

## **How to ASK for a job and how to land one!**

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### (Introduction) **Hitting the Ground Running**

You're a graduate – congratulations! Graduating from high school, college, or university makes you much more likely to find employment than someone without their diploma. And you couldn't be living in a better province. The Nova Scotia labour market continues to grow each year, aging workers are retiring, and our unemployment rate is declining, while in other parts of Canada unemployment is rising.

The information you're about to read will give you a head start with your job search. It's geared toward someone who knows what kind of job they are looking for and has the appropriate training. If you feel like you need more help with assessing what your values, skills, and interests are; finding out more about particular career paths; and understanding labour market information, then, check out **nscareeroptions.ca**. Detailed information on education, training, and career planning are there, plus comprehensive job profiles.

This booklet will teach you how to:

- target your resume and cover letter to the job you want
- create the best impression in an interview
- utilize everyone you know in support of your job search
- discover what employers are looking for
- avoid some of the most common mistakes job seekers make.

Looking for work isn't rocket science – it's all about effort and intention. There is a tried and true method that successful job seekers use to achieve their goals. You can too!

You've done your training, you've got a plan, now let's find you a job you love!

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One of the most important things to remember is that you're at the start of a great journey. There are a few things that you'll want to keep at the forefront of your mind.

**Stay positive. Focus on your accomplishments. And ask lots of questions!**

Never forget that you begin your adventure into the world of work as a novice. You won't be an "expert" in your field until you've put in about 10,000 hours of practice. You're just starting out, so stay curious and open to learning.

That's why the acronym **ASK** is such a good one. It's a reminder to be full of wonder and it's also a roadmap to set you off on the right foot.

**A**cknowledge and accentuate your strengths

**S**ell yourself

**K**now where the jobs are

Read on to discover the action involved in each element of this simple acronym. ASK and you shall receive!

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## **Acknowledge and accentuate your strengths**

There are a few methods to get your name out there in the job market. Applications, resumes, cover letters, and business cards all become physical representations of who you are to employers. Let's focus on the two most common ways of "putting yourself out there" – the resume and the cover letter.

### **Resumes**

The resume is known as "the key to the interview." A ho-hum resume is fast on its way to the recycle bin. A stand-out resume will guarantee you an interview. Then you can really wow them with your personality.

#### **Best Kept Secret #1:**

Employers may only look at a resume for up to 30 seconds. Make sure your half a minute counts!

The number one thing that employers want to see is proof that you will be able to do the job. So, it's absolutely crucial to target your resume to a specific opportunity or job.

Make sure your resume includes the following key headings:

- A job objective
- Your education and certification
- Your employment (or volunteer) history
- Highlights of your skills, attitudes, and relevant experience

Here's a list of must-do's for resumes:

1. **Address what the employer is looking for** straight up. If the job posting says that they want someone with a high school diploma, who is reliable and has hands-on experience in the field, make sure you draw attention to those qualifications. Consider using a "Highlights of Qualifications" section that appears at the top of a resume. This will make sure that the employer sees you have the relevant training, skills, qualities, and experiences they are looking for.
2. Next, **demonstrate any and all practical experiences** that you've had in the field. This could be through previous jobs, work placements, or volunteering. The employer wants to see the action that backs up the words. Focus on accomplishments and use active verbs (e.g., achieved, sold, increased, improved).
3. Now, **show them your human side**. These are called "soft" skills or "employability" skills and involve who you are as a person. What are your personality traits? What are your personal work habits? Employers are interested in your ability to communicate, work well with others, act responsibly, and deal with problems. And they are much more likely to give you an interview if you come across as someone who is well rounded. So don't forget to mention that you're a great team player, have a sense of humour, and take pride in your work.
4. **Use keywords so you can pass an electronic review**. Many employers scan and select resumes electronically now, so use words that appeared in the job posting and on the company website or pamphlets. Also use words that are specific to the occupation or industry.

### **Remember!**

- Your resume should be a maximum of two pages.
- Use an easy-to-read and easy-to-scan font with no excessive formatting.
- Make sure your resume is error free. Spelling mistakes and typos will take you out of the running, even if you're the most qualified person for the job.
- Always get someone you trust (and preferably someone in the field) to check your resume.

There are many comprehensive resources, both print and online, to help you with resumes. They will contain powerful examples of how you can create a successful application package. In addition, your local career resource centre can help when you're just beginning your job search and need help writing a resume.

### **Cover Letters**

A good cover letter ensures that the employer will at least look at your resume. A bad cover letter gets your whole application tossed out before anyone has even seen what you've accomplished!

Here's a list of must-do's for cover letters:

1. **Always write one!** A resume that arrives unaccompanied is usually dismissed.
2. Make sure the letter is **customized for the particular employer** and the situation you find yourself in. Are you applying for a posted position? Contacting someone by way of a referral? Or sending your resume for the employer to have in the event of a future job opening? Write each letter to the attention of the person in charge of hiring and make sure you spell their name properly!
3. **Highlight what qualifies you.** This is a short, well-written summary of what you have to offer this *particular* employer in a *specific* capacity. The more distinct you can make it, the better. Make sure it stands out above the rest. You want the employer to know that you've taken the time to impress them.
4. Make sure the employer knows you cared enough about this opportunity to do a little research. **Always mention something about the company or organization** you are applying to. A recent award they won? A new product? Their reputation in the community? But whatever you do, don't overdo it and gush. Keep it subtle and professional. And of utmost importance, make it clear how your skills and experience mesh with what the employer is looking for!

#### **Best Kept Secret #2:**

Unlike the resume, it's likely the employer will read every single word of your cover letter. So make these words count!

#### **Remember!**

- A cover letter should be one page only.
- Ensure it is easy to read and error free.
- Get help if writing is not your strength.
- Don't use tired language - make your cover letter stand out above the competition.

Go the library or surf the internet for examples of terrific cover letters. And don't forget to visit your local career resource centre for help with crafting a unique and winning cover letter.

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#### **Sell Yourself**

Research shows that employers decide whether or not they want to hire you in the first two minutes of an interview. Does that scare you? If so, you're normal! But there's a

secret to first impressions and once you've mastered it, you're well on your way to the job of your dreams.

## **From the feet up**

Jobs have been lost based on foot wear. This is a sad but true fact. If you look awesome but you didn't take the time to polish your shoes or worse yet, didn't take the time to invest in a pair that matched, then you may be looking for work awhile longer.

Employers are looking for clues to tell them what kind of a person you are. Your choice of everything from shoes to jewellery to make-up says a lot about you. Well fitting (but not too tight!) clothing, simple designs, and neutral colours are the best bet.

Find out what professionals in your field wear every day and spring for two interchangeable outfits, in case of a second interview. A suit or blazer will help you appear more professional. Avoid wearing perfume or cologne if you're not sure if the environment is "scent-free." One briefcase, one bag, or a simple folder or binder should be all that accompanies you. Be careful with your choice of dangling earrings or clinking bracelets. The focus should be on what you are saying, not what you are wearing or carrying. If you look professional and appear comfortable in your clothes, the interviewers will be able to focus on you.

Arrive early. When you walk into the interview room, walk confidently, greet your interviewers with a solid handshake, and sit tall in your chair. Look them in the eye. These easy steps go a long way. And don't forget to smile!

## **From your mouth to their ears**

There are a variety of different interview formats, but most likely what you will encounter is a "behavioural" interview. This means that the employer will ask you questions about your previous behaviour in order to predict your future behaviour. An example: "Can you tell us about a time where you implemented a good idea (or solved a conflict or achieved something you are proud of)?" If you aren't prepared for these types of questions, it's not going to be pretty, now is it?

Your preparation should include research about the company and a thorough re-reading of the job description. Focus on what they are looking for in an employee (good communication skills, leadership qualities, flexibility, etc.). This will enable you to craft some answers to the questions they may ask. Focus on situations in the past where you demonstrated the qualities and skills they are seeking. If possible, link these attributes to what you have learned about the company. Practice your answers outloud. And then practice them again. Can you get someone to help you do a "mock" (pretend) interview?

Even better - get someone to videotape you, so you can really get a sense of how you are coming across. You may be surprised by how often you look away or by how fidgety you are. You may never have known how much you ramble! Seeing yourself perform will help you hone your interview skills.

### **Best Kept Secret #3**

Did you know that after you leave an interview, the employer will sometimes ask the receptionist for their opinion of you? How did you act? Were you friendly and respectful? This is one way that an employer can get a sense of who you are outside the interview setting and how well you may fit into their company culture.

The more prepared you are, the more relaxed you'll be in the actual interview. This is a huge advantage. Employers are put at ease by individuals who are comfortable in their own skin. If you can combine this with a natural enthusiasm for the job and the field, you've got it made.

One of the most important facets of a behavioural interview is the ability to summarize both the action that you took in the past and the result of your action. Be clear and concise, and make yourself sound great. Don't be afraid of "bragging." Obviously, you want to choose key moments that you are really proud of and that demonstrate your star qualities to the employer.

### **Remember!**

- Maintain good eye contact.
- Sit up straight and no fidgeting!
- Take notes to show you're interested and have good questions prepared.
- Collect business cards from every member of your interview panel and send each of them a thank you email within 24 hours.

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## **Know Where the Jobs are**

Now, where will you send your flawless resumes and perfectly crafted cover letters? And who will benefit from your practiced and intelligent interview responses? This is where the fun begins!

There are a number of different paths you can walk down on the road to employment. You can respond to positions that are posted. You can contact someone you're interested in working for. Or you can be referred to a particular employer through a friend of a friend. The options are endless!

Employers may post vacant positions in newspaper, magazine, or periodical ads or right in their shop window. Other employers use placement agencies or dip into filing cabinets filled with the resumes of previous applicants when a position comes up. And still others turn to job search websites like CareerBeacon.com and JobsPress.com in Nova Scotia or national sites such as careerbuilder.ca and jobbank.ca.

**Best Kept Secret #4:**

Most jobs are not formally advertised – they are filled by word-of-mouth. In fact, positions advertised online only account for up to 20% of the jobs that are out there. If this is your only method of job searching, you're missing out on **most** of the employment opportunities!

**Building a Network**

One of the biggest hurdles facing young job seekers is that they mistakenly believe that almost all jobs are advertised online. Although it seems like all the "connecting" is going on virtually, don't be fooled! This simply isn't the case when it comes to finding work - especially in Nova Scotia.

Employers in our province largely hire people that they know. Ask anyone. It's likely that they got the job because they had some personal connection, no matter how removed. So, the more people you know, the better your chances. Don't know that many people? Don't despair! You're about to learn that you know more than you think. And, there are lots of ways to do get to know even more people. But we'll get to that in a minute.

"Networking" can be a frightening term for someone just starting to look for work. It sounds like you're expected to tell a total stranger how great you are. It makes some people feel like a telemarketer. And who wants to get hung up on? In reality, it's a lot more fun and a lot less scary.

Networking is really just a fancy way of saying "talking to people." And the beauty of it is that you're not expected to go talk to strangers. The best way to start is with people you know and the people who know them. It's called "building a network" for yourself. This web of connections will probably be the thing that lands you that first job in your field and helps ease any early bumps along the way.

See you there? In the centre of the spiral? That's where to start. Take a few minutes to construct your own network right now. Begin with names of your immediate family and your closest friends and spread out from there, making sure to include neighbours, classmates, coaches, club members, and casual acquaintances. And don't forget to ask your parents for their help! They may have their own extensive network that they can tap on your behalf.

The network should spread out across the page, meandering down the various paths that your life takes on a daily or weekly or monthly basis. When it comes to networking, there are no unimportant people. You never know who is going to give you the lead that enables your career to take off.

If you just put down your pen because you think you're done, think again. What about the guy who taught you drums? Or the woman with the bulging briefcase who sits next to you on the bus? Or that couple you heard about who started their own home-based business? Once you start, you'll be surprised at the sheer number of people on your list.

And you'll be utterly amazed at what happens when you start talking to them about looking for work.

If you're worried about being pushy or irritating to these people – some of whom you might not know all that well – you're not alone. Just remember, people love being asked their opinion and find it quite flattering when someone wants their help. It's all about how you approach them and what you say.

Marc was looking for work as a mechanic. He'd tried dropping off his resume to auto shops in town but no one was calling. Then one day he got a phone call from one of his Dad's friends named Brian who heard he was looking for work. Brian had taken his car in to get his brakes checked – same place he'd gone for the last 20 years – and he heard the manager talking about needing a new mechanic. Brian mentioned that he knew a young but talented mechanic, fresh out of school. The manager told him to have Marc stop by so they could have a chat. Marc took his resume, made a great impression with how quickly he had shown up, and had the job by the end of the next day!

## **The Pitch**

Okay, so how do you get in touch with these people and what do you tell them? Do you text them "looking for wk – can u help?" Uh, no.

If you're feeling shy, email can be a good foot in the door, followed up by a phone call. It's best if you can arrange for a face-to-face meeting. This strategy is all about building relationships with people and that requires spending time getting to know each other. One successful career planner puts her secret this way: "I create relationships. The relationships create jobs." Keeping that in mind, one of the most crucial things is that you be yourself!

The best use of time, for both parties, is to have a really specific request in mind. Are you asking them if they know of anyone who is hiring in the field you want to work in? Or do you want a set of professional eyes on your resume? Or do they work in your field and you're wondering if you can pick their brain and get a sense of what it's really like out there?

Fresh out of a design program at college, Cate wanted to open her own web design business. Problem was she had no idea how to do it. She sent out an email to her network of friends, acquaintances, and connections to find out if anyone knew of a self employed web designer. Within a day, she had a name and a number. Cate set up a meeting and gained valuable information about next steps. She also gained a mentor, who was willing to share their knowledge with her on an ongoing basis. Making this connection was invaluable and set her on the path to successful self employment.

Every time you meet someone, make sure to get their card and file it in a safe place. In this way, you'll have their phone numbers and an email address to follow up. You'll also have their correct title if you're applying for work. It might be worth your time and

money to print up a few of your own cards – these are sometimes called "job cards" when people are seeking work. It's something you can carry with you at all times and hand out to people you meet spontaneously.

## **Keep Growing It!**

Now that you're comfortable talking to people you know (or sort-of-know), why not challenge yourself to meet some new people. Are you ready for "networking for super-stars"? If so, there are a few methods. We all know about internet-based social networking (Facebook, Twitter, and Yammer to name a few), but it shouldn't be your only mode. Face-to-face networking events are also critical and these don't have to be stodgy, awkward affairs. There are also some lively young professionals organizations where you can make connections but also have fun.

### **Best Kept Secret # 5**

Some employers may check out the Facebook sites of potential employees. So make sure you clean up your contacts and your content – clean language and decent photos of you and your friends is the smart way to job search today.

The best case scenario after all this networking is that you'll gain valuable employment leads, find some supportive mentors, and make new friends. Keep in mind that favours you do for others will be quickly repaid. Being a friend is the fastest way to gain new friends, fans, and allies. Don't burn any bridges. Remember how fast word of mouth travels in Nova Scotia. This can be used to your great advantage or disadvantage.

### **Remember!**

- Email everyone in your address book and tell them you're looking for work.
- Ask for help and advice from professionals in your field.
- Challenge yourself to meet new people.
- Stay in close touch with the network you create – these people will be an invaluable resource during your career.

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## **(Conclusion) Venturing Out**

It's easy to feel overwhelmed when you're taking these first few steps into the world of work. But hopefully you now realize how easy it is to succeed. Here's a brief recap at how you can place yourself at the top of the job seeking pile:

- Make sure your resume and cover letter don't have spelling mistakes or typos.
- Tailor your resumes and letters to the specific job and employer.
- Dress professionally for the interview – look the part and look people in the eye.
- Send a thank you email as a follow-up.
- Build your network and use it!

**Best Kept Secret #6**

Most employers are interested in applicants who have a balance between the required technical expertise and "employability" skills. Remember what those are? That's the human side of you – the person who takes initiative, shows leadership skills, knows how to laugh, and is always learning. It's hard to teach enthusiasm and positive work attitudes and employers know that. So, show them what you've got!

For details on labour market and career development information, visit [www.nscareeroptions.ca](http://www.nscareeroptions.ca). For specific information on in-demand careers, go to [www.brightcareerutures.com](http://www.brightcareerutures.com).

Good luck with your job search!