

# 11

## The Professional Career After University

Read this chapter if you would like the following issues addressed:

- What do students need to do in order to move from undergraduate study into a professional career?
- What changes will students experience in moving from the university environment to professional employment?

Winston Churchill once said that,

*“Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm...”.*

Churchill’s observation, together with the old adage that,

*“The man who never made a mistake never made anything...”*

summarise an important characteristic of professional life, and one which differentiates the professional world from the undergraduate world. The sayings highlight that mistakes and failures are an integral part of moving forward. Needless to say, graduates who have just spent 17 – 19 years of their lives being encouraged to always arrive at the “correct answers”, and to avoid “mistakes”, can therefore find the unstructured professional world markedly different from the secure constructs of the academic environment.

Regardless of the career that is chosen, and regardless of the decisions made along the way, those that learn to accept mistakes and failures, as an integral part of professional development and learning, are those who best embody the principles of a professional – that is, a person who can grow through increasing self-awareness, rather than by masking over shortcomings.

In the university undergraduate environment, the majority of students become accustomed to the notion of continuous success, simply because the majority of students do succeed and move on a steady upward path through their study program. This success isn’t purely coincidental or based solely upon student capabilities. It is, more likely, related to the fact that undergraduate studies are

specifically designed to provide a controlled environment with a series of upward challenges or steps. Of particular significance is the fact that the success of one student is generally not predicated on the failure of another – in other words, there is no filtering force acting to prevent all students from performing well and moving forward, should they make the effort.

Once out of the rarefied university environment, which has the effect of nurturing, encouraging and building, graduates encounter a far less structured environment, which is very much based upon issues of promotion through filtering, and individuals moving forward at the expense of other individuals.

The professional workplace is a pyramid, the base of which contains a large number of graduate positions – then each upward step contains fewer positions, until the apex is reached, where there is only room for one individual. Each step up the workplace pyramid requires contenders to be eliminated and, with each step, the stakes become higher – the remuneration increases; the level of authority increases, and so on. The movement of one individual up the pyramid is therefore generally at the expense of another, and the environment is competitive rather than nurturing.

Regardless of whether the professional environment is business, industry, health, public service, or even the arts, there are pressures imposed on that environment which require the individuals within it to deliver outcomes, and to add “value” to the organisation. The more value that individuals add, the better their prospects for moving up the professional pyramid.

For those students who are in the final months of university study, the notion of adding value to other parties is not one that comes naturally. To begin with, most students have spent their entire lives, up to the point of graduation, seeking personal outcomes (good academic results, etc.). For this reason, they tend to be inward looking in examining how they perform in terms of their own betterment and growth. Employers, on the other hand, want people who are outward looking. In other words, they are more interested in what individuals can offer the organisation if they become employees, and less interested in how this contributes to the personal betterment of the individual.

Employers are particularly focused on issues such as the enthusiasm and commitment that new graduates can bring to a position, rather than just their academic results. In most cases, employers are also interested in the inter-personal skills that applicants have, simply because few professionals are able to function effectively in isolation. Sometimes, employers look for evidence of leadership ability, because they are interested in having a long-term relationship with new employee, beyond the narrow confines of their starting position – this provides the employer with some stability and long term flexibility.

So, in seeking to make the transition from undergraduate university study to a professional career outside the university, students in the final stages of study have to undertake another learning journey – that is, to go from being inwardly focused individuals, to become people who learn to observe the world from the perspective of others – specifically, to view themselves in terms of what value they add to others.

For those students who have had work experience in their secondary school and university years, the transition to the professional work environment is smoother than for those who have solely been engaged in studies. There is an understanding that, much as one might wish it to be otherwise, the workplace is not there for the benefit of the individual – the individual has to adapt to the needs of the work environment.

The old saying that, if work was always enjoyable then they wouldn't need to pay people to do it, is one with which graduates have to come to terms, when they leave the university and join the workforce. Of particular importance is the fact that most students have to make the transition from a lifetime of being a customer (student) who has expectations of service, to becoming the service provider that has to deliver on other people's expectations.

A few of the basic issues that students have in adapting to the environment include a continued mindset of preconceived expectations – specifically, that the workplace:

- Has to utilise the specific skill set which graduates acquired while at university because otherwise the learning has been wasted (*- the workplace normally requires a broader application of knowledge than that which is developed at university*).
- Is obliged to provide graduates with an ongoing stream of interesting and stimulating activities (*- the workplace generally exists for the broader benefit of its stakeholders, rather than for the personal benefit of an individual*).

- Has to recognise and respect the intellect of graduates and their academic record of achievement (*- respect in the workforce has to be earned, and is based upon the value that individuals add to the workplace*).
- Has to provide avenues for personal growth and development (*- again, the workplace exists for the broader benefit of its stakeholder, rather than for the benefit of an individual*).

In the ideal case, the professional workplace might provide all the above benefits and many more. In reality, graduates have to learn how to accept and manage situations where the workplace doesn't behave in the manner that they expect.

As a starting point, graduates have to recognise that the majority of professional positions, whether they be in business, industry, government or medicine, are founded on the principle of repetition – specifically, having individuals performing the same tasks over and over again. This can manifest itself in various different ways, including:

- Engineering professionals who are responsible for problem solving in mass production.
- Medical doctors who work in general practice, and see an ongoing stream of common ailments, day after day.
- Legal practitioners who work on regularly occurring minor disputes or transactions in business.

- Advertising professionals who need to develop similar, mundane advertising programs for similar, mundane products.

The media tends to give a very glamorised view of the professions which it portrays in the artistic forums of film and television. In particular, the image is one of a constantly changing environment filled with drama, excitement and new challenges. In reality, it would be very difficult for such a world to exist because it would imply that there was sufficient wealth to pay for individuals to be constantly part of a learning curve, and to be challenged by new issues. In the practical professional environment, learning curves are something that are consciously avoided – because they consume time and resources – repetition, on the other hand, brings returns without repeated learning.

Some two centuries after the commencement of the industrial revolution, which is something that people equate with repetitive human tasks, the rhetoric of various industries has changed to make them sound more exciting and glamorous – for example, “knowledge industries”, “biotechnology industries”, “cyber industries”, etc. The reality, however, is that the wealth from these industries is still generated by repetition, just as it was two centuries ago – the difference is in the sort of repetition, and the broader options that individuals now have to change their engagement with the environment.

Of course, for the fortunate few, there are positions in society, typically in areas such as the arts, research, etc., which provide avenues for ongoing change and creativity. Even there, however, one finds the need for repetition – for example, an actor might need

to perform an identical stage show several hundred times in order for that show to be a financial success.

After years of learning, where there is constant change and growth, an individual graduate might therefore find the notion of early professional employment difficult to deal with:

- *“What happens when I am asked to do the same thing over and over again?”*
- *“How do I maintain enthusiasm?”*
- *“How can I grow and develop as an individual?”*

All of these questions are ones which form part of life’s new learning challenges after university.

Interestingly, various studies show that graduates tend to address these problems by moving relatively rapidly from their first appointment to another appointment elsewhere – usually this occurs within 24 months of professional employment – this tends to be the transition period between an individual’s university life as the *“expector”*, and the development of that individual as a mature professional (the *“expectee”*), from whom things are demanded. In general, graduate positions don’t live up to unrealistically high graduate expectations and, often, when graduates quickly move on to another position, it is not the environment that changes but, rather, the expectations of the graduates, which generally come into line with the realities of the professional world.

As graduates move into synchronisation with the professional world, and come to understand that it is not there solely to serve their personal requirements, they mature to the extent where they

can make decisions about the sorts of things that are important to them in order to grow as individuals. In so doing, they also come to terms with the sort of deals that they have to make with the professional world in order to make such things become a reality. For example, a graduate employee may decide that they wish to move into a management role, where they can have greater autonomy in decision-making – this may require up-skilling, and extensive after-hours learning, in order to handle the added requirements of the position. A graduate may decide that they wish to stay in the same sort of hands-on role in which they entered their organisation, but that they wish to have a greater variety of work – this may require movement from one organisation to another. None of the benefits and freedoms that accrue automatically within the university environment appear without conscious effort or determination in the professional workplace.

As undergraduate university life draws to a close, however, the biggest issue that students have in regard to the professional environment is how to get into it in the first place. In some high-demand areas, the effort required is minimal, and sometimes, the demand for graduates is well in excess of supply – so final-year students can pick and choose from a range of potential opportunities.

For the majority of impending graduates, however, the reality is that there are generally more graduates than there are employment places, so the starting point for entry into the workplace is effectively a competition.

There are a few basic issues that need to be understood before one can enter the graduate employment competition. These are:

- The business process of recruitment.
- The current employment/unemployment rate.
- Outward focus versus inward focus.
- The value proposition.

The most important point about recruitment is that it is “*personnel*” not “*personal*” – it is not about deciding whether a person is good or bad but whether they are suitable for a particular job. In other words, deciding which applicants best match the job requirements. It is also the case that, regardless of the processes that are put in place to recruit individuals, there is always an element of subjectivity that is involved in deciding which individuals best suit the requirements of the job in question. Matching jobs to individuals is therefore a somewhat mechanical process which inevitably needs to be performed by humans with emotions and prejudices – for this reason, it is a process subject to a high degree of error.

In some instances, it may well be the case that a rejected applicant could have become a better employee than one that was accepted – this is the practical reality of recruitment. And, when the process goes wrong, there is no way of reversing time back to the initial decision point to correct the error.

From the perspective of an employer, the recruitment process is simply a business process – good employers endeavour to make the process as objective and impartial as possible because that provides the employer with the best potential outcome in the recruitment. Unfortunately, graduates tend to take each rejection personally, and this is neither productive nor generally reflective of the actual decisions that were made by those that reject applicants.

One reason that graduates take rejection personally is that they sometimes have high expectations about a specific job. Given the error margins in the recruitment process, this is a naïve way of viewing professional job seeking, because there is a finite possibility that, even if a person is genuinely the best candidate for a position, he/she may still be rejected.

Job seeking is therefore very much a numbers game. If a graduate applies for a single position, and is genuinely the best candidate for that position, the probability of getting that position is still less than one.

If we assume (given all the potential error sources in the recruitment process) the chances of getting a position for which a person was perfectly suited were seven in ten then, in the long run, for every ten applications a person would only get seven offers. Pragmatically, the three offers that were missed could well be the ones that the applicant most wanted to have. The moral is that simply wanting a particular position, and being well suited to it, are no guarantee of being successful.

A good way of removing the emotion from applying for positions is to do some simple “back of the envelope” calculations about the chances of getting a job, and then determining how many jobs one needs to apply for, on average, to achieve success.

For example, if one assumes there are ten well-matched applicants for each position, then the chances of getting a position are one in ten at best (in the long run). If a person is not as well matched as other applicants, then the chances may be one in 20 or one in 50.

Sometimes, positions that are advertised are not genuine positions – for example, an organisation (particularly in the case of government departments) may have already made up its mind about who they intend to hire, but are required to go through a sham recruitment process in order to meet various guidelines. For every ten jobs that are advertised, perhaps, unbeknown to the applicants, the outcomes of three may have already been predetermined – so, even if a person applied for all ten jobs, statistically, he/she may get none.

There are two basic solutions to this problem. The first is to focus on applying for jobs for which one feels best suited. This increases significantly the chances of success. The second is simply volume. If the “guesstimate” is that there are ten good applicants for every job, then one may reasonably expect to apply for at least 20 to strike success.

Graduates need to psychologically prepare themselves for the job application process from the very outset by understanding how many applications will be required and how many rejections are likely to be received. Needless to say, when one looks at the process from a clinical perspective, one doesn’t need to be disappointed if rejected – rejection simply becomes another step in a business process. And, of course, statistically, there is always the possibility that the very first job application will be successful.

Unemployment rates rise and fall, sometimes temporarily in specific fields and, sometimes, during recessions or depressions, universally across the board. In periods of low employment demand, students/graduates can quickly become disheartened at the limited prospects and can turn to despair. This, however, again

tends to personalise a business process. If there is a one in ten chance of getting a position during good economic periods then, in periods of low economic activity, the chances may reduce to one in a hundred.

The basic objective of taking the businesslike approach to applying for employment is that it is not about “if” one gets a job but, rather, about how many applications one needs to submit in order to get a match between one’s own personal skills and the requirements of the employer. Recessions and depressions can change the number of applications that will be required, but they do not change the basic nature of the process.

Needless to say, in applying for positions, students have to become aware of the quality of their applications, and the quality of their performance at interviews. If the quality of applications is low, or performance at interviews is low, then the probability of securing a position can decrease dramatically. In other words, it can prejudice the “numbers game” against the applicant.

Employers all have different expectations of what is required in terms of an employment application but, in the case of recent graduates, the basic information tends to be similar – that is, a *curriculum vitae* (resumé) containing personal details; academic results; final year projects/theses; work experience; interests, etc. The purpose of a *curriculum vitae* (CV) is to introduce, in writing, an applicant to an employer. Once an employer is sufficiently satisfied with an applicant that they are prepared to interview them, then the CV has done the bulk of its work. The CV needs to present an honest portrait of a graduate but it also needs to present his/her attributes in terms of the sorts of things that are of interest to the employer.

There is little value in structuring a CV such that it only represents things that are of interest to the applicant.

It is therefore useful for final year students to compare their approaches so that they can benchmark their CVs against peers. This is a good way of ensuring that one's applications are up to the sort of standard presented by other candidates.

In addition to getting peer reviews of one's applications, final year undergraduates can also make use of the careers units which are in place at universities to support students in applying for jobs. These units have staff available to assist with the preparation of applications for jobs. In addition, universities, through their careers units, tend to organise careers fairs and on-campus recruitment sessions for final year students. These provide important employment opportunities, particularly because many organisations use on-campus recruitment of graduates to the exclusion of other options – this means that if final year students miss on-campus opportunities, they may not be able to apply elsewhere to work for particular organisations.

Regardless of the source of job opportunities, professional appointments require students to sit for formal interviews, and it is these that ultimately determine the success or failure of an application. As with the CV, the purpose of the interview is to determine what the applicant can do for the recruiting organisation, and how the applicant believes that he/she is a match for the position that is on offer. This, in turn, requires student applicants to be outwardly focused. Specifically, to understand:

- The nature of the organisation for which he/she is applying.
- The role for which he/she is applying.
- How the skills that he/she has acquired during university study can be directly applied to achieve outcomes for the prospective employer.
- How he/she will be able to fit into the company culture through his/her communication and personal skills.

It is of little value to an employing organisation to know that an individual has a record of high scholastic achievement if that individual is unable to enunciate how that achievement results in benefits to the employer – in other words, the applicant has to match his/her life's experience and qualifications with the specific needs of the employer.

In business terms, a final year university student has to make a "value proposition" to a potential employer through a CV and an interview process at which he/she demonstrates how they can add value by becoming part of the organisation. A good way of putting together a value proposition is to try to understand the employer's value proposition. As a rule-of-thumb, in simple monetary terms, an employer expends approximately twice the value of a salary on an employee when one considers the cost of office space and other overheads. The challenge for the student applicant is not to provide a dollar by dollar accounting of how this money will be returned through work but, rather, to put forward an argument of how the employer's investment will lead to value-added returns which are of direct relevance to the organisation's activities. This requires an

applicant to do some research into the employer organisation, and to understand:

- The nature of the organisation's activities, as well as its strengths, weaknesses and competitors.
- The organisational structure.
- The elements that are of particular importance to the organisation.

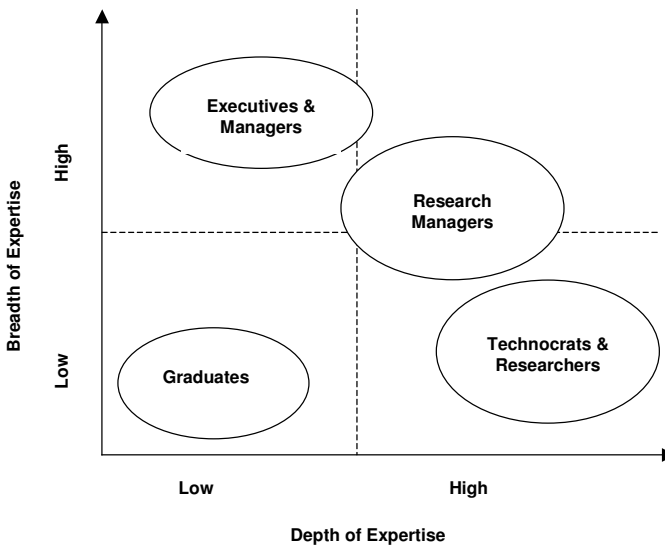
Often this research can be conducted on the Internet – sometimes (in the case of companies or government departments), the answers to the above questions can be derived by contacting the organisation and requesting an annual report.

Once the value proposition has been put, and the numbers game has been played and won, graduates have to decide how they will pursue their professional career in the workforce. A number of issues can arise within the first few years of professional life:

- Do I wish to stay in my core profession for my entire career or to branch out into other areas (such as management)?
- Do I want to have a long term association with my first professional employer, or do I want to gain broader experience by moving from employer to employer?
- Will I seek to undertake further studies in the future to change the course of my career, or to enhance it?

Staying in one's core profession for an entire career shows passion and dedication to one's work but it also has downsides. In

particular, if a professional continues to do the same work, for year after year, following graduation, then the employer may question why they are paying progressively larger amounts of money to that professional, when they can have a lower-cost graduate come in and replace the original person. The status quo is generally not a long term option. So, a graduate has to be prepared to embark on ongoing change. Figure 11.1 is a quadrant diagram that shows, in broad terms, professional career options.



*Figure 11.1 – Professional Career Options*

Figure 11.1 shows that the options available to a graduate are two-fold, and generally mutually exclusive. Graduates can either increase their depth of expertise and move towards a technocratic or research career, or increase their breadth of expertise and move towards a management career. Companies that earmark employees for management roles will tend to move them around from department to department, or subsidiary to subsidiary, in order to increase their breadth of expertise. Such companies may also support individuals with management potential to undertake postgraduate coursework programs in basic management (such as an MBA or DBA).

In some cases, companies will recognise that individuals would prefer to remain in technocratic positions and will support such professionals in their efforts to increase their specialisation. Sometimes, this might come about by sending those individuals to spend time in central research headquarters in other countries or, perhaps, by allowing individuals to undertake a postgraduate research degree in a university.

It is also generally the case that the commercial demand for highly specialised staff is considerably less than the demand for broader management skills and, so, there is less likelihood of a company supporting increasing specialisation than there is of a company supporting increasing breadth of knowledge.

Historically, loyalty to an individual employer was a trait that was lauded and recognised as a positive attribute. In the modern world, however, this perception has changed for several reasons. The first reason is that companies generally run much leaner than they did in the past and, despite the best of intentions, it is unlikely

that a company would maintain a surplus of employees in bad economic times. In other words, there is little practical prospect of professional employees getting loyalty from an employing organisation, so the imperative for loyalty to organisations has also changed. The second reason is that the lifespan of organisations has decreased as a result of increasing competition, thereby leading to staff having more frequent changes of employment. The third reason is that employers prefer employees to have a broader range of experiences (than they did in the past) in order to contribute new knowledge to their organisation.

A question that therefore arises for many graduates in the professional workforce is how long to stay with a single organisation. The simple answer to this question, from an ethical perspective, is that a professional should stay, at the very least, until they have made a contribution to that organisation which more than recovers that organisation's investment in them. Although there are situations where workplace conflicts arise and prevent this from happening, graduates need to understand that their reputations will be built or lost based upon how their employers view the contributions they have made. All professionals therefore need to look at how much value they have added to their organisation before deciding whether to "career hop" to another organisation.

Some graduates believe that they can move up the professional ladder far more quickly if they career hop from one organisation to another. This is because each time they enter a new organisation they are judged on their own terms (that is, their CV), whereas when they attempt to move up in their existing organisation, they are judged on their employer's terms, based upon

a known track record. Needless to say, career hopping gives graduates some short term advantages because it enables them to step upward without facing direct accountability for value-adding from the people who employed them.

In the long term, career hopping tends to be counterproductive for two reasons. The first is that professionals who career hop move upwards too quickly, without having gained the substance, life-skills and maturity required to undertake each subsequent step up the pyramid. This leads to the age-old problem of people being promoted above their level of competence, and crashing badly as a result. The second problem is that those professionals who do get a reputation for career hopping become a potential liability to future employers, who see the “hit and run” pattern of employment as being a high risk – that is, an investment which is not rewarded with a value-added return. In both cases, the damage to a professional’s reputation can be serious or even irreversible. In any given profession, the environment is limited; the colleagues numerous, and the corporate memory for rogue professionals is long. For this reason, poor reputations can spread very quickly through the informal communications networks and undermine an individual’s career prospects. The only long-term-sustainable pathway for those professionals who do wish to move from organisation to organisation is to ensure that they have added value along the way before making their move.

Many professionals also choose to grow within a single organisation, and one of the accepted ways for professionals to grow within an organisation is through further training or learning. This tends to allow for either specialisation or for branching out into

broader areas such as management. While many graduates are pleased to escape the learning environment, after a few years in the professional workforce, the concept of learning is viewed differently, and takes on much greater value, both emotionally and from a career perspective. For this reason, it is commonplace for modern professionals to return to their university roots or perhaps explore options in other universities as a natural part of their career.

Whichever career pathway is chosen, in the unstructured professional environment, most professionals will make mistakes; have setbacks, and sometimes lose their jobs as a consequence. The process of making mistakes, and learning and growing from them, is the way that learning takes place outside the university undergraduate environment. To assume that one will go through an entire professional career without making mistakes is either overestimating one's own capabilities or seriously underestimating the complexity of the environment. An important part of professional life is therefore making a basic assumption that mistakes will be made and that individuals will grow from them.

In some cases, it won't be simple mistakes that lead to career setbacks. Almost all professionals, at some stage in their careers, are faced with issues of propriety or principle, where it becomes impossible for them to maintain their jobs without sacrificing their integrity. It is in these situations where the true value of university learning will become apparent – professionals sometimes have to choose between expediency and principle – some will always choose expediency and some will always choose principle. For those that do choose a pathway based upon principle, there is normally a requirement for the professional to either resign or to be retrenched

when the situation at hand is serious. This can cause a career to go into hiatus, or even reverse, for a period of time. The important point here is that this is a natural part of professional development, and those that leave the university environment having acquired, at the very least, principles and integrity, will inevitably have to face such situations from time to time. The expedient alternative, which is to allow issues of principle or integrity to go unchallenged for the sake of maintaining short term career or employment opportunities, is a form of appeasement that inevitably leads to a lowering of professional standards, and the certainty that such behaviour will continue unabated.

Some professionals like to map out their entire careers from the beginning, while others are content to let nature take its course and simply focus on being the best at whatever they do and acting, at all times, with principle and integrity. In the final analysis, as the song goes,

*“...life is what happens to you when you’re busy making other plans”.*

The professional graduate would do well to consider this because, in the long term, the best career strategy is to always act with integrity and add value, rather than planning for career paths that may never eventuate. It is genuine value adding that builds careers of substance, and creates demand from employers.

University life is therefore an opportunity for students to grow as much as possible in preparation for what happens in professional life after university.

**Chapter 11 Summary:**

- (i) *The professional employment environment differs markedly from the undergraduate student environment in the sense that there are boundaries and limitations on the number of people who can move up the professional pyramid..*
- (ii) *The professional world does not provide a controlled and nurturing environment, so graduates need to be accept that they will make mistakes and experience setbacks, and that these are an important part of the learning process after univorsity.*
- (iii) *The professional world is less interested in what is of interest to individuals, and more concerned with what value the individuals add to the professional world.*
- (iv) *Getting into the professional world from university can be an ordeal for some, particularly in periods of low employment activity. Students in the final months of their undergraduate study should learn to view employment seeking as a business process rather than an emotive, personal issue.*
- (v) *Graduates need to make numerous decisions during the course of their career in terms of how long to stay in their organisation; when to move on, etc. The basic rule-of-thumb for developing a good reputation is to ensure that professionals always leave an organisation having added more value than they have extracted..*

