

Career Planning

What College Students Need to Succeed in the Corporate World

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HBR Staff; Peter Dazeley/Getty Images

Summary. To be employable these days, your degree alone won't cut it. For entry-level roles, employers are looking to see how easily you can transition from school to the corporate world. They seek candidates with well-developed soft skills, such

as communication, resilience, optimism, curiosity, an ability to learn, responsibility, accountability, and reliability. Here are five ways to begin building these skills from your first day at university.

Attend your classes in-person: Online learning, by default, tends to emphasize technical skills over soft skill development. You also miss out on opportunities to practice skills like reading body language, observing non-verbal cues, and discovering and sharing your unique communication style. In-person classes force you to show up and be present, listen actively, and ask thoughtful questions.

Find a part-time job: There is no better way to prepare yourself for the workforce than to participate in it, even for a few hours a week. For example, waiting tables can be a great way to develop your interpersonal, communication, and presentation skills. Sales positions will give you the opportunity to practice listening, building trust, and influencing customers.

Secure internships: Internships give you a chance to get in front of hiring managers and make a good impression on the people you work with. Not only will you learn how to navigate the day-to-day of your future career, you'll also be practicing soft and hard skills directly applicable to roles you may want to apply to upon graduation.

Join a club: Clubs are a great place to connect and bond with people outside of your major. Having a diverse social group equally increases your interpersonal skills, as well as social and intellectual awareness. You can include these extracurriculars on your resume to highlight soft skills such as teamwork, communication, self-confidence, and leadership.

Build your network: As much as job readiness is about mastering the skills that will prepare you for the workforce, it's also about building relationships with people who will provide you with the recommendations, connections, and support you need to launch your career.

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Students: Are you setting yourself up to be “job-ready?”

Simply put, when you’re job-ready, you’re able to transition from campus to corporate life with relative ease. It’s about having a mix of experience and skills that will help you secure a job and remain employed upon graduation.

Job readiness may not seem like a big deal — after all, you’re on your way to earning a shiny new degree. What else could you need? But to be employable these days, your degree alone won’t cut it. In fact, since the start of 2023, 53% of recent grads in the U.S. have been unemployed or underemployed.

In conjunction with your degree, employers seek candidates with well-developed soft skills, such as communication, resilience, optimism, curiosity, an ability to learn, responsibility, accountability, and reliability. To an extent, we all have these attributes, but to be job-ready, you must learn how to focus and harness them.

While you may assume that job readiness is something you can ignore until your final year of college, setting yourself up to be employable after graduation can start the moment you step onto campus. Here are five ways to begin building these skills from your first day at university.

Attend your classes in person.

If you have the option to attend your classes in person, do it.

In today's virtual world, we can be fooled into believing that online classes are always more convenient and efficient. At times, this may be true. There is no disputing the upsides of online study for those learning at a distance or in less favorable socioeconomic circumstances. And when you're juggling school with full or part-time jobs, the flexibility of online courses offer can be a lifeline.

Even so, that same flexibility comes with some downsides. The tradeoff is the lack of a structured commitment and fewer in-person interactions. In the comfort of your home, distractions may be tempting and focusing on the task at hand can be a challenge. It's no surprise that, despite the ease and benefits of online education, the completion rates for many programs is quite low, with only about 15% of Open Universities students leaving with degrees or other qualifications.

Online learning, by default, tends to emphasize technical skills over soft-skill development. When the majority of your interactions occur through a screen, you miss out on opportunities to practice skills like reading body language, observing nonverbal cues, and discovering and sharing your unique communication style. In-person courses, on the other hand, expose you to a much larger breadth of diverse individuals, and are often designed to encourage relationship building and discussion. They force you to show up and be present, listen actively, and ask thoughtful questions.

This kind of commitment will help you develop the discipline needed to be a reliable, punctual team member. It will keep you accountable and teach you how to respectfully converse with others. Teamwork, collaboration, and interpersonal skill development are defaults of being physically present. Employers rank the ability to work on a team among the most important attributes for graduates.

Find a part-time job.

It's not uncommon for students to take on full or part-time jobs while in school. For many, it's necessary to help pay for classes and living expenses. While there are challenges to this — time management and work-life balance — there are also a number of benefits.

Namely, there is no better way to prepare yourself for the workforce than to participate in it, even for a few hours a week. For example, a side hustle of waiting tables can be a great way to develop your interpersonal, communication, and presentation skills. Retail sales positions, for example, will give you the opportunity to practice listening, building trust, and influencing customers. Almost every job requires a certain level of problem-solving and will increase your self-awareness and emotional intelligence.

Part-time jobs can also help you get more comfortable taking direction from others, receiving feedback, and asking questions to help you understand tasks. You'll get used to the brief discomfort most people feel after inevitably making mistakes. Rather than letting this stop you in your tracks, you can practice learning, picking yourself up, and moving forward. Your stamina and resilience will increase. And, of course, having work experience on your resume will show future employers that you're a responsible person who can be trusted to show up and deliver. Your part-time job may feel insignificant right now, but hiring managers want to know you have the basics covered before you join them.

Finally, when considering part-time roles, try to find a job that you will enjoy and want to stick with. Think about what you like

doing in your spare time or the field you want to move into. Is there a position that can give you more exposure to those areas? If you're burning the candlestick at both ends – between your schoolwork and your day job — it will be hard to find the energy and excel in either area. Choosing a job that aligns with your longer-term goals can help motivate you.

Secure internships.

Internships can similarly help you become job-ready, but there is a key difference here — internships are often more directly related to your degree or career goals. Finding an internship in an organization or industry you'd like to pursue after college can be extremely valuable. Not only will you learn how to navigate the day-to-day of your future career, you'll also be practicing soft and hard skills directly applicable to roles you may want to apply to upon graduation.

Additionally, internships give you a chance to get in front of hiring managers and make a good impression on the people you work with. Companies are always on the lookout for talent, and one of the ways organizations find great people is by hiring interns who have the potential to transition into full-time roles. A job could be waiting for you after your internship if you use the opportunity to showcase your skills and contribute value to the teams you work with and the projects you take on.

Put your best foot forward, always. During your internship, be curious (set up meetings with your teammates and ask about their work), don't clock out early just because you finished your to-do list (show passion and excitement towards tasks), and raise your hand when an opportunity arises (take on stretch projects that will allow you to showcase your skills and add work to your portfolio).

Join a club.

Universities have an array of clubs you can get involved in and learn from — sports, political societies, community-based initiatives, and other professionally-aligned opportunities.

Clubs are a great place to connect and bond with people outside of your major. Having a diverse social group equally increases your interpersonal skills, as well as social and intellectual awareness.

Many clubs also hold events or organize outings that involve external guests and vendors, allowing you to meet successful leaders or professionals in your areas of interest.

Beyond networking, you can include these extracurriculars on your resume to highlight soft skills such as teamwork, communication, self-confidence, and leadership. This effectively

shows employers your interests and provides insight into who you are and what you value.

Build your network.

It's hard to break into any industry without a network. Job readiness is about more than mastering the skills that will prepare you for the workforce, it's also about building relationships with people who will provide you with the recommendations, connections, and support you need to launch your career. Many people are intimidated by networking, see it as transactional, or want to avoid it at all costs. But at its core, networking is about developing mutually beneficial relationships, sharing information, and giving back to others. Most importantly, it can help you land that first job.

How do you build a network? Think about where you spend most of your time: attending classes at university, working at your part-time job, interning at a company, or hanging out at social clubs. These are all great places to connect with others. In each of these environments, make it a goal to find one connection who can help you accelerate your career upon graduation — whether by being a reference, a supportive friend, or even a reliable peer who can provide feedback on your resume.

One of the easiest ways to build your network is to connect with your professors. When you apply to jobs, they can serve as great character references and may be willing to connect you to professionals in your field of interest. Make a good impression by showing up (or signing into) class on time, completing assignments by the assigned deadlines, and participating thoughtfully in group discussions. Likewise, the manager at your job or internship can be a valuable reference. Show them that you're punctual, reliable, and aim to do work that highlights your unique skills. If you extend yourself at university or at work, people will want to help you.

Finally, as you network, remember to connect with people at all levels. Don't be afraid to message the CEO of the company you intern at, reach out to a senior who leads your favorite on-campus club, or ask your professor to meet for coffee. Networking isn't just about building relationships right now — it's about building relationships with people who can help guide you on your long career journey. Foster your connections throughout your time in college, and in the years after. Reach out to your network when you need advice, when you want to share something in their area of interest, or even just to check in and let them know what you're up to.

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Landing a job after college takes more than keeping your resume up to date. For entry-level roles, employers are looking to see how easily you can transition from school to the corporate world. You need to show that you have the skills and experiences to collaborate with others, contribute value, and be accountable for your work. Being job-ready puts you on the path to be life-ready. Don't wait... start now.

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Roxanne Calder is the author of 'Employable – 7 Attributes to Assuring Your Working Future.' She is also the founder and managing director of [EST10](#), one of Sydney's most successful administration recruitment agencies. Roxanne is passionate about uncovering people's potential and watching their careers soar.



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