

TOP 3 TIPS FOR FINDING YOUR FIRST JOB IN A BAD JOB MARKET



Looking for a job after graduation is akin to playing a game of poker. Just as each round of card playing is unique, every career opportunity involves its own strategy, characteristics and rewards. Your goal is to get the best hand possible, or in other words, attain the best possible job that will maximize career success. No one can guarantee that any particular strategy will work, but expert players enjoy far better odds of winning than amateurs. This advice is especially critical for this year's crop of graduates, given that the U.S. is in the midst of a poor job market.

Poker players and job candidates use many of the same strategies. For instance, in poker, players conceal their cards. Likewise, job seekers usually don't know the competition they're up against when vying for a job. This means that it's possible another candidate knows someone employed at the company and is using this tie to gain a competitive advantage. Or, there could be applicants who have the benefit of specialized training or an advanced degree. Further, some players may be bluffing. These are candidates who've embellished their resumes to appear more qualified than they actually are.

So how can you get the upper hand when competing against these folks? Try using these tactics to improve your odds:

1. **Use your cards wisely.** The best cards in your hand are your work experiences. These may include jobs, internships, co-ops or volunteer activities. These usually trump grade-point averages and other academic achievements, so don't downplay even unpaid work experiences.
2. **Be ready to "up" the stakes if necessary.** Employers typically offer candidates the lowest salary possible for the position they're seeking to fill. Research the going rate for the job you're targeting (many job sites, including this one, offer information on average salaries for entry-level jobs), then settle on a bottom-line number that you'd accept. If that amount you're offered doesn't meet your standard, be confident and ask for more. Still, bear in mind that many companies have a tight salary range at the entry level. Having extraordinary skills or relevant work experience will give you more leverage at the negotiating table.
3. **Know when to fold.** If the job you're offered isn't a good fit and doesn't lead you up the appropriate career ladder, don't take it. After all, you'll be spending a lot of time at work. To avoid a mismatch, prepare questions about the company to ask during the interview. If you're made an offer, look closely at the attributes that matter most. For many people, money is the lead factor in choosing a job. However, it's important to evaluate the entire compensation package. Consider whether it includes full medical or dental coverage, paid time off, a retirement package and other benefits.

Knowing how to play the cards that are dealt to you is key to your success. Strategic thinking, along with faith in yourself and your abilities, will help you to take control of your career.