

Stepping into the Unknown: A Graduate's Guide to the Real World



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1. Introductions

Author Smith: When you are young and the question of what you want to do when you grow up is posed, for some people, one answer comes to mind and it is as sure as the seasons change. As a former student convinced of my future, the path to realizing my actual interests has been winding. The year I turned 13, an under-calculated jump off a trampoline landed me a hospital bed with a broken ankle, a visit during which I questioned each nurse and doctor that was assigned to me about their job. It was then, sitting in the hospital, that I realized that helping to ease people's pain was exactly what I wanted to do. As my high school years passed, I began to focus more on the challenging science classes and academic experiences that would provide access to any program or degree I pursued in university. I can vividly remember conversations with my mom about different types of doctors and the commitments I would have to make to become one, and we both discovered the magical field of Neuroscience. Within a week of researching and visiting hospitals to bug the doctors about their professions, I was completely convinced neurosurgery was going to be my career. When it was time to apply to college, I chose a small school that had a reputable Neuroscience program and began eagerly moving through my classes, taking on extracurriculars and classes that medical schools value. After three semesters of slowly coming to the conclusion that a small school was not the best fit for me, I transferred to a larger school in hopes of finding research experience that would propel me further into my medical school dreams. It was not until I stumbled upon an opening in a graduate student's lab conducting research in the adaptability of demographics to robotic surgery tools that I allowed myself to consider anything other than my "dream" career. Being a part of a whole different branch of research opened my eyes to the possibility that I didn't have to go to medical school to have an interesting and fulfilling career. Desperate for this new discovery to not sway my goals, I fought the excitement and growing interest in the idea of pursuing research. It was not until senior year of college that I confronted the reality of my

interest in research and made the decision that I would take some time off after graduation to work and gain research experience before applying to a PhD in Neuroscience research. This decision led me to become a scientist at B2S Life Sciences, learning the tactical skills that accompany the theoretical ideas I had been taught in school. The different knowledge and hands-on training I have learned in my industry job has given me confidence in my own ability to learn and perform at high levels, giving me the last push I needed to submit applications for graduate schools. As those application dates are steadily moving closer and I have given myself permission to explore careers in the research world, I have become increasingly ecstatic about the idea of being on the cutting edge of discovery of the brain and its incomprehensible abilities. I am grateful that I trusted myself to follow that small grain of curiosity, as it ultimately led me to confidently pursue my interests and find a career that engages and excites me.

Author Wheeler: My journey started in Franklin, Indiana in a high school chemistry class. At first, it seemed like my teacher was much too excited about chemistry than anyone in their right mind should be. However, as the school year wore on, I found his enthusiastic energy rubbing off on me and awakening my interest in the logical ways that science and math weaved together to explain how even the tiniest bits of the universe works. It just made sense to me.

Fast forward 2 years: I stepped onto Memorial Mall at Purdue University, marching excitedly to the first day of Biology I. Over the course of my four years at Purdue, I pursued courses that interested me, even if they were not part of the typical biology degree path. One of these was a graduate-level ecology lab typically reserved for environmental engineers and ecology majors, and it ended up being my favorite class by far. We went on field trips to Indiana Dunes to collect data on succession and walked from campus to the nearby wildlife preserve to investigate migration of milkweed seeds. Although I participated in various activities that were related to my major such as medical scribing, biology club, and career

seminars, my favorite parts of my education were the most unexpected: the out-of-the-box courses, mentorship programs, Purdue Old Masters, and exchange student club. The commonality among all of these favorite memories is that they allowed me to step outside of my comfort zone and learn about myself through the different lenses these unique experiences offered.

As I continue to pursue a path of lifelong learning, I keep challenging myself to actively contribute to both my career and community. I am a scientist at B2S Life Sciences, a biotherapeutic company that develops quantitative assays and creates custom reagents to aid research teams in the drug development process. Outside of work, I am a Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteer advocating for children that have experienced neglect or abuse. I identified a need for improving my programming and statistics skillset, so I am also enrolled in a Data Science Master's program. In my free time, I thrift, mend, and resell vintage clothes. In essence, even if I'm not sure what my next career step may be at a given moment, I'm learning more about myself and my interests each day with the confidence that this knowledge will guide me in the right direction.

2. Post-Grad Transition

Transitioning from student life to the workforce is one of the most complicated and tumultuous life adjustments that society leaves us exceptionally unequipped for. Over and over during this period, I expressed my worries to other adults, with their only attempt at reassurance being a simple and unencouraging "Welcome to the real world." College sends students off with a resume stuffed full of technical skills and awards; however, there is no blueprint for what comes next. Until this point, the paths of academics had been carefully laid out, starting on the first day of elementary school and ending with university graduation.

In order to start navigating the shift from school to work, it's important to first highlight the differences between the two. As every job is different, it can be hard to get a clear picture of the day-to-day

until you actually begin working; nevertheless, there are a few common challenges detailed in the following sections about transitioning into the workforce that apply to most professions. In addition to outlining these obstacles, we have compiled our recommendations for overcoming them based on our personal experiences.

A. Becoming Adjusted to Working Life:

The time you spend for yourself is so crucial to a healthy work-life balance, and it tends to be one of the largest differences between school and a job. Most college experiences have structured class schedules, but you are completely free to fill the time between and after classes however you choose. The abundance of student activities on campuses make occupying free time an easy choice between interests and friends who share them. However, in the setting of a typical adult working life, clubs and organizations are less accessible. While finding groups that share your interests is not quite as easy as it is in undergraduate programs, the exciting thing about being a true adult is having complete control over your free time and deciding how to best use it without limitations of campus resources and with more of an access to personal funding.

Similarly, there are a few more barriers to making and spending time with friends after college. During undergraduate school, if you take courses and join clubs that interest you, then by default you are surrounded by others with similar interests. This dynamic makes for easy connection and camaraderie; you share the same struggles, interests, and schedules. After college, a general sense of loneliness emerged as my friends scattered across the country and everyone was suddenly living according to starkly different timelines. Some of my friends are mid-way through professional school, some of them are traveling the world, some of them are married with kids, and some of them are completely changing their career path. Although this may sound scary, in reality it is such an exciting time in which you are free to write your own story, learn who you are, and cultivate intentional and meaningful friendships.

Our Solution: Finding friendships as an adult can feel daunting, but the reality is that it just takes a new approach. You would be surprised how almost all post-graduate adults feel the exact same way! All it takes is a bit of intentionality and bravery to take the first step, like reaching out to an acquaintance on social media or talking to the other new person in your yoga class. Essentially, I found it the most helpful to put myself in environments where I was guaranteed to meet people with shared interests. For example, if you like to read, go to a library event, join a book club, or visit your local independent bookstore. If you like to workout, join a workout class, go every week, and get to know the other people in the class. Just like a muscle, it's hard to push yourself outside of your comfort zone at first, but after each repetition, it gets easier and easier until it's second nature.

B. Individualism versus Being a Team Player:

While directly opposite to the individualistic mindset in school, a productive and hireable employee needs to be a team player and have a sense of community effort in the work that they do. When working in a collaborative environment, it is important to understand that your work reflects your peers and supervisors and that doing your best boosts yourself and everyone around you. In school, oftentimes, the work you submit is solely yours and it is a direct correlation with the information you have learned, meaning your grades only reflect on you.

There is instant and constant gratification of your work in academia that acts as a direct gauge for your success. In a work environment, there is much less chance for recognition or gratification in your work. In most work environments and depending very much on the career, group recognition is much more common than individual appreciation, as the company is wholly dependent on the productivity of the team. For a recent graduate entering the workplace, it can be disheartening when your contributions are not acknowledged and instead lumped into the whole. Learning to change expectations of acknowledgment can be very difficult for some. Immediate,

measurable feedback for every single assignment and project gives a sense of linearity and achievement to students; recognition in the workplace is more subtle and less personal, often only occurring for major milestones. However, many people find this type of recognition, like being selected to lead a major project or receiving encouragement from a boss, to be more meaningful and fulfilling as it is tied to real world impact and is a direct result of your deliberate efforts.

Our Solution: When beginning to work for a common goal among peers, as is the case for most careers, your small successes are often lost to the bigger picture. Because of this transition, it is very common to feel overlooked and undervalued unless your individual role is singled out and praised. I have found that celebrating your own victories and work can change your outlook on how valuable you are to your company. It is important to begin with clearly outlined personal goals and make a point to celebrate them once you achieve them. Many direct supervisors will congratulate and encourage you, but being your own cheerleader helps you ultimately happier with the effort you put forth.

C. Input versus Output:

Yet another key difference between the learning stage and career stage of life is the type of work expected. During school, a student is asked to assimilate loads of information and absorb the bigger pictures and connections between the concepts they are learning. In a working environment, one is expected to produce by means of information, data generation, reports, presentations, etc. For young adults coming from a phase of life that expects constant intake, it can be overwhelming to consistently yield productivity.

Our Solution: Continue to prioritize learning after graduation. If there are opportunities at work to learn something new, seize it and ask as many questions as you can. If there aren't, identify a need or gaps in knowledge and consider asking your boss for an opportunity to learn about it through a class or conference. It's also been

incredibly invigorating to explore my passions and hobbies after work hours. In the year since we graduated college, we attended events with our local bookstore where we learned to bedazzle books; we visited a yarn store downtown for a beginners knitting class; we started learning the native languages of countries that we are soon traveling to. In the transition from the mass intake of information to constant output and productivity, it's been vital to continue to foster opportunities for learning, both professionally and in our personal lives.

D. Communication:

In college, professional communication is somewhat limited and rarely formal; however, at work, efficient and effective communication is single-handedly the most valuable skill. Emails, meetings, newsletters, and direct messages are all frequently used throughout a workday to ensure work is being done correctly. However, during school, the most formal means of communication are occasional emails to professors or fellow students. At our job, if there is a simple miscommunication between the Principal Investigator (PI) and Scientist regarding experiment setup resulting in assay failure, it can cost thousands of dollars to re-run it, and our company is forced to absorb that cost. Additionally, being able to summarize data analysis from the day's experiment and relay it effectively to the PI is imperative to guarantee that everyone involved is on the same page. Similarly, if a Scientist does not accurately record and convey reagent requirements for a project, it can cause a weeks-long setback and completely disrupt timelines. It becomes absolutely vital to communicate every single detail, no matter how miniscule.

Our Solution: This shift in expectations presents quite the learning curve. Thus, it is important to be proactive and hone these skills throughout school as you prepare for the transition from academics to work. To improve your ability to present complex information in a straightforward manner, take that presentation course you've been avoiding because you hate talking in front

of people. To learn to break down information quickly and effectively, try teaching or tutoring your favorite subject for practice. While you have access to your university's career center, work on a resume and cover letter template and ask for feedback or schedule a mock interview. You'll have a head start after graduation if you commit time and energy to refine your communication skills as a student. When you arrive at your first job, ask as many questions as you can come up with (especially the "dumb" ones), don't be afraid to repeatedly clarify expectations or plans, and be meticulous in both your written and verbal communication.

3. Navigating the Job Market

After graduation, embarking on the job search journey can be intimidating. Imposter syndrome, determined confidence, and enthusiasm of a first job can coalesce to create an uncomfortable mix of worry and excitement. Before starting a job search, it is important to clarify which features of a job are the most important to you. After giving an overview of our journeys through this process, we hope to provide some actionable tips to help prepare for navigating the job market.

Author Smith: As graduation grew nearer and the daunting task of applying to jobs and entering the workforce became more than a distant thought, I sought advice from those around me who had been through the process. A few of my older friends who had recently graduated from my Purdue School of Science program were more than happy to share their experiences while job hunting. Their advice was to be patient and to be diligent about following up. While applying is the first step of finding your spot in your chosen industry, remembering to check back in is often overlooked. It's important to show employers that you are eager and intentional throughout the entire process. While this seems like a small detail, companies look for committed workers who are willing to go out of their way to achieve their goals. When asking my father what he would look for in a hireable candidate for his company, he described that good communicators and team players are always moved to the front of the line as potential employees. Keeping these tips in mind as I began to put out applications and sit for interviews, I found that oftentimes I was complimented on these very aspects after meeting with several companies. I am a strong believer that an attractive personality, an eagerness to be involved and learn any way you can, and the ability to take direction and communicate well will be key to any person participating in the difficult endeavor that is job hunting.

Author Wheeler: Upon graduation, I began the tedious process of finding my first “big girl” job. Initially, I was overwhelmed by the sheer

volume of job listings requiring a PhD or 10+ years of experience. It felt as though everything I had worked so hard for over the past 4 years had amounted to nothing. The strong sense of pride I felt during graduation was in sharp contrast to the lack of confidence I felt immediately upon embarking on my job search.

I sought advice from anyone that I thought could relate—peers grappling with similar emotions, family that constantly encouraged me, and older friends that had experienced the exact same challenges. In retrospect, I recognize that I was not seeking advice, but reassurance. I desperately wanted reassurance that I was on the right path, that I could truly offer value to an employer, and that the right job opportunity would eventually come. I realized that I needed a major shift in my mindset. Rather than simply viewing it as asking a company to give me a job, I began to see all of the ways my skillset would benefit an organization. In place of worrying whether my qualifications and experience was enough to impress an employer, I shifted my focus to how the role could help me grow and develop. In this time of stress and worry, it took a great deal of intentionality to elucidate exactly what I wanted from a job and transform both my mindset and my confidence.

With this newfound perspective, I was able to approach my job search in a new light, with a sense of purpose and self-assurance. Ultimately, this shift in mindset not only helped me find a job that aligned with my needs and goals but also set me on a path of continual professional and personal growth, with the confidence that the right opportunities would present themselves when the time was right.

The most important tip, albeit cliché, is to be patient. From submitting an application and awaiting a response to completing various rounds of interviews and discussing pay and benefits, the process of securing a job is often lengthy and sluggish. As many companies receive hundreds of applications each day, it may take a while to hear back at all. This is the case regardless of your

experience or qualifications; it is simply a requisite element of the process. Nonetheless, if there is a position you are especially excited about, it can be helpful to reach out to the hiring team again to check in and restate your interest in the position.

Before ever browsing Indeed or LinkedIn, it is imperative that you have a concrete list of your non-negotiables and needs that you are looking for in a job. You are interviewing the company just as they are interviewing you. Ensure that you know exactly what you need from an employer by investigating the aspects of a job that are the most important to you. For example, if you know you enjoy travel, make sure that the company's PTO policy will accommodate your needs. In addition to technical aspects such as salary, PTO, and benefits, it is important to seek work environments and teams that best suit your personality. Some companies greatly value teamwork, while others reward individual accomplishment. Some people thrive in competitive environments while others flourish in more collaborative workspaces. While interviewing, inquire about things like the work-life balance, the flexibility of work hours, the possibility of hybrid/remote work, relocation needs or opportunities, and any other aspect that would help you reach your individual life goals. While it is common to discuss salary and pay before committing to a job, many recent graduates are not taught that they have the ability to negotiate. It is perfectly acceptable to make a counter offer that would better meet your needs with regard to salary or PTO, for example. There will be times when an employer is unable to meet a request for negotiation outside the offer they have already made, at which time, you will need to examine if you are happy accepting the job as is, or if you feel that your experience and time would be better suited in another place. A crucial part of finding the best fitting job for you is to advocate for yourself and your needs. If you are fulfilled and find your company and work community rewarding, it will be much easier for you to be productive and in the mindset to learn and participate.

4. Final Reflections

Ultimately, the transition from college to the workforce is challenging, but it is also rewarding and fulfilling to see the culmination of years of work. Although we dove into various tips and solutions that may help in the job search process, there is no need to overcomplicate it. You've done the work and are deserving of the job you are looking for! In times of doubt and worry, it is vital to lean on your friends or peers who are experiencing the same lengthy process as you, find comfort and encouragement that most job-hunting journeys take time. We sincerely hope that our experience provides the helpful groundwork needed to succeed in transitioning from university to the workforce, as the advice included here are the exact tips we desperately wished we had during that period of change.

After securing your first job in the industry, prioritize a clear boundary between work and the rest of your life. The habits developed at the start of a new job lay the foundation for your entire tenure at that company. Fulfilment at work is equally influenced by your life outside of work as by your work itself. The freedom and opportunities that working life provides are unparalleled—take advantage of it! Embrace a well-rounded life, explore new hobbies, and be purposeful with the time you spend with those you care about.