



Developing Employability for Business

Maryvonne Lumley
James Wilkinson

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Enhancing your profile: standing out from the crowd



Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter you should:

- Have recognized the importance of and initiated some of the following extracurricular activities in order to build up your experience:
 - participating in societies;
 - volunteering;
 - part-time work/Saturday jobs;
 - work experience;
 - holiday internships;
 - twelve-month placements;
 - activities that demonstrate global connectedness.
- Understand the importance of achieving significant personal goals.
- Have reflected on the value of having a positive mindset and of visualizing success.

What do you think?

- What sort of things do you do outside of your university course that might impress employers?
- How much do you think employers value such extracurricular activities?
- How important is a positive attitude towards your employment prospects?

Case study

Telefónica UK Limited

Telefónica UK – also known in the UK and Europe as O2 – is the kind of organization that many university students imagine themselves working for once they graduate. Worldwide, Telefónica is a major presence in the mobile telecommunications industry and employs more than a quarter of a million people. In the UK, the company has more than 10,000 employees and sponsors the O2 Arena, the O2 Academies, and the English rugby team.

According to Telefónica UK's Chief Executive Officer Ronan Dunne, with whom we spoke early in 2013 together with HR Director Ann Pickering, being '*born mobile*' makes today's graduates useful for the

(continued...)

organization, not so much because they are needed to work in specific, digital and IT roles, but because *'they have digital skills, they understand mobility'*.

Besides having an annual graduate intake, the company also offers paid, three-month summer internships and one-year placements. So if you are aspiring to work for such an organization, Telefónica UK would undoubtedly offer an excellent career start, no matter what your degree subject. Indeed, Ronan is keen to stress that the company is looking to bring in not so much subject specialists as people with a special kind of attitude.

What we're looking for is people who bring a broader dimension which is: a thirst for knowledge, a desire for change, who are looking for a career that will give them opportunities to maybe travel, but also to do different things. And therefore in our structured programme for our new graduate intakes, they move between different areas of the business in order to get different experience. And overarching everything, what we're looking for is attitude. We want bright people and we're lucky enough to get a lot of bright people but it is that kind of 'get up and go', self-motivated attitude to want to make a difference, a sense of purpose.

Ann explains why attitude is so important in today's fast changing environment.

Our firm belief is: you recruit for attitude – you can train for skills, because in our world, we don't know what skills we'll need in two years' time.

Introduction

When thinking about their future careers, many students do indeed tend to think about the big-name companies, and there is no doubt that getting onto a graduate traineeship with a well known, multinational company would be an excellent stepping stone in your career. On many graduate training schemes such as at Telefónica, you would have the chance to explore different areas of work, on a structured programme, with excellent support and guidance. You would gain valuable skills, and simply having such experience on your CV would open up all sorts of future opportunities, whether with the company you started with or moving on to work in others. For all of these reasons, graduate schemes of this kind are certainly worth aiming for, and you should also look out for work experience opportunities during your studies. Organizations sometimes see these as extended interviews: if they like you while you are with them on a three-month internship or a twelve-month placement, maybe there will be a job waiting for you when you complete your studies and even if not, it will be great to have on your CV.

This said, it is vital that you understand the extremely high expectations and standards set by companies like Telefónica UK and the huge competition you will be up against. As Ann explains:

When we had our first round of recruitment earlier this year (in early 2013) we didn't fill our quota because what we said is: 'That's where we're setting the bar, and we're not just going for quantity, we're going for quality'.

When you learn that in the graduate recruitment round to which she is referring, there were more than 12,500 applicants for 60 roles, and they still did not fill all the positions, you should start to get the picture. Such statistics are daunting. Indeed, they should help to convince you

of the importance of also researching smaller, less well known companies and organizations that can also offer good opportunities. However, just because they are less high profile, it does not mean that these smaller organizations do not also have high expectations or that there will be little competition for the jobs they are offering. Applying for a job where there are 'only' 30 or 40 other applicants, you will still need to stand out if you are to be successful.

This chapter aims to help you do just that, by showing you the kind of things you can and should be doing, besides studying hard, to build up evidence that you have the set of employability assets employers want. These extracurricular activities can include: participation in university societies, hobbies, sport, and voluntary work; engaging with both local and global communities; part-time work; work experience such as holiday internships and twelve-month placements; and achieving significant personal goals. Hopefully you are already doing some of these things.



As we explain in Chapters 9 and 10, these activities are important because they will give you noteworthy things to write and talk about when you are applying for jobs and they will give employers evidence of the kind of special mindset and attributes that they are looking for.

Undertaking and being successful in these kinds of activities is not only good for your future employability but it is also satisfying, and contributes to positive feelings of self-worth and self-belief. Because these are such important employability assets, we conclude the chapter by emphasizing the importance of maintaining a positive mindset and of visualizing success.

The importance of extracurricular activities

As Ronan makes clear, companies want bright people but they also want more than that. So while academic success is important, you really have to do more than simply focus on your studies and achieve a good degree in order to make employers take notice of what you have to offer. As we explained in Chapters 1 and 2, to be successful, you need to convince employers that you possess a set of employability 'assets', which includes skills, knowledge, and that special ingredient that Ronan and Ann both emphasized, which they refer to as 'attitude' and which Reed and Stoltz (2011) call 'mindset'. And for all of these you need to provide evidence.

This is not to say that working hard at your academic studies is not important. Indeed, for evidence of knowledge and – perhaps more importantly – the skills and mindset needed for acquiring and processing knowledge and for achieving success academically, employers look at your academic profile. In addition to the qualifications you gained before studying at university, these will include the degree classification that you eventually achieve. So applying yourself purposefully and rigorously in your academic studies is vitally important.

However, the problem is that for every job you apply for, you will be up against many others whose degrees are as good as or better than yours. This means that to stand out, there have to be other things about you which show that you possess the assets that employers are looking for. This is why extracurricular activities are so important, as Ann emphasizes.

What makes us choose A over B? The thing that really stands out for me is the extracurricular stuff. If we've got two CVs that are identical, we'll go for the one that looks like a more interesting person because of the stuff they do outside of their university course. The extracurricular activities that they do personally are often a key differentiator.

Another employer that we spoke with, Louise Morrissey – who we introduce in Chapter 10 – is also keen to get an idea of the kind of person you are, and likewise looks for this in extra-curricular activities.

One of the things I particularly look for is: what is this person like, what is this person going to bring, and is this person going to fit in with my team. When writing their CVs and cover letters and their personal statements, people rush at the hobby side, or rush at what experiences they've had. I would spend a bit more time making it clear that there's more to you than the academic achievement.

Mentioning your extracurricular activities is indeed important in the written elements of your job applications, and it is also very significant at interview. Grace, the graduate we introduce in Chapter 9 who has had interviews for various graduate schemes, explained to us that in most of the interviews she attended, the majority of questions were 'competency-based', where you are asked questions like 'Give me an example of where you have demonstrated ...' and the sentence finishes with a different competency statement relating, for example, to teamwork, achieving difficult tasks, meeting deadlines, etc. We give more examples of these in Chapters 8 and 9, but the point for now is to understand that your extracurricular activities allow you to give good examples of where you have applied the kind of competencies that employers are looking for and which give them a glimpse of the sort of person you are. Grace describes how this works and why academic grades are not enough on their own.

I'd say that it's essential to take part in extracurricular activities because every job I've applied for involves the same sort of application process, and you need to have these examples for competency-based questions, so even if you get the best degree mark possible, you're still not going to have anything to talk about on your applications, and your grades are only one part of the process now. Lots of people come out now with a 2:1 or a First, so you need to stand out in other ways, particularly as for all the jobs I've applied for you have to have a 2:1 to apply in the first place. So if you think about that you start to realize how important extracurricular activities and other things that you do ... how important they are, because they are what make you stand out.

Indeed, university performance alone is not enough to demonstrate many of the qualities employers look for in new graduate recruits. Employers are looking for evidence of wide-ranging abilities and attitude, which include strong team playing ability and willingness to contribute and show commitment. Ronan puts it like this:

What we're looking for is 'rounded', it's 'breadth', it's evidence of that kind of 'engagement mindset' – people who want to be involved, people who want to make a difference, a combination of intellect and attitude.

Participating in societies, hobbies and sport

When writing and talking about yourself in job applications and interviews, the kinds of things you do in your free time can therefore provide evidence of exactly this 'engagement mindset'. Important examples of this can be drawn from experiences relating to societies to

which you belong, your hobbies and also sporting activities, whether as a competitor or in some official, organizing or adjudicating capacity. Besides giving you important experience of teamwork and perhaps leadership, these activities can also provide evidence of what makes you tick, in particular they give an insight into the values that drive you. For Ronan, this is significant.

A lot of graduates will be coming to us because of what they see as our values and how they line up with their values – values in the broad sense of ‘this is important to me and therefore this is what is likely to motivate me, whether it be in a work environment or in my personal environment’ – that ‘fit’ is really important to us.

Giving concrete examples of these values and of you applying them in real situations, such as in your spare time activity, is therefore very important. Our conversations with graduates give a sense of how these examples can be drawn from your extracurricular activity and how this is beneficial. Here is Grace talking about how belonging to a society while at university can be helpful in the application process.

If you’ve been involved in societies – I suppose by that I don’t mean just being involved but actually being on committees, running for a committee position for example – that’s really relevant to a lot of application questions. Firstly, you’re always going to have a good example of teamwork, having worked with different people. They’re usually quite small teams, so around a maximum of ten people on the committee, so it’s a good example to use for teamwork. And also: you’re likely to have faced differences of opinion. I tend to use it a lot for that, because that tends to happen quite a lot when you’re trying to agree on things at meetings.

Using skills of persuasion and also achieving consensus in a group situation are indeed important skills, and common questions about this might include:

- ‘Describe a time you’ve had to persuade someone about something’ or
- ‘Describe a time where you’ve had a difference of opinion with someone and you’ve had to convince them, or come to an agreement’.

Grace shows how her involvement on a university society gave her relevant examples to talk about:

[W]e had an example where we had a disagreement as to which supplier to use. I wanted to go with one particular supplier but the president of the society was keen on another one so in that situation, it’s about negotiating. So instead of trying to insist on my idea, I suggested we try both of them, get a few samples from each supplier and then test them and see which style everyone prefers. So it’s all to do with negotiation really, and just trying to come up with a solution. ... Sometimes you can waste a lot of time just arguing back and forth, so it’s better to come up with a more creative solution just so you don’t waste time.

And if you enjoy sports, you will be pleased to learn that Ann mentioned two team sports, as well as refereeing, as examples of the kind of activity where you can demonstrate that you

are a team player, and also that you have the kind of engaged, committed attitude that Ronan said was so important.

Voluntary activities: getting involved

Both Ann and Louise also cited voluntary activities, which can likewise convey powerfully your commitment and desire to get involved, perhaps at the level of your local community, or in a more globally connected way. If you watched the London Olympics, whether live at the actual events or on television, you are likely to be aware of the huge part played by the 'Games Makers' – volunteers who helped to manage the events. In fact, since the Olympics there has been a significant increase in the interest shown by people wanting to get involved in a whole range of volunteering activities, with many different organizations.

Andrew (who we introduce in Chapter 9) and Grace – as well as Anna, who we met in Chapters 1 and 2 – all found it useful to undertake volunteering. Both Grace and Anna worked for some time with the Citizens Advice Bureau. Andrew was keen to do something relevant to his career focus in public health, and although they were not advertising at the time, he sent a speculative email to the Sickle Cell Society and was invited to an interview. He has been working there for more than a year and has developed many important administrative and networking skills. He has also been able to apply and extend his writing skills, which have been employed in preparing publicity and educational material for the society. Indeed, many skills can be gained by doing voluntary work and you might receive training in return for giving up your time.

Remember also that doing activities such as volunteering is not just valuable because of skills that you gain. Bearing in mind Ronan and Ann's emphasis on attitude and values, volunteering can show evidence of significant personal qualities and these include showing your caring attitude, commitment, and willingness to do that 'little bit extra'. Many universities run a dedicated service which can show you opportunities in your local neighbourhood, as well as activities that could involve you with communities the other side of the world.

Having a global outlook

After attitude and leadership, foreign language skills were the third element that Ann mentioned when we asked about the knowledge, mindset, and skills that Telefónica looks for in its graduate applicants.

Obviously because we're a global organization, we wanted to take a tranche of people who were at the very least bilingual. So most of our graduates to date have got at least one other language.

This makes it clear how important it is not to be limited to only one language in today's competitive and global employment market. Regrettably there has been a perception in various quarters in the UK, including government and a number of schools and universities, that learning foreign languages is not really important if you happen to come from a country that speaks English, because everyone else supposedly speaks the language. It

is unfortunate, because it gives an impression of arrogance if we effectively say to people from other countries:

When we have dealings with you, whether for business or other reasons, we don't need to speak your language, you'll have to speak ours.

The fact that so many organizations have to act globally now also highlights the importance of the attitude we described as 'Openness' in Chapter 2: being open to people, opportunities, and issues in the wider world, and possessing cultural sensitivity and awareness. In fact there are all sorts of ways in which you can broaden your horizons in this way while at university, and we list just a few of them here.

Study and work placements abroad

Spending time in a foreign country is an excellent way of developing your intercultural awareness and skills, and may also be a great opportunity for developing foreign language skills to a high level. Your university's International Office will be able to give you guidance and support relating to such opportunities including information about grants that may be available from the EU and other international charities and organizations. Support may also be available from your university's Placements Office. If you do study abroad, make special efforts to get to know students from the host country and try to avoid spending all your time with people from your home country.

Foreign language classes

These may be available at your university. Alternatively, you can join an evening class close to where you live. There are also online options available, although you may find it harder to develop confidence in the spoken language than if you were interacting with others in a classroom situation.

International projects

Students and academics at your university may be undertaking these. They can come in many shapes and sizes and might include engineering, humanitarian, or knowledge sharing projects, to mention just a few. Look out for such projects on your university and student union websites.

You could also join a nationally – or internationally – based charitable organization and get involved in all sorts of activity, from fund-raising to marathon running and even taking part in charitable work in a part of the world in which the organization operates.

Mozilla Open Badges

At the time of writing, the Mozilla organization are promoting a system of virtual 'badges' which can be used to verify your learning outside of the classroom. This system has been set up because they recognize the fact that much learning takes place in places other than educational settings. Badges can be collected and used to provide evidence to employers of the breadth of your engagement in non-university related projects <<http://openbadges.org/>> (accessed March 2013).



Activity

If you are not already involved in any clubs, societies, or voluntary activities (either local or global), do some research into things that you could possibly get enthusiastic about and involved in. Make a point within the next month of finding something you are happy to commit to, and get involved. Don't forget when you do so to keep a learning log and add your activity to your personal development plan. You might also explore the Open Badges link and keep a watching brief for badges that you can collect.

Building work experience

The most common way that university students gain experience is through part-time work and this can be very valuable. There are further important ways that students can increase and enhance their experience, and these include holiday internships and year-long or six-month placements. We explore each of these in the sections that follow.

Part-time

Not so very long ago, students had more tutorial contact than at most universities today, attending timetabled classes five days a week. The most common form of work they did was temporary jobs in the university holidays and perhaps a Saturday job. During the week and in term time they were expected, and able to, concentrate almost entirely on their studies.

However, it is not unusual now for students to have part-time jobs which they do on week-days, some even on each day of the week, before or after their attendance at university. It has to be said that good planning is needed to make sure that neither their academic work nor their job suffer as a result of these dual responsibilities.

In many ways those earlier students were fortunate to have the luxury of concentrating on one thing at a time. However, in successfully combining work, personal, and academic life, the benefits to today's students are manifold in terms of providing evidence of the kind of skills their future employers will seek. Having to be somewhere on time regularly shows that you are reliable and responsible. It also shows that you carried out your duties to the satisfaction of the person or organization that employs you, and being able to show that you have been successful in your degree while maintaining a good work/life balance demonstrates good self- and time management.

As an aside, it is worth also noting that because of working regularly, current students are better able to see some of the things they are being taught in context. Moreover, in addition to what holding down a part-time job shows to an employer, it also builds confidence.

Unfortunately, from an employability point of view, people often play down the things they do, and it is not unusual to hear them say: 'It's only a ... job'. For example, 'It's only a bar job'. We hope that as you become more aware of the things that employers value, you will find it easier to talk confidently about the transferable skills and the evidence of attitude and other personal qualities that your job demonstrates.



Activity

In Table 4.1, we have provided you with examples of the skills we think are needed to work in a bar. Those of you who work in bars will probably be able to add to these. We have also suggested a few other typical student part-time jobs. Discuss with your fellow students the part-time jobs they do. Add them to the list and discuss with them the experience, knowledge, and skills they feel they have gained from doing their jobs. You may be surprised at their variety.

Table 4.1 Transferable skills gained from part-time work.

Job	Skills needed
Bar work	<p>Communication skills – listening to people. Being appropriately sociable</p> <p>Dealing with difficult people – placating people who have perhaps drunk too much.</p> <p>Working under pressure – in a busy bar, making sure people are served, tables are cleared, food orders are delivered, etc.</p> <p>Legal knowledge – rights and responsibilities of part-time workers, health and safety legislation</p>
Shop assistant	
Charity fund fundraiser (Chugger)	

If your attitude to your part-time job is to learn as much as possible from it, then it ceases to be 'Only a ... job'. We know of several students who have been offered excellent training opportunities, such as customer service training, through their part-time jobs, training that provided valuable extra material for their CVs.

One final benefit of doing a part-time job well is that it can lead to a full-time job. One of our students who worked regularly in a fast food outlet eventually obtained a permanent management job.

Internships

Grace had this to say about internships:

And also, if you know what kind of area you're thinking of going into, the earlier you can decide that the better. It just makes it easier – you can apply for that summer internship. Lots of people do that in their second year and if I had known that that was a good thing to do, I would have definitely done that. Applying for an internship in the summer can then lead to having a job offered to you when you leave university – you can walk straight into a job. I would definitely recommend applying for an internship, gaining as much work experience as you can.

To give yourself the best chance of getting an internship, having a longer-term career focus is helpful, especially if this enables you to get relevant part-time experience and decide if it is the right area for you to aim for. Grace suggests that:

There are lots of internships online, for example on 'Milk Round' and websites like that. ... They tend to be for second year. First year students I would say, just try to gain some sort of experience ... in the first year, so if you know what sort of area you're interested in, or actually even if you're kind of interested in something but you're not entirely sure, get some experience in it as soon as possible so then you can either rule it out or establish whether you really are interested in it in the long term.

Many internships are indeed for second year students, the assumption being that at that stage they have more experience and maturity to handle the job. However, this does not mean that a first year student cannot prove to an employer that they could handle an internship. We have heard of students getting great internships in the summer holidays after their first year at university (e.g. Kate who we mentioned in Chapter 1), then being in an excellent position to apply for another one for the following year.

In fact, successfully securing an internship in your second year is by no means a foregone conclusion, but the earlier you can learn and practise the skills needed for the application process, the better.

We are not suggesting that it is easy to decide on the path you want to follow, and, unfortunately, as employers highly value enthusiasm it can be that you are in a Catch 22 situation while you make up your mind. It can seem that the whole of your life depends on the next decision you make. However, as we pointed out in Chapter 2, many people's working careers go through twists and turns so there might not be just one right job for you but many possibilities. Grace gives good advice on this:

Just try things, if work experience is offered to you, or ... just have a look online. If something even mildly interests you, I would say apply for it as work experience, because you're not going to be able to really evaluate what you want to do until you've tried something ... I would recommend at least going to the Careers Department, having a look – they have online questionnaires and things like that which try and match you.

You need to be aware that companies offering internships generally start the application process in the autumn. At Telefónica, for example, the application stage starts in September but you can register your interest before this online.

Placement year

Andrew likewise emphasizes the importance of building good quality experience while at university as he has found that a lot of the kind of 'entry level' training positions of the kind applied for by Grace are *'not being offered any more'*. This is in large part because of the state of the economy, which impacts the graduate labour market as follows: firstly, tight financial control makes organizations reluctant to invest in graduate traineeships, and, secondly, when companies are recruiting, they want people who already have the experience and so can *'hit the ground running and make an impact quickly'* (Yorke and Harvey 2005, p. 41). As well as internships undertaken during the holidays, it is possible to do a one-year 'thick' placement after the second year of your studies, or in some cases two 'thin' placements of six months spread over the course of your programme. These are a mandatory element of so-called sandwich courses, although if you are not on such a programme, it may be possible to defer your studies by a year in order to take up a placement.

N.B. If you are considering doing a placement, it will be crucial to start applying early in your second year at university. As with internships, the companies that offer such opportunities usually advertise them during the autumn.

Andrew is convinced that undertaking an industrial placement in this way helps to *'give (people) an edge'* and also improves their motivation and focus on their studies:

I know people that did sandwich courses, did very well during their placement, and once they finished their undergrad' they had a job waiting for them.

Evidence of achieving significant personal goals

In discussing with us the things that impress them, two of the employers we spoke with – Ronan and Louise – both mentioned examples of people achieving personal goals which are remarkable in some way, even if their direct relevance to the world of work may not be immediately apparent. As we mentioned earlier Louise, suggested that people should not underplay their hobbies and experiences, and she gave examples.

Perhaps you've canoed down the Zambezi or you've done a sponsored walk for the blind dogs or maybe you've decorated an old person's home.

Such projects will doubtless have developed important planning abilities and there are likely to have been other skills that you can mention in connection with such achievements. They also give a positive impression of your values and your mindset, as no doubt they will have involved a good deal of motivation, determination, and tenacity, as is the case in the example that Ronan gives:

[I]t might be that 'I went and walked for three months in the Andes, and the reason I did that was X,Y and Z' might be interesting for us as regards: that sort of individual has demonstrated that they're self-motivated, they're able to organize themselves, they're able to deliver on personal objectives, so there could be as much out of the 'Andes for three months' as there was for 'three months with Linklaters' (a global law firm).

As you will no doubt appreciate, an internship with a leading international company will *not* necessarily be less valuable than undertaking some exciting personal adventure. The important point to realize is that the two are different, but both have value, and with all such experiences it is crucial to highlight for employers the skills, values, personal, and mindset qualities of which these achievements provide evidence.

Having a positive mindset and visualizing success

Most of this chapter has been devoted to practical things that you can do to help you build up your profile and stand out in the graduate employment market. We turn now to the more intangible aspect of mindset and how important it is to remain positive during the job application process, not least because of the huge competition for graduate positions, as we indicated in the introduction to this chapter.

Our intention is not to put you off trying for the big-name organizations like Telefónica. For a start just because there are, as Ann mentioned, 12,500 or more applicants applying to get onto these graduate schemes, it does not mean that 12,499 of them are all better than you. Instead of worrying about the chances of succeeding against seemingly impossible odds, we suggest that you start by considering how many candidates are in with a serious chance. For every position that Telefónica is offering on its graduate scheme, roughly six candidates are shortlisted for the final interview, so a different, more positive approach is to think:

What do I need to do to put myself up there with the very best of applicants so that my chances of success are one in six?

Put like this, the challenge appears much more realizable. In fact, this way of thinking is in line with the kind of provocative, 'brain jolter' questioning that Reed and Stoltz (2011, p. 187) say is needed when you face difficult obstacles, where they suggest that you ask the following questions:

Clearly, this is impossible. But if it were possible, how would I/you/we do it?

Clearly, this can't be done. But if it could, how would I/you/we do it?



Reflection

Can you think of something at the moment that you feel daunted by? Try the above technique. If this isn't applicable at the moment try this procedure next time you come across what you think of as an 'insurmountable' obstacle. Keep a log of the outcome.

Unfortunately such thinking does not always come easily. In Chapter 2 we discussed theory relating to self-efficacy (Bandura 1994), and also to fixed and malleable self-belief (Knight and Yorke 2004, citing Dweck 1999). Such theory suggests that for people with a fixed self-belief, experience of failure in the jobs market might appear to them as yet further evidence of their own personal shortcomings. Such a view can really only lead downwards into a very negative and unhelpful spiral. Nevertheless, it is worth being aware that such feelings – or similarly negative ways of thinking – are common, and also very natural, in lots of people who have invested huge amounts of time and energy in the applications process, only to find themselves continually being rejected.

The situation can be further clouded by perceptions, either of oneself or within one's own community, which suggest that the employment market may not be a level playing field, and that people with certain backgrounds, or of certain ability, age, or gender are perhaps privileged over others. Our discussions with Andrew, Ernestine, and Carlotta – volunteers at the Sickle Cell Society, all three of whom are black – highlighted the emotive and demoralizing nature of discrimination, whether real or perceived, and the added importance of nevertheless maintaining a positive mindset. Perhaps as a non-British black person, Andrew is able to discuss such issues with a certain detachment:

Being a black person but being born and raised in Africa, I kind of have a different perspective to people I have met and become friends from here. I do think that a lot of young black people from the UK do perceive themselves to be discriminated ... the perception is definitely

there and I do think that for some black people, it will discourage them. It discourages them from education and work, because they think 'I'm being discriminated anyway. I'm never going to get this. I might as well do something else.' So I think the perception of discrimination does exist but it's not across the board.

Ernestine believes that it is very important to remain positive, and also to maintain a good support network:

It's for the individual to know that 'I'm better than this. I can do this ...' and to be able to say: 'OK, this is what I want to do, or this is what I want to be, regardless of what the situation is. It's going to be difficult, it's going to be hard, but I'm going to pursue that and try to achieve what I want.' It's not easy. There are various challenges you may encounter as you go along, but as long as you have got a goal, you've got something in your head, you know, at the end of the tunnel, you're going to win, you're going to get the star, or whatever it is, you will, you will! You should be determined in yourself, and also at the same time, get the support, so that when you need to cry, or when you're emotionally down, you've got that support around you, and the right sort of support, people who can help you through it, who you can speak to in confidence.

We will revisit the issue of remaining positive in Chapter 11 when we talk about career management.

Maintaining optimism

There is a tendency for people to think that being an optimist or a pessimist is something we are 'born' with and which cannot be changed. However, it has been suggested that optimism is something that can be learnt (Seligman 1998). You may wonder why, apart from the fact that it is quite pleasant to view the world optimistically, we should be suggesting that it is worth your while learning to be optimistic if it is not your natural tendency. The reason is that there is research providing strong evidence that optimists are more successful in their job searches. Kaniel et al. (2010, Abstract) conducted research on the job search performance of MBA students in which they found:

[T]hat dispositional optimists experience significantly better job search outcomes than pessimists with similar skills. During the job search process, they spend less effort searching and are offered jobs more quickly. They are choosier and are more likely to be promoted than others.

In fact the news gets even better. Research suggests that optimists and people who think positively tend to experience positive health benefits (Goode 2003, Segerstrom and Sephton 2010), which can only be beneficial in relation to work performance.

Visualizing success and maintaining a positive outlook in the face of adversity are not things that come easily and without practice. There is a lot of literature on the topic of personal power, visualization, remaining positive, positive mental attitude, and being optimistic. Spend some time researching these topics and try one or two methods that seem feasible to you. We have offered you a starter reading list.



Activity

As a starting point, you could try any of the following to increase your optimism. Think about the possibility that with any situation, you can choose how you look at it, or interpret it. This means that you can choose to focus on the negative aspects, or you can choose to focus on the more positive aspects. Practise focusing on the possibilities in any situation rather than the obstacles. Accept that things change. That means that even if things are bad now they could be better in a month or year from now. To convince yourself of the above, think back to bad things in the past that now seem insignificant. As an alternative to this, think back on successful times. Remember how you managed to overcome obstacles, and how good that made you feel. Remember the saying 'When the going gets tough, the tough get going'.

Conclusion

In case you had not been well aware of this already, you should by now realize the scale of the competition you will face in the graduate employment market. That competition means that because so many other graduates – including people with considerable experience – will all be applying for the same jobs as you, employers can now pick and choose. For employers to select you, you have to stand out and to do this you have to be able to show convincing evidence not only of skills acquired through education and employment, but also of having a committed, engaged, and resilient mindset, and values that fit with theirs.

This chapter has aimed to show you the importance of building this evidence and how this can be done through your extracurricular activities. It is never too early to start building this evidence. In any case, we believe that engaging in such activities alongside your studies is both enjoyable and enriching, and we know that it will count for a lot when the time comes for you to apply for work, whether during or after your studies. In fact, it will probably make all the difference.

What do you think now?

Having worked through this chapter, have you revised your opinion on any of the questions above? How about your classmates? Have any of them changed their opinions?



Project

Your tutor will give you further guidance on how to work through the project tasks. The material we provide below summarizes the tasks and links them to other parts of this book.

Your team should now have gathered information on the first part of the question: What do employers want and how can you give it to them?

Make sure this is in a format that you could present to others if necessary, in accordance with any assessment your tutor might have given you.

(continued...)

You should now be able to move on to the second part of the question which is to do with building up graduate assets and gathering evidence of these assets.

Your team should spend time identifying your current team formation stage.

This might also be a good time to have an honest evaluation of how you think you are performing and address any issues that are developing. Chapters 6 and 7 should help with this, as should any further research you do into the topic

Further reading

- <<http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/55509036/personal-power-6-rules-how-harness-yours>>.
- Goleman, D. (1987) Research affirms power of positive thinking. *The New York Times*. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1987/02/03/science/research-affirms-power-of-positive-thinking.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>>.
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- Keller, H. (1903) *Optimism, An Essay*. D. B. Updike, The Merrymount Press: Boston <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/31622/31622-h/31622-h.htm>>.
- Kaniel, R., Massey, C., and Robinson, D. T. (2010) *The Importance of Being an Optimist: Evidence from Labor Markets*. NBER Working Paper No 1638 <<http://www.nber.org/papers/w16328>>.
- Rogers, C. R. (1978) *On Personal Power: Inner Strength and its Revolutionary Impact*. Philadelphia: Trans-Atlantic Publications.
- Segerstrom, S. and Sephton, S. (2010) Optimistic expectancies and cell-mediated immunity: The role of positive affect. *Psychological Science*, 21(3), 448–55.
- Seligman, M. E. P. PhD (1998) *Learned Optimism: How to Change your Mind and your Life*. New York: Pocket Books.