, before you decide to proceed you should consider the following suggestions to ensure you make the most of your investment.

- **Choose Wisely** – You may be interested in art history, but will acquiring an in-depth knowledge of Baroque art help you get ahead at work? Learning for the sake of learning is great, but if your time is limited, make sure what you are learning is interesting, enriching – and likely to boost your career.
- **Aim High** – You may be a copywriter now, but you probably have your sights set on something bigger. Don't just think about what you do now – think about what you want to do tomorrow. If you are a copywriter but want to be a project manager, think beyond taking more writing classes and consider taking management, business or technology classes that will help you acquire the knowledge and skills you will need to be the manager you want to be.
- **Consider Your Schedule Carefully** – Most continuing education institutions today offer classes at all times, including early morning, evening and even on the weekends. Pick the schedule that fits your lifestyle and remember that you will likely spend at least two hours studying and completing class work for every hour you spend in class.
- **Consider the Costs** – Unfortunately, learning takes money, and as a recent graduate, finances may be tight. Check out every possible avenue to fund your continuing education – scholarships, student aid, bank

loans, personal loans from family – and even your company. Many companies offer tuition reimbursement to employees who successfully complete education that will help them do their jobs better.

Volunteer and Lead

Everyone knows that volunteer work can have a meaningful, positive and lasting impact on communities, families and individuals. But did you know that volunteering can also have a positive effect on your career? In fact, volunteering can:

- Provide you an opportunity to establish contacts, build your network and foster mentors. The leadership of the groups you volunteer for can even serve as excellent references or provide valuable recommendation letters.
- Give you a platform to demonstrate your talents, skills, commitment and leadership. You may not be a manager at your job yet, but volunteering to manage projects and people at a charity can prove that you are up to the task.
- Serve as an important part of your growing resumé. There's no rule that says that every item on your resumé has to be a paid position.
- Give you the opportunity to learn new skills, gain new knowledge, and experiment with different interests and roles.
- Help you practice the skills you need to succeed in your career, giving you experience and self-confidence. Not sure you can deliver a high-impact project on a low-cost budget? Try it by volunteering for your favorite non-profit agency. When you succeed, your confidence will soar – giving you the courage you need to take on more challenging projects and roles at work.
- Expose you to different perspectives and experiences, helping you to appreciate diversity – an important life and career lesson.

So, you want to volunteer. You know there are an endless number of organizations that need your time. But how do you find them? Consider the following:

- Contact your local government, United Way, colleges, or churches and synagogues and ask them to make recommendations.
- Visit your city, county or state Web site. Many list local and regional volunteer opportunities.

- Search the Internet. There are a variety of volunteering Web sites that post volunteer opportunities or even match volunteers with organizations.
- Think about your interests and how you have been helped in the past. Were you a member of the Boys & Girls Club as a child? Do you remember being tutored by a volunteer at the library during middle school? Maybe you attended the summer arts festival of a local non-profit arts organization each year. All of these groups likely have volunteer opportunities – all you have to do is ask.

After you've done your research and know who needs your time, keep in mind the following suggestions to make the most of your volunteer time:

- Don't overextend yourself. It's better to be realistic and commit two hours per week than to try and commit 10 hours per week and not be able to follow through. You may not get paid to volunteer, but it's still a commitment – take it seriously.
- Find volunteer opportunities that help you make the most of your skills and talents – or help you acquire new ones. Licking envelopes for a charity fundraising direct mail is fine, but writing the copy for the direct mail piece is even better – especially if you are trying to earn more prime writing projects at work. Figure out how you can use your volunteer time as a way to build your resumé, not just spend your time.
- Volunteering is a great way to build your resumé, but it's not the only reason to give your time – you should also enjoy yourself and feel that you are making a real difference. When it comes to volunteering, find a cause you are passionate about and believe in – otherwise the responsibilities you take on will be just another thing to add to your To-Do list.