

From Student to Professional :

Tips for the Transition

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It can often be disconcerting for fresh graduates to transition from the heights of their academic achievements to the bottom rung of a corporate organisation. Apart from a reversal of status (in a hierarchical sense), many find the unarticulated rules of the game, expectations around norms of conduct and the drivers of recognition somewhat disorientating.

There are two stages of “cultural conversion” that the new entrant needs to go through:

1. The Interview

- a. **Get into the Sell Mode:** Don't expect the facts on the CV to be self-evident. While a CV is usually structured in the visually-appealing style of chronological bullet-points, you can choose your verbal narrative based on areas that you wish to elaborate on. Tell your story and sell your story - of course, with full integrity and without misselling it. Many interviewers will give you a degree of editorial control over the course of the interview. Take the opportunity to demonstrate that you have done some homework on the firm and its business. As in any marketing context, consciously attempt to connect your offering with the advertised description of the job.
- b. **The medium is the message:** Your communication style, clarity of enunciation, body language - all make a disproportionate impact on the interviewer. Technical skills are usually tested at the pre-interview stage. How you present information and how you optimise the time of the interviewer (who will likely conduct dozens of graduate interviews on the day) will be a key determinant of success.
- c. **Attitude:** Your choice of words must display a sense of personal accountability. Someone who describes every negative experience as somebody else's fault does not inspire confidence. In addition, there must be at least one item on your CV (even if unrelated to the job) that you can display genuine *passion* for. Finally, you must be prepared to talk about every item that appears on the CV. A response such as “I don't recall much about that dissertation from three years ago” is a guaranteed turn-off.

2. Early Days on the Job

- a. **The Non-linear Syllabus:** Unlike academia where the curriculum is laid out in advance with a clear progression of topics from the basic to advanced, professional life doesn't present its challenges in a neat order of difficulty. The learning is not sequential so it's important to keep at it, ask questions and improvise where possible. Many of the

tasks will feel like floundering at the deep end without sufficient support. It is a temporary phase but I have seen several academically-gifted graduates struggle with it. Perseverance is key.

- b. **The Incomplete Command:** In several professional settings, the full requirement of a particular project may only become clear over time through a process of iteration. To the fresh graduate, both clients and bosses may appear unreasonable when they expect action based on incompletely-specified tasks. Again, I have seen high-scoring students paralysed into inaction because “the problem has more variables than equations”. Dealing with these situations is an art-form but inaction is not an option.

- c. **Influence without Authority:** Some academic settings - though not all - may allow the student to return a reasonable grade without the need for extensive collaboration with others. Furthermore, a wide range of decisions related to conflict resolution are taken by authority figures in the school administration. By contrast, your effectiveness on the job will hinge crucially on your ability to collaborate with and influence those over whom you will have no formal authority. Interpersonal skills of persuasion and negotiation are tested early on and the new joiner should not underestimate the scale of this challenge.

Finally, the overarching characteristic that is most valued - both at the interview stage and on the job - is that of **Reliability**. At every stage of your career, you will be part of a wider value-chain. It is important to establish yourself as a strong link in that chain, to cultivate a reputation that says yours are a safe pair of hands.

Good Luck!

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