

During the current economic crunch, it is becoming increasingly difficult for college graduates to find degree-level employment.

Peddling a Degree in a Tight Job Market

BY THOMAS C. TILLAR, JR.

Tom Tillar, formerly in Tech's student personnel division, is now director of alumni services. He holds B.S. and M.A. degrees from Tech.

We have narrowed the field of applicants to those who will be invited for personal interviews at our home office. I regret to inform you that you were not among those selected. This in no way reflects upon your qualifications for employment; however, we find that the credentials of other applicants are more closely suited to our particular needs. Your interest in our organization is sincerely appreciated, and we wish you success in your search for employment.

This is an all too familiar reply to a letter of inquiry from a prospective job applicant seeking his first professional position or perhaps seeking a change in his current employment situation. Yet, during a recessed economy, such replies are quite frequent and can

be very discouraging to applicants, particularly new degree holders entering the job market for the first time. By mid-1975, approximately 700,000 new college graduates had entered the already depressed job market. The College Placement Council estimates that 18 percent fewer jobs are available for these new graduates this year than existed at the same time last year. In a day when more students than ever in the history of this nation have access to opportunities for higher education, the increased skill and marketability that traditionally accompany the degree apparently fail to open many, if indeed any, new doors. Virginia Tech graduates, like all others around the country, are faced with these grim statistics.

It is disconcerting for many who are seeking employment to face a job market so unlike the market of one or two years ago. In what seems like only yesterday, students who were completing degrees had a reasonable selection of opportu-

nities identified through college placement services. Recruiters from business and industry, government, and education were sitting virtually shoulder-to-shoulder in interview cubicles assessing the parade of talent before them. The current year, however, has been sparse in recruiting activities among graduating classes—classes which are the largest ever.

Discouraging though it may seem, the picture is not so bleak! With patience, perseverance, and perhaps a rub on a lucky rabbit's foot, the college graduate can peddle his degree while it is still fresh in its frame. This may require a more comprehensive search than the job seeker anticipated while working toward a degree and a tempering of his expectations regarding starting salary, entry level responsibilities, and job location.

A seemingly attractive alternative for many graduates, but not necessarily a viable one, is to postpone the job search and remain in college to work toward another de-



gree. Many prefer this route because they cannot get a high starting salary and would rather wait out the recession. Continuing in a new degree program with ambivalence and low motivation is not likely to increase one's future marketability. In fact, it may serve only to delay entrance into the work force at a time when openings *do exist* for those who will intensify the search. Before considering the alternative of pursuing another course of study, one should weigh the possible advantages of entering the market now as opposed to embarking on another path *intended* to increase future opportunity. Oftentimes the opportunity for further study is available at the expense of an employer following several years of service with an organization.

Projections released by government and higher education sources anticipate that a surplus of 800,000 college degrees will accumulate during the next 10 years. Simply put, many graduates will be forced

to assume positions in nonmanagerial or nonprofessional jobs, while many advanced degree holders will be underemployed. Cyclical trends during that period will naturally create supply and demand variations in certain disciplines—particularly law, engineering, business, and the health professions.

What does all this mean exactly? It clearly illustrates that the degree is no longer an automatic passport to obtaining a good job. Job applicants must resolve to work diligently at selling themselves to prospective employers. Degree holders, with or without professional experience, must carefully assess their credentials and career interests to determine specific target areas in which to pursue possible openings. However, the targets should be broadened, rather than narrowed, to include options that previously may not have seemed as attractive. Any position that can be used as a stepping stone will certainly increase future marketability. Likewise, expectations

for financial compensation may have to be lowered so as to remain competitive with current conditions in a recessed economy. Geographic limitations may further place constraints on a job search; therefore, remaining as flexible as possible geographically should increase the available selection of opportunities.

A resume is a short personal profile that is generally filed with a prospective employer in advance of an interview. Preceding the employment search, the prospective applicant should identify *all* possible areas in which his degree and career interests might be appropriate and then carefully develop or revise a resume. The job seeker should attempt to confine his resume to one page in length. In addition to this, however, the more experienced executive seeking a career change or advancement may choose to develop a vita (three to five pages) and a credentials file offering more detailed information concerning experience, professional affiliations, and activities.

The resume should be comprehensive, but cannot be expected to enumerate every detail. Only enough information to stimulate the reader's appetite should be included in hopes that an interview will be scheduled to expand on the capsule of biographical data provided. For example, after name, address and telephone number (both home and business, if possible), a summary of personal characteristics should introduce the applicant. Birthdate, physical characteristics, marital status, family, military history/status, and physical condition are essential items for inclusion. A career or professional objective should follow in two or three concise statements. The objective should be specific, such as "management trainee in a financial institution." Vagueness, on the other hand, only reduces the attractiveness of the applicant. The stated objective may vary if different resumes are developed to appeal to various *types* of employers.

The next portion of the resume should summarize the employment history of the applicant. This section may assume either of two basic formats: a reverse chronological listing of previous employment, summarizing duties and/or major accomplishments while employed in each position, or a narrative summary of specific skills or responsibilities of all previous positions or college study. Such a summary of skills may be attractive to the recent college graduate who has had little or no previous experience in a professional capacity. Skills for which the applicant was not paid that can contribute significantly to his employability should also be included. One student, for example, emphasized her experience in preparing income tax statements for her parents and other

relatives, which complemented her major in business administration and finance.

Educational history is generally the next resume item. Degree(s) in higher education, institution(s), major(s), and dates of attendance should be arranged in readable fashion. Disciplines which were included as minors in a degree program and a grade point average may also be included if deemed to be appropriate and helpful. Activities in college, professional memberships, special interests, honors, and civic offices or responsibilities should follow educational information. Finally, "references upon request" should conclude the resume. If the names and addresses of specific individuals are listed as references, at least three should be included—only after they have consented, of course.

Researchers have found that an accompanying photograph, preferably color, with a resume can generate greater positive results. Also, an accompanying credentials file with confidential letters of reference often provides supplemental information which can make a lasting impression on the reader during the screening of perhaps a hundred or more resumes. All resumes should be typewritten; most are photocopied, while some are printed professionally with attractive typeface. However, in either case, they should be conservative and businesslike, without distracting colors, artwork, or gimmickery.

An excellent means by which the degree holder may learn of position openings is through his college Placement Service. At Virginia Tech, for example, the Placement Service, in conjunction with the Alumni Association, will reproduce an Alumni Qualification Record which is completed by the alumnus. With his permission, it or his resume is forwarded to potential em-

ployers who have notified the University of position openings. An "Alumni Placement Bulletin," listing these same position openings, is also published semi-monthly and mailed to those alumni who request the Bulletin.

The employment search occasionally extends beyond the college Placement Service. Private employment agencies can assist in locating openings for the recent graduate as well as the seasoned job seeker. Certain affinity groups such as professional or fraternal organizations arrange "career weekends" through private agencies to bring applicants and recruiters together. Often openings identified through these private agencies are "fee paid" by employers. State employment offices provide data concerning current manpower needs and can be helpful in providing referrals to professional positions in public and private organizations.

Using a more dependent approach to locate openings, one should follow classified listings in newspapers, including newspapers from other cities found in most libraries. Many weekly and periodical professional publications, also found in libraries, carry position advertisements. Inquiries may be made by telephone or letter to personnel departments in corporations identified in publications such as the *Dun and Bradstreet Reference Book of Manufacturers*. And certainly, soliciting the help and influence of friends and relatives should not be discounted as a possible vehicle to identify openings. Occasionally, the least likely contact can produce an encouraging lead to follow.

The method by which initial contact is made with prospective employers by applicants themselves can have a profound influence upon the ultimate outcome of the job search. If the job seeker is not

aware of specific opportunities that are available, he should contact organizations by telephone or letter and express an interest in learning of existing or *anticipated* position openings for which he might qualify. If possible, the person in charge of a particular department or division in which the applicant has a specific interest should be contacted directly. In some cases it is helpful to ask for an interview regardless of whether or not the applicant knows there is a specific opening. The prospect of an applicant bearing the expense of an interview is often attractive to an employer.

Whether or not initial contact is made by telephone, a resume and cover letter should be sent to the personal attention of the executive most likely to make the hiring decision. Cover letters should be tailored to the job opportunity or to the particular organization. This requires that the applicant do his homework on the nature of an organization, including its products, services, and objectives. The cover letter should be three or four short paragraphs in length, providing an excellent opportunity to expand upon strengths or skills only touched upon in the resume. Or it may be used to demonstrate the writer's knowledge of some aspect of the organization, particularly an area in which he would be interested in working.

Once all the groundwork has been laid by initial contacts, cover letters and resumes, the personal interview generally tips the scale for or against the applicant receiving a job offer. During an interview, the candidate should respond only to those topics or questions initiated by the interviewer, interjecting wherever possible bits of knowledge about the organization that were gleaned from the candidate's homework. The candidate

should also be prepared to ask questions about the organization and assert his interest, yet he should never volunteer negative information about himself. Instead, information concerning personal strengths, interests, hobbies, and leadership experience should be stressed. After all, personal characteristics are the deciding factor among a wide field of candidates with similar skills, degrees, and employment histories. Likewise, the follow-up letter after the interview should emphasize personal characteristics which would seem to satisfy the organization's needs identified by the candidate during the interview.

Recent college graduates and less experienced veterans of the job market will find some interesting reading and helpful information in a recently published book entitled *Finding Your First Job* (Houghton Mifflin Co., \$1.95). Its author is Carl McDaniels, a professor in the College of Education at Virginia Tech. This publication offers a wealth of information concerning resume writing, assessing career opportunities and goals, and hints for successful job hunting.

Perhaps the most important ingredient in any job search is *determination*. The task is sure to be a difficult one and likely to include an element of frustration for the degree holder. Many doors will be closed and opportunities limited, but perhaps only temporarily. With each letter eliminating him from a field of candidates for a particular position, the applicant should reciprocate with still stronger determination, using every resource available. There is a market for that degree and all the hard work that went into earning it. Yet finding the market requires an application of all the ingenuity and perseverance that the degree holder possesses. ■

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