



# Tips for Finding Your First Job

BY LIZZ CARROLL



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**L**et's face it: **The current job market is tough.** When anyone—especially recent graduates, current students or even young professionals—approaches the process of finding that first job, there is inevitably some risk involved. But with a smart mix of confidence and strategy, you can be successful. And your own diversity—or your commitment to diversity—is a driving factor in that success.

The younger generation, known as Generation Y or millennials, is reshaping the workforce with a new approach to the workplace and a different vision of their roles at companies. According to the Center for Work-Life Policy, millennials aren't just looking for jobs that pay well. They are seeking career opportunities that provide flexibility and foster personal growth, as well as ones that make them feel like a part of a team and give them chances to give back to society.

Many millennials have been exposed to more multicultural experiences than their parents have. Pew Research Center's latest report, "Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change," says the current millennial population is 61 percent white, 19 percent Latino, 14 percent Black and 5 percent Asian. Two examples that Pew included that reflect the mindset of millennials are: 50 percent favor or strongly favor gay marriage (compared with 32 percent of baby boomers) and 93 percent of millennials say it is OK for Blacks and whites to date versus 83 percent of boomers. Diversity is a priority for millennials across the board, not just for those from traditionally underrepresented groups.

Employers are increasingly understanding that innovative solutions can come from millennials. Several companies that have placed a focus on recruiting and nurturing young talent are on The DiversityInc Top 50 Companies for Diversity®. How do you get jobs there?

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## PART I • GETTING STARTED

### **Aside from finding a company that fits your needs as a young professional, how else can you find a job that helps to lay a strong foundation for your budding career?**

Aaron Fung, director of strategic initiatives for Ascend—a professional organization for Asians—recommends asking plenty of questions and trying things out before you set your sights on that first job or even career path. He says, "You really can't say you know what you want to do until you have tried it. You can't say, 'I want to be an investment banker' unless you've studied finance or you've done an internship at a bank. What are the skills necessary? And what are the core components of this job?"

He adds, "Any time you get into the field, you have to ask questions to people who have done it, who have done it and failed, and who have done it and succeeded. I think each of those perspectives is incredibly compelling and inevitably quite unique."

Anthony Ramos, communications director for the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), advises your first step to be setting goals. "I would start by asking yourself what your long-term goals are. Where do you want to be in five years? At this point you really just have your education to rely on. Having a plan for longer-term goals will help you determine what that first job looks like and how you can leverage education more effectively in the future," he explains.

#### **Finding Companies That Value Diversity**

**If you want to work for a company that has an inclusive culture, it's important to put that in your job-search checklist.** But what are some good ways to go about finding companies that align with your

beliefs and provide a safe space?

You can start by scanning job posts from the DiversityInc Top 50. Also, look at the company's site for a commitment to diversity: Does the CEO make a diversity statement? Is there a mandatory diversity-training program for all employees? Does the company have employee-resource groups (ERGs)? How are the ERGs influencing innovation at the company? Is there a section dedicated to diversity easily found from the homepage?

Andrea Saenz, executive director of the Hispanic Alliance for Career Enhancement (HACE), says researching the company and its leaders is key. "Look at people in leadership roles at that company," says Saenz. "If it's a diverse group of people, that tends to be an environment that is a little more inclusive. Are the people in

leadership roles all still white men? That can be a clue to the kind of diversity of thought, diversity of background that is really valued at that company.”

She also emphasizes the importance of asking to talk to current employees. “If you can find people from diverse backgrounds that work there, ask them about their experience,” she says. “Try to get them to be open with you about how they

feel; do they feel that they are kind of leaving their cultural heritage at the door when they come in to work every morning? Or do they feel comfortable really being their full selves at work?”

Ramos urges job seekers to tap into established sources as well. For LGBT and allied job seekers, he recommends the Human Rights Campaign’s Corporate Equality Index, which evaluates companies

on their inclusiveness of LGBT people, as well as DiversityInc’s lists and professional networks.

Ramos also recommends mentioning in your initial letter to the company how diversity drove your search.

“If you say in your cover letter that you found it on a site like DiversityInc.com, then they know that diversity is a priority to you,” says Ramos.

## PART II • GET YOUR FOOT IN THE DOOR

**Now that you’ve decided where you want to be, the next question is how to get there. Your alma mater and your cultural background, as well as skills such as sharp communication and networking, are all assets you can draw upon to land the job.**

### ➔ Make the College Connection

**Your alma mater can be important before and after you graduate.** Whether you are a current student or an alum, Fung advises not to downplay the importance of your college connection in your job search, especially when it helps you find common ground with potential employers or valuable contacts.

“Look at a connection as an opportunity to build relationships,” says Fung. “I’ve always been a believer that business is predicated on comfort, which comes from trust. And trust you can only earn through similarity, things in common and the ability to relate to someone else, and the belief that someone is genuine. I think that’s an important feature to articulate because a mutual connection to a school is incredibly valuable, especially when the school is smaller. Any time you try to meet anybody or ask something of them, they have to have a reason to help you.”

Stacy McMurray, territory vice president, West, of INROADS, an

internship organization for students from traditionally underrepresented groups, says the services your college offered, such as those provided through the career-development or career-services office, don’t end when you leave campus on graduation day. In many cases, alumni are entitled to useful resources for job searching as well. McMurray urges grads to get on alumni mailing lists and any networking groups that your alma mater may offer.

### ➔ Get Involved With Professional Organizations

**Being part of professional organizations**—such as PRIMER (Puerto Ricans in Management and Executive Roles) or NABA (National Association of Black Accountants)—not only gives you opportunities to network with individuals you might otherwise not be exposed to, it also gives you chances to expand your leadership and organizational skills. These are valuable experiences to share with a potential employer during the

application and interview processes. It shows that you have initiative and that your culture is a driving force in your career.

“If you are part of an organization like NSBE [National Society of Black Engineers], you can talk about what skills you’ve learned from being part of that organization and how it’s helped you develop at school and toward this career that you’re pursuing,” says McMurray.

So don’t just be a member of your professional organization; become an active member who is open to learning opportunities. “Volunteer at the organization’s events so that you’re not only attending the event but you’re also forced to interact with people,” says Saenz.

### ➔ Informational Interviews Done Right

**If you’re not landing interviews, don’t get discouraged.** Instead, set up informational interviews. These meetings can be just as valuable, not only for their networking purposes but also for practice putting on that

suit and conducting a professional conversation in which you are presenting your best self.

“The key is once you get the information and you’ve taken the time, you want to follow up with them; you want to stay in touch,” says McMurray. “Because that one person knows lots of other people, that helps with networking and perhaps getting you access to other people they know in their network.”

But, McMurray emphasizes, in order to cultivate that new contact, don’t forget to reach out, whether in a thank-you note or a friendly e-mail. “The follow-up is important so they know that you’ve really done something with the information, that you’ve listened. It lets them know that you’ve taken it seriously.”

### ➔ Let Your Culture Work for You

**Remember that who you are**—from racial/ethnic background to disability to orientation to religion—adds value to any workplace. Your contribution, as a different voice, background or viewpoint, strengthens a company’s ability to present a well-rounded experience to its employees as well as its clients.

This asset that you offer a company should also be an important tool for your job search. However, culture is often the reason some people hesitate to use their personal networks, be they social or family connections, to find a job, says Saenz. “I find that people, especially in diverse communities, hesitate to look to their social network for job leads, for advice. Those are really valuable assets and people need to feel like it’s OK to call on friends and friends of friends and family and friends of family to make good career decisions and good career connections,” she says.

As a Latina, Saenz sees this happening in her own community. “I



find it true for people to hesitate to ask a favor of people they don’t really know,” she says. “For Latinos, that’s where the cultural impediment comes in. You don’t really ask strangers for help.”

### ➔ Definite Don’ts

**There are a few things you can do to avoid job-search pitfalls as well.**

Being knowledgeable about the no-no’s of the hunt can help you adhere to a focused path. For example, while you may be eager to get lots of résumés out at once, be careful of how wide a net you cast. Ramos warns against “generic, volume-based applications.”

“Instead of sending a hundred résumés that are generic, I would send five that are specific, well thought out and researched and that apply your skill set to the particular job. That will increase your chances significantly,” he says.

And, although the poor state of the economy, bills and looming student loans may be forefront in your mind, try your best to not let money be your only motivator.

“Often, I find that people just getting out of school are eager to find the highest-paying opportunity

almost immediately. That’s not always the best opportunity for their career. It’s important for people to think beyond just salary and think about where they want to be in five years. Where do you want to be and which job is going to get you there and is going to build your résumés in the right way?” says Saenz.

She adds, “I see people make the mistake of going to the highest bidder. And it may not be a company that has a very strong reputation or it may not be a job or role that gives them the kind of exposure to leadership opportunities that will allow them to move up the ladder down the road.”

In the end, Saenz stresses the importance of happiness and its power to lead you to success.

“People need to think about what really motivates them, beyond the salary and the benefits, although those are important,” she explains. “But think about what it is that makes you excited to get out of bed in the morning and go do it. Either in the work environment that you’re going to need to choose, or in the actual work itself you produce, what is it that’s going to keep you motivated?” 🗣️