

A Compendium of Career and Job Search Advice

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Career Planning

The Career Planning Process	2
Do What You Love	3
Information Interview	5
Labour Market Trends	6
Extracurricular Activities	8
When You're <i>Not</i> Perfect in Every Way	9

Job Searching

Where the Jobs Are in 2004	11
Hidden Job Market	12
6 Degrees of Kevin Bacon	13
5 Job Search Lessons from a Career Fair	15
Selective Advertising	17
Resume/CV Bank	18
Highlights Section	20
Hit the Resume/CV Bullseye	21
Resume/CV Makeover	23
Judging a Candidate By Their Cover (Letter)	25
Behavioural Descriptive Interview Questions	27
Breaking the Case Wide Open: Investigating Companies	28
Available Upon Request	29
Interview Fashion	31
The Follow-Up	33

Discovering the Future: The Career Planning Process

Ever envy people who always knew exactly what they wanted to be when they grew up? How did they know from the age of four that they would be a nurse, or electrician, or hockey player? It's true that many people develop career plans very early in life, some stick to these goals, and yes, a lucky few even make it to the NHL. For the rest of us, however, a little more guidance is required. Here are the 5 steps in the career planning process that will help you find a career.

1. Self Assessment The first step in career planning is to discover yourself! What are your values, interests, skills, and ambitions? What things in life motivate you to get out there and give it your all? Although many people take tests to find out "what they're good at" it is more important to have a good, long, honest look at yourself. What are your hobbies? What are you passionate about? What makes you curious? What courses did you like most in school? Self assessment never finishes. Always be looking inward and be honest about what you see. If what is important to you changes, recognize this, and make the necessary adjustments to your goals.

2. Brainstorm Careers Once you've got a good sense of who you are, brainstorm a list of careers to investigate further. If you're having trouble ask yourself the following question: If someone paid you a decent wage to work any job in the world, which job would you choose? Branch off from this dream job to related careers. For example, if your dream is to be an astronaut, you might also enjoy being a pilot, an avionics engineer, or an astronomer.

3. Research Careers After brainstorming a list of careers, find out all you can about them. What are the educational requirements? Working conditions? Salary? Job prospects? What do you actually *do* in this job? Speak to people in the profession and visit their workplace to get a sense of what that job is like.

4. Decision Time Eventually it comes time to make some career decisions. This can be the most difficult part of the process. If you are having trouble deciding between two or more paths, don't despair! Most people will change careers at least 7 times during their working lives. Think instead about the path you would like to take first. Which one makes the most sense for your current situation?

5. Action Plan Now that you've chosen your path, determine the steps that you need to take to get to your destination. Are there any barriers between you and your goal (time, money, family commitments)? If so, how will you overcome them? Make sure that your plan is specific, realistic, and achievable. Then, do it!

Do What You Love!

“Do What You Love!” That has been the theme for the big career events that have taken place in E-town during the last few weeks. It’s an excellent sentiment and the best piece of advice that anyone could tell you about career planning, but unfortunately, it’s advice that many people ignore.

Think about it. How many people do you know that have toiled away in jobs they either despise or merely tolerate? Working for the weekend? Counting the days to vacation, or even worse, retirement? Stretching their coffee breaks and lunch hours to the seams and plodding back to their desk, tools, or equipment with a countenance of defeated gloom? The average Canadian knows many of these people and has a good chance of being one of them.

So, how do you avoid being one of these folks? Well, here are some suggestions that will help you do what you love and love what you do.

Don’t listen to your parents (exclusively)! Parents are great, they love and support you, but sometimes they don’t offer the best career advice. Sure they’d like to see you as a doctor or lawyer, but is that something you really want to do? They might love to see you be the first person in the family to get a university degree, but is that truly one of your goals? Career decisions are best made by the person most affected by them – you! If your parents are burying your desk in med school applications, gently remind them that you have the last say in your career planning and promise them that you’ll pick something that will make *you* happy. In the long run, if you’re happy, they’ll be happy.

You only live once! Unless your religious beliefs have you passing through different incarnations as quickly as Mike Keenan goes through coaching positions, you ought to consider this. Think about it! No, I mean *really* think about it!! We’ve got just one chance to fulfill our dreams, achieve our goals, and reach for the stars. You’ll be at work for a full third of your working life. Pick a career that excites you and gives you the motivation to get up in the morning and seize the day. If your dream job is slightly out of reach, do the next best thing. Why waste the time you have being miserable?

Be honest! Unfortunately, not everyone can make the NHL (in fact, *too* many people are making it into the NHL as it is – do we really need a team in Nashville?). Oops, got a little side tracked. But seriously, there are things we can do and things we can’t. When making career decisions, think broadly about whether or not the careers you’re investigating fit into your skills, abilities, values, responsibilities, and lifestyle choices. If there is a conflict, look elsewhere. Similarly, get the straight goods on possible careers. Don’t invest in a career because it looked good on television. Do some real research and honestly assess if the career is for you.

Inertia is your Enemy! It is never too late to make a change, even a big change. If you hate your job, write down an action plan and start taking the steps towards a new career. Talk to people who have gone through a career change. Talk to a career advisor. Entering a new career is always a risk, but it can also pay enormous dividends.

Career planning is all about making choices, compromises, and concessions. Despite this, the one thing not to concede is your happiness on the job. Everything else comes second to that. Keep this in the forefront of all your career planning and you'll make the choices that are best for you.

From the Horse's Mouth: The Information Interview

When it comes to researching a career, you need to get the straight goods. No overblown exaggerations. No hyped-up rhetoric. No sugared sentiment. No, when it comes to making a career decision, you want just the facts, ma'am.

So how do you get them? The facts, that is. Well, one excellent way of getting the cold, hard truth about a particular career is to speak with someone in the know. Someone who has experience in the career you're investigating. Someone who's doing the job that *you* want to do. Someone who will give you an information interview!

An information interview may take any number of forms. It may be talking to your contact on the telephone, a conversation over coffee, an exchange of emails, or an actual in-person interview. No matter the format, the important thing is that you get your nagging questions answered, and answered honestly.

What do you find out in an information interview? Whatever you want to find out. The questions you have about your potential career may be quite unique to your situation. Nevertheless, there are a few topics you might want to consider. What's a typical day like? What do you like most about your career? What would you change if you could? What are the job prospects right now? Are they expected to change? Where's the best place to get trained?

How do you find someone to interview? Aren't people too busy for that sort of thing? It's true that potential interviewees are often busy, but it is also true that people, even busy people, love to talk about themselves. First, see if any of your contacts know people working in that field.. This can include friends, family, teachers, co-workers, even your friendly neighbourhood career advisor! You'd be surprised how far your web of contacts stretches – this is also good practice for when it comes time to look for a job. When you speak to the potential career contact ask for 15 minutes of their time, when they're able, to answer a few questions about their career. You'll likely end up getting at least a half hour of valuable information. Remember, people love to talk about themselves.

A few points to remember: Come prepared with questions. If you meet them in person, dress and act professionally. Ask the most crucial questions first. Thank them in person *and* send them a thank you note. Finally, get a second opinion! Not everyone has the same information or shares the same views even when talking about the same career.

Information interviewing can give you the added confidence that you are making a good career decision, or that the career is not at all what you expected.

To Trust or Not To Trust: Labour Market Trends

A funny thing happened on the way to the millennium...

Do you remember 1999? I do. It was a heady year – the economy was booming (seven years of stock market growth, tons of jobs), no particularly horrible wars were occurring (India and Pakistan were thinking about tossing nukes at one another, but they didn't), and we were partying like it was, well, 1999 (thanks, Prince).

It was also a good time to be in the information technology sector. IT graduates were having a breeze finding jobs, often leaving to find work before program completion (something they would later regret). You couldn't walk through a career centre without hearing about someone with IT papers heading down to the States for \$5000/month.

This boom occurred for a number of reasons. The global economy was cooking like it was being fuelled by a nuclear reactor and investors were throwing billions of dollars at IT stocks and dot.com companies, banking on a high-tech future. Much of this confidence was due to apparent stability in the global economy. The Cold War had been over for a decade and funds that used to be designated for military spending were diverted to other parts of the economy. Similarly, investors were greedily anticipating the integration of formerly Communist countries into the global economy. Nascent computer and communications technology were finally becoming mainstream and useful, not just novel. Companies were embracing the Internet, everyone and their dog had to have a cell phone and an email account, and computers were actually becoming more than a glorified typewriter. Computer programmers, engineers, network specialists were also snapped up to help prepare for the so-called Millennium Bug that would presumably strike at 12:00 a.m. on January 1, 2000, wreaking havoc on information systems.

So what happened? Well, the Y2K bug was a bust, dot.coms crashed, and, 21 months later, it was September 11, 2001. These factors, combined with others, destroyed the demand for IT personnel and created a massive oversupply of computer folks.

What lessons can we learn from all of this? Most importantly, it is imperative to think critically about labour market information. In the late nineties, all the career "experts" could talk about were how many jobs there would be in IT. We'd all be independent IT contractors with tiny computers strapped to our foreheads, relaying instructions to our electronic secretary as we strolled through Central Park (remember the ad?). Plenty of people were advised to go into IT even though they knew next to nothing about computers and didn't particularly enjoy working with them. These were the people that got burned by the crash in IT.

Now don't get me wrong! Labour market information can be very helpful. For example, many schools' placement surveys can tell you exactly how many grads in a specific programs found employment. A newspaper article about a new company moving to town also provides excellent labour market information. And it's certainly good to take advantage of economic trends that relate to one's career. Where people go wrong is when they rely completely on labour market

information to make decisions. There is no such thing as a sure thing, no matter what the labour market info says. Passion about a career area always trumps employment stats.

There are two other points to remember. The first is that things change – often quickly and without notice. During the early nineties when provincial governments were making cuts to health care, there were pitiful few jobs for health care professionals. Once more money went into the system, jobs returned with a vengeance.

Second, it takes more than just education to get a job. Students need to know how to *look* for a job; to network, write sparkling resumes and cover letters, shine at interviews, and, sometimes, be willing to work their way up the ladder.

The bottom line is that while it is fine to trust labour market information, it is better for people to trust themselves. Labour market information is just that – information. It's good to know and can be helpful, but it is foolish to hinge career decisions entirely upon it.

Extracurricular Activities

It's the middle of October. Almost two months into the your first semester at NAIT and you're starting to get the hang of things. You've got a schedule that works for you, you've kept up with your readings and assignments, and, most importantly, you're confident that you've made the correct career choice.

But still, something has been haunting you. It's not the Thanksgiving turkey that you ate after it sat in the fridge for a week and its not your lack of a brilliant Halloween costume. No, what's bothering you is that while you're firing on all cylinders when it comes to schoolwork, you realize that you lack the work experience possessed by some of your fellow students. Maybe some of them have worked in the field before, or have some excellent contacts, or simply have impressive employment histories. How do you compete with them in the labour market?

Relax! There are plenty of ways to get work experience while you're in school. First of all, remember that the training provided at NAIT is very practical. Employers know that a NAIT grad is going to have all of the technical skills required for a position. What often gets their attention are **transferable skills**, skills that apply to a wide range of positions and duties.

What are these transferable skills? Good question! The skills most desired by Canadian employers, no matter the industry, are **communication, teamwork, interpersonal, analytical, and organization skills**. They also hire people with a **good work ethic**. What to work on, therefore, are ways that you can develop these skills in either academic, volunteer, or work activities.

For example, say you're in Animal Health Technology and your class decides to do some fundraising for the SPCA. You work as a team (**teamwork**) to plan an event (**organization**) where you can raise some money. You contact the media (**verbal communication, interpersonal**) and although it takes a lot of time and effort (**good work ethic**), you are able to present the SPCA with a substantial cheque. Afterwards, you go over the entire process (**analytical**) and write up a report of recommendations for next year's class (**written communication**). See how that works? Try to put yourself in situations (working, volunteering, or even doing schoolwork) where you are able to develop these skills.

The next step is to ensure that you remember these skills when it's time to write up your resume and cover letter as well as when you get an interview. This will help separate you from all of your competition in that search for a job. We can help you with this at **Career Services**. Of course, you don't want to sacrifice your grades for a few new skills. The secret to avoiding this will be balance: manage your time effectively, keep ahead of your schoolwork, and know your limits. So, get involved with something! You'll have a good time, meet some new people and improve your chances of landing that great job.

When You're *Not* Perfect in Every Way

The other day I had an experience that taught me an important lesson about career planning. I had recently purchased my first car and had promised myself to learn about vehicle maintenance, you know, doing my own oil changes and minor maintenance and repairs. This was partly because I am cheap, but also because I genuinely wanted to learn about engines, electrical systems, tires, and mechanics.

I wanted to be able to talk cars with other guys in the line up at Canadian Tire; I wanted to lose the utterly blank look I got whenever a friend mentioned carburetors, horsepower, or alternators and replace it with a knowing and car-savvy expression. I wanted to be like the guy in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* who was at one, spiritually and physically, with his motorcycle. I had always envied those kids on the school bus that could identify makes, models, and years of the cars and trucks that passed us on the way to school. My dad could do this with ease, identifying 57 Chevies and 41 Fords with ease; had I not received this gene? I also wanted to know what made those idiots in that TV ad drool over a Hemi – just what the heck is a Hemi anyway? Feeling quite inadequate, I decided to purchase a maintenance manual for my new car and set out to read all 200 pages of it, becoming an expert on my car.

I kept the large, floppy, red maintenance manual on my bedside table where I usually kept a Dickens novel or book on Latin American history. And for the first couple of days I was pretty diligent. I breezed through the introduction and the section on lubrication and maintenance – although I still couldn't remember which type of oil was heavier or lighter and which I was supposed to use in the summer. Pretty soon, however, the book was starting to have a remarkably soporific effect. Whereas *David Copperfield* would have me reading attentively for hours, a few minutes reading about my car's battery would have me dozing within seconds.

Nevertheless, I was determined to keep my car in shape. I decided that I probably needed new spark plugs and an oil change. This seemed pretty easy. I went to Canadian Tire and purchased some oil, making an uneducated guess at 10W30 and picking up some spark plugs. After finding my car in the spark plug identification book and wondering at length how there could be so many different kinds – didn't they just make a spark? – I decided on buying the cheap ones – expensive ones were for suckers, right?

Arriving home, ironically and perhaps prophetically, on my bike, I walked out to my parking stall and set to work. First, I crawled under the car and searched around for the oil plug (you'll have to excuse me if my terminology is incorrect) and succeeded in draining most of the oil into a pan – the rest drained onto my forehead and onto the concrete. Then I poured the new oil into the reservoir and got set on the spark plugs. I reached down for the package and noticed, to my horror, that there was an oil slick making its way to the storm drain – I hadn't screwed in the oil plug, or whatever that thing was called. Swearing mightily, I cleaned up the mess, biked back to Canadian Tire for more oil and tried again.

It had taken my two tries, but I had successfully changed my oil! I felt my confidence wax as I started on the plugs. To my annoyance, however, the plugs fit into their holes, but the caps did not want to sit on the plugs. I was sure that I had purchased the correct plugs, but somehow I

had messed up. So I reluctantly put the original plugs back and got in the car for a final trip to Canadian Tire.

When I started the engine, it sounded like a Harley Davidson running on cherry brandy. Coughing and sputtering, I made it to the store and back, stalling 13 times along the way. Now, I suspected that this had something to do with misplacing the caps that went on the plugs, but I didn't know for sure. I feared that I might cause permanent injury to the electrical system by mucking around with them. So, I tried calling a friend who knew buckets more than me about cars for his advice. He wasn't there. I had promised to give a lift to my wife later that evening and, stalling about 19 times, we limped around town. When my buddy called me back, we determined that the spark plug caps had been misplaced and upon fixing them, the car was more or less back to normal.

I know what you're thinking. This guy is about as sharp as sack of wet mice. And you'd be right, kind of. I'm the first to admit that I am witless when it comes to mechanics, and for that matter, carpentry, electronics, computers – the list goes on. But I am good at some things and I have been fortunate enough to find careers where I can use these skills. And that's the point of this whole exercise. When you're looking at careers and making choices about what to take at NAIT or elsewhere, the first two questions to ask are what do I like to do? and what am I good at? There are plenty of diplomas at NAIT that will virtually guarantee you a high paying job. But if you are going to hate that job and be lousy at it, what's the point of taking it? So think carefully when you're choosing a program. Participate in the Open House, Information Sessions, and the Buddy System and be honest with yourself about whether or not you will really be able to succeed and enjoy in a particular career. Accept your shortcomings and exploit your strengths.

Where the Jobs are in 2004

The first step in looking for work is pretty straight forward – you need to know where the jobs are! Where are they? Well, there are a number of ways to look for work – the trick is to spend most of your time focussing on the most effective methods. There are two primary ways to job search: 1) Responding to Advertisements and 2) Taking the Proactive Approach. In this article I will describe how to effectively search for advertised jobs and talk about the proactive approach next week.

Responding to Advertisements: There is no doubt that many jobs are advertised in newspapers, industry magazines, employment offices, and on employment internet sites, company internet sites, and even job hotlines. The problem with advertised jobs is that they are seen by many people. That means many job seekers end up competing for the same job. This is something you want to avoid like a mad cow wearing a SARS mask. How do you avoid ending up in a pool of 500 applicants? Simple: spend time looking at job ads that will be seen by fewer applicants.

This means spending less time looking at newspapers and massive job sites like Workopolis and more time with company websites, industry magazines, and specific job search sites like the one provided by NAIT Career Services. NAIT's Job Postings, for example, target only NAIT students and alumni and only NAIT students and alumni are allowed to access the site.

Moreover, job ads are categorized according to program area, so if you are in Dental Assisting, you will only be competing with other NAIT Dental Assisting students and alumni. While you are a student and up until a year following your graduation, you can even sign up for Job Alert and get emails about job ads that meet your criteria. More about our terrific site next week.

Company and organization web sites are excellent ways of avoiding competition as well. Not everyone will take the time to research companies and check them regularly for jobs. The first step is to develop a list of websites representing companies in your industry of choice. You can do this by looking at the Yellow Pages, doing an internet search, or accessing a directory like the *Canadian Oilfield Service and Supply Directory*. Once you have a list of websites set up, make a point of visiting them regularly. Simply set out an hour or two every week to check the sites for jobs. This is a good idea even if you aren't actively looking for a job. Find out what skills and abilities employers are looking for and take the steps to gain these assets if you currently lack them. The same thing goes for industry publications and Edmonton's Labour Market Information Centres carry many helpful industry magazines.

By looking for job ads that are accessible to fewer job hunters, you will have a much better chance of getting hired sooner. The time you spend looking for work will be more productive. Now that I've told you all about finding job ads, here's the bad news: only a third of all jobs are advertised! So, next week I'll tell you about the elusive Hidden Job Market and the Proactive Approach to job hunting.

The Hidden Job Market

Last week I wrote about how to search for advertised jobs. I stressed that it is good to avoid job ads that will likely attract hundreds of candidates and, instead, look for jobs advertised on company websites, industry magazines, and specific internet job boards. Today, I will talk about how to really eliminate your competition by uncovering the hidden job market.

“Over 70% of all available jobs are found in the *hidden job market*.” So what does that mean exactly? Just what is the “hidden job market? Basically, the hidden job market refers to all the jobs out there that are not widely advertised. Some of these jobs include those that haven’t been advertised yet, but will be shortly. For example, a company knows an employee will be retiring, but hasn’t yet started recruiting for a new person. Or, a company may have just won a new contract, but has been too busy to start looking for new employees.

Other “hidden” jobs are those that don’t currently exist, but might be created for you based on your skills and qualifications. An example of this is a student I knew who wanted to do some research for a particular organization. She wrote up a proposal, submitted it, and a job was created for her. In other situations, an employer might like an applicant’s qualifications and personality so much that they decide to create a position for him. Since these jobs aren’t advertised, you don’t have to worry about too much competition from other job seekers.

Why does the hidden job market exist? Quite simply, it is an enormous pain in the rump for employers to recruit candidates through advertising. It takes a great deal of time and money to advertise, sort through hundreds of applications, interview candidates, and agonize over a decision. If your application is on file already, they might just interview you, thus saving such expenditure.

How do you access the hidden job market? Take a **proactive approach** to your job search. Instead of waiting for the job to fall in your lap, go to the jobs. The proactive approach is all about networking. I estimate that networking has helped me get over 90% of all the jobs I’ve had (over 30 of them at this point – and I’m not that old!). I will talk about networking next week.

The other way to break into the hidden job market is to find out as much as you can about your industry. Which companies are getting lucrative contracts? The companies that are getting new contracts are more likely to be hiring new people. If you can contact them about employment opportunities before they start their hiring blitz, then you’ll get the inside track on jobs. Networking can obviously help you get the inside scoop on which companies are looking to expand, but so can industry magazines, news reports, and company websites. So, start uncovering the hidden job market in your industry. The deeper you dig, easier it will be to find the best jobs.

Six Degrees of Job Attainment

Have you ever played “Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon?” That game where you try to link an actors through their roles to Kevin Bacon based on who they’ve acted with? For example, Ian McClelland, the British actor who played Gandalf in the *Lord of the Rings*, acted with Liv Tyler in that series. Tyler acted with Matt Dillon in *One Night at McCools* and Dillon acted with Kevin Bacon in *Wild Things*. Easy, eh? It would actually be harder to find an actor who isn’t connected with Bacon, the guy has been in so many movies. The game is based on a movie called *Six Degrees of Separation*, starring Will Smith, which claims that any two people in the world can be connected via six other people. In theory, therefore, you should be able to connect yourself with Kevin Bacon through your friends and family and their friends and family and so on and so on.

So what does that have to do with searching for a job? A lot actually! Looking for work is all about networking. In the job search context, networking is the process of building a group or network of contacts who might be able to help you land a job. Contacts can consist of your friends, family, co-workers, instructors, and neighbours, but also *their* friends, family, co-workers, instructors, and neighbours and so on and so on. It is through this huge web of people that you find out about new job opportunities. While one contact might let you in on a limited, unadvertised job competition, another might give you a stellar recommendation that leads to employment.

If your network doesn’t know that you’re looking for work, they’re not going to be much help in the old job search. So, make sure that all of the contacts in your network know that you’re looking. When you see that friend for coffee, ask if she knows anyone in your field. If you take your car in for new tires, ask if they have any hot job tips. Maybe even your dentist can make up for all the pain he caused you by giving you a lead. It may seem repetitive to repeat the same spiel over and over, but that’s what it takes. Be persistent and the opportunities will arise.

You might be saying, “That’s nepotism!” I want to get a job based on my own merits.” Well, stop thinking that way. First, whether you call it nepotism or networking, it is how the world works. Employers would much rather rely on the recommendation of a trusted associate than the results of a one hour interview. Face it, sometimes the person with the best resume writing and interview skills is not the best person for the job. Second, no one would recommend you or even give you a job tip if they didn’t think you were a good candidate. Think of how silly they would look if they recommended someone who ended up being a complete dud. So, don’t feel bad about networking.

Anyway, networking is a two way street! Although during the first few years following graduation it might feel like you are always relying on you network, eventually, they will start to rely on you and your contacts in industry. Follow the golden rule: do for your network as you would have them do for you. When one of your contacts gives you a lead that pays off, THANK THEM! Profusely! They have done you an enormous favour at their own risk. When you’re on the job, ensure that they don’t regret their recommendation. When you’re more established, find ways to help your own contacts find employment. It is the best way to stay connected within industry, cement relationships, and learn about all sorts of opportunities. Still

unsure about how to get your network established? Come down to Career Services at O117 in the South Lobby and ask to speak to a career advisor about networking.

The Insider's Insight: 5 Lessons from a Career Fair

Every so often, it's good to check your facts and make sure you're not talking out of your rear. When I was in high school, I got into an intense (and completely ridiculous) argument with my best friend over the nationality of Dire Straits. I was sure they were Australian, but my friend correctly contended that they were from England. I wasn't convinced and it was years before I sheepishly admitted my error – in retrospect, I must have been thinking of AC-DC, or just been an idiot.

Now, as a career advisor, being wrong about resume writing or interviewing etiquette is much more hazardous than one's erroneous statements about 80s rock and roll (unless, you're being asked during Final Jeopardy). We need to give accurate advice every time and keep track of what's happening out there in industry. Therefore, I was very eager, on January 28, to attend the CST Career Fair and find out more about IT hiring practices. The following are 5 key points they made. And keep reading even if you aren't in an IT program – what follows applies to all career areas.

1. Hiring practices differ. Companies use different strategies to recruit new employees. It's vital to determine what a company's hiring policy is in order to maximize your chances of getting a job. Consider Alberta Education and CGI, Canada's largest independent IT firm. If you want to work for Alberta Education, your sole option is to look on the Alberta government website, find a posting, and apply. Being proactive and submitting an unsolicited application is futile. In contrast, the 2 chief sources of new hires for CGI are employee referrals (meaning you want to know a CGI employee) and their online resume bank. In other words, being proactive will pay off. A little bit of digging will uncover a company's hiring policies and ensure that you're on the smoothest path to employment.
2. Soft skills sell. Communication, customer service, analytical ability, teamwork, organization, ability/willingness to learn: these were the buzzwords mentioned by *all* of the companies present at the Fair. Soft skills, not the latest technical expertise, are what employers desire. Well, let me clarify. As a graduate of a NAIT program, employers assume that you have the technical expertise. What will distinguish you from your classmates are your soft skills, your abilities to communicate, sell, solve problems, lead, and create. Sure, you might know programming languages from A-Z, but if you act like Nick Burns, Saturday Night Live's not-so-friendly computer guy, you won't be hired.
3. Speaking of which, attitude is everything. IT companies want smart, skilled people, but they also want people who are positive, willing to learn, energetic, and a good fit for their office. All of the companies stressed that they are fun places to work. Therefore, they hire people who love their work, and work hard, but also enjoy a good time. Sometimes it is difficult to maintain a positive attitude when you've been looking for work for a while, but it's a job search necessity nonetheless. Moreover, if you do land a job, and it's an entry level position, the key to a promotion is a fantastic attitude. With many companies, starting out at the bottom is your only option.
4. Any experience counts. Employers want proof that you have the abilities you say you have. Demonstrate your skills and knowledge by outlining your accomplishments, whether they be

related to school, volunteering, or work. Don't discount the projects, presentations, and assignments you do at NAIT – after all, NAIT training is designed to match what's done in industry. If you feel you lack experience in certain areas, create an opportunity by volunteering your IT skills in the community. Not only will you gain experience, your volunteering will impress employers and expand your network.

5. Edmonton is becoming an IT hotbed. Cool, eh? But Dell and other companies aren't hiring just because they like short summers and long underwear. No, they're here because they value Edmonton IT professionals and the training they get at institutions like NAIT. Hopefully, this will result in more labour stability in Edmonton's IT sector and more opportunities. So, if people say that they're aren't jobs in IT, tell them about the 100 people hired by Acrodex last year. Or the 9 entry-level positions open at Upside Software. Or the 30 positions at CGI. The IT industry is cyclical and vulnerable to global instability. But if Edmonton can build a reputation as an IT leader, we'll weather the storms and thrive when times are brighter.

Selective Advertising: Finding Ads That (lead to) Work

The first step in looking for work is pretty straight forward – you need to know where the jobs are! Where are they? Well, there are a number of ways to look for work – the trick is to spend most of your time focussing on the most effective methods. There are two primary ways to job search: 1) Responding to Advertisements and 2) Taking the Proactive Approach. In this article I will describe how to effectively search for advertised jobs and talk about the proactive approach in a subsequent issue of Career Corner.

Responding to Advertisements: There is no doubt that many jobs are advertised in newspapers, industry magazines, employment offices, and on employment internet sites, company internet sites, and even job hotlines. The problem with advertised jobs is that they are seen by many people. That means many job seekers end up competing for the same job. This is something you want to avoid like the plague. How do you avoid ending up in a pool of 500 applicants? Simple: spend time looking at job ads that will be seen by fewer applicants.

This means spending less time looking at newspapers and massive job sites like Workopolis and more time with company websites, industry magazines, and specific job search sites. Moreover, our ads are categorized according to program area, so if you are in Dental Assisting, you will only be competing with other NAIT Dental Assisting students and alumni. While you are a student and up until a year following your graduation, you can even sign up for Job Alert and get emails about job ads that meet your criteria.

Company and organization web sites are excellent ways of avoiding competition as well. Not everyone will take the time to research companies and check them regularly for jobs. The first step is to develop a list of websites representing companies in your industry of choice. You can do this by looking at the Yellow Pages, doing an internet search, or accessing a directory like the *Canadian Oilfield Service and Supply Directory*. Once you have a list of websites set up, make a point of visiting them regularly. Simply set out an hour or two every week to check the sites for jobs. This is a good idea even if you aren't actively looking for a job. Find out what skills and abilities employers are looking for and take the steps to gain these assets if you currently lack them. The same thing goes for industry publications; Edmonton's Labour Market Information Centres carry many helpful industry magazines.

By looking for job ads that are accessible to fewer job hunters, you will have a much better chance of getting hired sooner. The time you spend looking for work will be more productive. Now that I've told you all about finding job ads, here's the bad news: only a third of all jobs are advertised!

Start Up Your Own Resume Bank

Writing a resume is hard work. This is especially true if you follow the sage advice of career advisors who encourage you to target, target, target each resume you send out. Ten job prospects mean ten resumes and ten cover letters, right? Well, yes, but there are some clever ways in which to make this task considerably less arduous. One important exercise is developing your very own resume bank.

Just what is a resume bank, you ask? Elementary, my dear job seeker! A resume bank is a comprehensive, complete, categorized, and capacious catalogue of your career history. Huh? OK, what I mean to say (without the alliteration) is that a resume bank is a list of statements that describe all (and I mean all!) of your work experience. Whenever you need to write up a new resume, you take a look at the job qualifications and copy and paste appropriate statements that describe your qualifications from your resume bank.

How do you set up a resume bank? First, write down all of the positions, volunteer or paid, that you have had in your life – do the same for all schooling that you have done. Don't leave out anything! You never know when all of that customer service you provided working at McDonalds or delivering the Journal might pay off.

Second, brainstorm every single last thing you did in those positions. Everything! Think in terms of verbs or action words that describe what you did. For example, in order to describe my summer job for a restaurant equipment supplier, I would use words like cleaned, swept, painted, repaired, delivered, assembled, constructed, cooperated, prevented, ordered, maintained, cut, sandblasted, phoned, adjusted, troubleshoot, analyzed, and communicated. I also demonstrated attributes and skills like initiative, diligence, customer service, safety awareness, determination, endurance, and a uncanny toleration for toxic chemicals and electric shock in this position (well, I might not put down those last two). The idea is that you really want to analyze and record what you did in various experiences because you never know when those skills may be desired by another employer.

Third, starting with the verb (like ordered), describe specifically how you demonstrated each skill. Instead of just saying "Ordered supplies" say "Ordered industrial cleaning and painting supplies on the phone and via email, respecting budgetary guidelines." The better picture you can paint of what you actually did, the fewer questions the reader (your future employer) will have. Your resume will also be a lot more interesting to read as well and believe me, after reading 50 resumes in a few hours, this is desirable!

Fourth, after coming up with all of your statements, you may want to categorize them so that when you are looking for a statement concerned with communication skills, you'll know where to go. Then it's simply a matter of reading the job ad carefully and copying the appropriate statements. And, of course, you'll want to add to your resume bank as you learn new skills in the workplace, in volunteer situations, and at school.

Setting up a resume bank is an investment in time and effort that will pay off by making it easier for you to create the targeted resumes that employers love. It gets you in the habit of closely

analyzing what you've done in your career and will assist you in seeing how your skills transfer effectively to other situations.

Put Your Best Foot Forward in Your Highlights Section

Imagine this. You are the manager of a relatively small, but well-respected and growing electrical engineering firm. You've just been awarded a contract and require the services of another electrical engineering technologist. Part of your job is to supervise the hiring process, so you are in charge of recruiting, reviewing resumes, interviewing, and making the final decision to hire. You put an ad on the NAIT Career Services Job Opportunities site, on your own website, and in a trade magazine. Two weeks later you are staring at your desk and the pile of 50 resumes and cover letters that are weighing it down. You start out enthusiastically, but after reading a dozen or so, you are starting to glaze over. Most of the resumes are generic, they don't have many interesting details, and they don't mention the skills you require.

Then, all of a sudden, the next resume you reluctantly pick up off the pile changes everything. Within the first 15 seconds of reading, you realize that this candidate has the right stuff, and you're on the phone getting her in for an interview. What does this resume have that the other resumes lack? Something all resumes should have, but don't: a Highlights section.

Titles for Highlights sections vary; some call it a Skills Summary, others call it a Professional Profile, and still others call theirs Highlights of Qualifications. What doesn't vary is the purpose of the Highlights section, namely, to show the employer within the first quarter of your resume that you have the skills and qualifications that they require. Having a strong Highlights section that follows your contact information is the best way to ensure that your resume is kept out of the recycle bin.

So where do you start? Always begin with the job advertisement and the qualifications they list. Write down the key qualifications, even prioritizing those that are stressed a great deal. For example, if the employer states that you need teamwork ability, communication skills, troubleshooting experience, and technical expertise, but they really stress the need for customer service, then you would also make sure that you stress *your* customer service skills. Once you write down the crucial qualifications, think back into your experiences at work, volunteering, and school and write down how you have met the qualifications. If the employer doesn't list too many qualifications, think carefully about the job and try to deduce what skills and abilities should be stressed.

Your Highlights section should consist of 5-8 bulleted points, listed in order of importance. If none seem more important than the others, use the order listed by the employer. The idea is that your Highlights section mirrors the employer's list of qualifications, thus expediently showing that you are a good candidate for the job. The Highlights section should also provide details about how you meet the qualifications. Where did you demonstrate customer service? To whom? For how long? Why is your customer service ability impressive? Also, stress your accomplishments. For example: "Five years experience providing superior customer service at a busy call centre." Each of your statements should show how you've met the qualifications of the employer, making it easy for them to select you for an interview.

Hit The Resume Bull's-Eye!

You've researched companies, networked, checked out all of the really good job search websites (especially NAIT Career Service's), and rounded up a whole whack of job ads. What's your next step? Fax off your never-fail resume (the one that landed you that Dairy Queen gig in high school) and watch the job offers fill up your mailbox like so many ads for delivery pizza and real estate agents?

Sorry to break this to you, but faxing off an out of date generic resume is just not going to cut it anymore. What you need now is a top of the line, fully loaded, "feed all of those other resumes to the shredder" kind of resume. What does this resume look like? To be completely honest, unless you are a mind reader, you will never know *exactly* the type of resume that will knock an employer's socks off. This is because different employers look for different things in a resume. Some are attracted by brash, confident resumes, but others are turned off. Some like resumes that take a creative approach, but others won't be impressed. It's like on that show *The Apprentice*. I wouldn't hire any of those mouth-breathing bozos and bimbos to run any company of mine, but for Donald Trump, they were the cream of the crop.

Nevertheless, you can get inside the employer's head to a certain degree by *targeting* your resume and cover letter to the job ad and the company. The best way of doing this is by putting yourself in the position of the employer. If you were hiring someone for the job in the ad, what would you look for in a resume? Most likely, you would keep an eye open for resumes that are a mirror image of the job ad. If an employer is looking for communication skills, analytical abilities, and a knack for solving problems, then you should be stressing your competencies in these areas. Qualities that you have and of which you are proud should only be mentioned if they are relevant to the employer.

For example, if the ad states that you will be working very independently, then it isn't much point to stress your teamwork skills. Prioritizing is essential – even to the point of putting your most relevant skills first on a list of your qualifications. Let's face it. We all have tons of skills and qualities that we love to share with others (or on *American Idol*). But on a resume you have to be selective and mention only those attributes that the employer desires. Everything else is excess baggage that wastes the employer's time.

While sometimes the employer will list exactly the qualifications they want, other times job ads are a little sparse on detail. In these cases it is important to refer to the company's website to try to determine what qualities and skills they'll appreciate. For example, if a company prides itself for being on the cutting edge of industry, you should mention how you are also innovative and creative. The other thing you should do is call the company or, better yet, go in person (unless they explicitly forbid you to do so in the ad) and ask them for more information about the job. Finally, there are many transferable skills (the type of skills you'd use in most work settings) that are valued by darn near every employer. These are things like communication skills, problem solving, organizational ability, and a good work ethic. By compiling this sort of information, you

should be able to organize your resume in a way that reflects what the employer needs in an employee.

Targeting your resume is the best way to ensure that your resume does not become shredder food. Keep reading the *Nugget* for more resume writing advice in the upcoming weeks. Next week will focus on getting the most out of your work experience.

Give Your Resume a Makeover!

Do you still sport the mullet that drove the ladies wild in grade 11? Are you pants of choice either “super slim” Levis that bunch up over your high top Nikes or purple parachute pants.? Still favour fluorescent colours and Hard Rock Café t-shirts? If so, don’t worry! Those fashions are bound to come back in style – well maybe not the parachute pants. What **should** worry you is if your resume hasn’t changed since 1991. Even if you’re so young that previous paragraph made next to no sense, the point is that the style of your resume is important to consider. You might have a targeted and well-written resume, but if it looks like a notepad document printed on paper towel using a dot matrix printer, it will just end up in the garbage – where it belongs.

Take out your resume and take a look at it. Would you want to read it? Does it catch your eye and pique your interest? Or does it provoke an impulse in you to yawn, squint, or use it as a handkerchief? If your resume needs a makeover, a renovation, or a complete overhaul, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* can’t help you, but reading this can.

Let’s start from the top. Your name should be the biggest thing on the resume, but size isn’t everything. It can stand out in other ways, with an interesting font, italics, or other effects. Don’t go crazy, but make it **eye-catching**. The font for the rest of your resume should be 12 point (11 at least – you don’t want to give a far-sighted HR person a headache) and in a legible font. Don’t feel compelled to stick to Times New Roman or Arial, but don’t get too goofy. Comic Sans MS might work if you’re applying for a job as a marketer for a toy firm, but not if you’re looking for finance positions. Your address, phone number, and email can go line by line underneath your name, but it can also go beside your name or in one line underneath your name to save space. If you develop a letterhead style for your resume, you can also use this for your cover letter.

Section headings should stand out. Your highlights, education, work, volunteer and other sections should be labelled clearly. Try using a larger or different font or other effects like inserting lines underneath the headings. Be consistent with the features you use, however. If your first heading is in Georgia (the font, not the state) and is underlined, then the others should be as well.

As far as the statements that go in your sections, keep in mind that the employer only takes a few minutes (at the most) to read your resume. Therefore, you want the information to be presented in a way that is inviting, yet concise. Using bullets and stating only the most relevant information is half the battle, but limiting what you write to bite size chunks is helpful, too. Don’t skimp on the details in the individual lines, but don’t have a section consisting of 10 lines, either. More than 7 lines and your work experience section will start to look like a paragraph and no one wants to read a paragraph! Similarly, keep your resume to two pages – there are lots of formatting tricks that can help you with this if your resume is too long or short.

Typos kill resumes. They do! Employers that see a typo will cringe in disgust, crumple up your resume into bitter ball of hate and then sky hook it into the nearest garbage can. To prevent your resume from meeting this fate, **proofread the @\$*thing!** I once met someone who had a snazzy, targeted resume, but was puzzled by why he never got any interviews. Knowing that

he had moved recently, I asked if he had remembered to update his phone number. Problem solved!

Finally, a word about using gimmicks like graphics fancy paper, or colours. It's true that sometimes these things can attract attention and may even suggest creativity, but they can also turn off potential employers. My advice is to ask yourself, if you were looking for an employee, would gimmicks impress you? They might, but I would bet that you'd be more impressed by resumes that showed how a candidate had the right qualifications. The basic idea is that some gimmickry might be ok (for example, my resumes have some grey shaded areas and are printed on bond paper), but it is the last thing to worry about and, 90% of the time, it won't help or hinder your chances of getting an interview. Use your best judgement and if you have doubts, leave gimmicks out.

A resume is the first impression and employer gets of you, so it's pretty darn important. Devising a resume that suits your needs and personality can be fun and creative exercise that will pay off in the end. Next week, the cover letter!

Judging a Candidate By Their Cover (Letter)

Ever make a snap judgement about someone? We can't help it sometimes – it's almost a survival mechanism to make quick judgements based on little evidence. Perhaps we developed this strategy during more primitive times when interpreting a look from an approaching caveman with a big club was a matter of life or death. Now, we're all told to suppress our prejudices and get to know a person before forming an opinion, but we're also told that, in an interview, employers often make decisions about candidates within thirty seconds of meeting them. Bottom line? First impressions are important!

When you're job hunting the employer's first impression of you is often formed by your cover letter. Employers whose desks are weighed down by stacks of applications often use cover letters as a screening tool. If your cover letter has typos, is too long, is boring, isn't targeted, or isn't captivating, it might torpedo the rest of your application. So, how do you avoid this fate? The four tips listed below reflect the most common faults I find in cover letters and will give your cover letter the edge it needs.

1) Write a new cover letter every time you apply for a job. *Every* time! It should be immediately apparent to the reader that this is not the same letter you send off to every employer and their pet poodle, so write with the specific qualifications of the job in mind. Your cover letter must be **targeted**.

Is this a lot of work? Yes and no. Yes, it takes time to write a new, targeted letter for each application. But, if you do so, you'll also get a job sooner. It's a little like fishing. Use the right bait and you'll catch your limit quickly; if not, the only thing you'll catch is a cold. It's much more effective to send ten well crafted and targeted cover letters, than one hundred generic letters (Don't believe me? Try it yourself!).

2) Tell the employer why *you'd* like to work for *them*. Are they're a leader in the field, or do they feature an innovative line of products? Have your contacts mentioned that they have an excellent training policy and healthy company culture? Do some research into the company. If you can't find anything worth mentioning, do you really want to work there?

There are two reasons for this. First, it shows that you've done your homework and written a targeted cover letter. Second, it encourages the employer to read the rest of your application. Instead of droning on and on about how great you are, pay *them* a compliment. Imagine you receive a monthly letter from your grandmother. If she always writes about her aches and pains and the price of rutabagas, you'll tune out after a while. But if she starts out by congratulating you on winning a scholarship, you'll take notice.

3) Pick a *few* of your most impressive and relevant qualifications and describe them in detail. Don't list how you meet **all** of their qualifications – that's for the resume. Describe your “slam-dunk” attributes and then encourage them to refer to your resume for how you meet their other qualifications.

A cover letter is a letter, not a list. In it, you have the opportunity to tell a bit of a story about yourself. For example, you can describe how your public speaking ability has progressed from doing small workshops to being able to speak effectively to hundreds of people. Or you can demonstrate how your mechanical skills have advanced as you've gained more responsibilities. By providing more relevant details your cover letter will stick out to an employer who has dozens of other letters to get through.

4) Write in a style that is professional, but captivating. This is tricky. A letter filled with flowery phrases will throw off employers expecting formal writing. To determine the right balance, think carefully about the position. Someone hiring a salesperson might expect a more forward, confident style than an employer looking for a meticulous and cautious medical lab technologist. When in doubt, just be yourself, follow the preceding rules, and make sure your grammar, spelling, and punctuation is perfect.

An excellent cover letter is an essential part of your work search. It won't land you a job on its own, but it can provide a sparkling first impression.

Judging Your Behaviour, One Interview at a Time

If you have a job interview coming up, there's a good chance you might hear the following questions: "Tell me the hardest problem you've solved" or "When's the last time you dealt with a difficult customer?" or "How have you applied your school training to your work?" These questions are called Behavioural Descriptive (BD) questions because they ask you to describe your past behaviour. BD questions are asked increasingly often in interviews because your past behaviour tends to predict future behaviour. So, Mike Tyson will probably bite another ear, Jennifer Lopez will re-marry, and Donald Trump will certainly fire yet another annoying twit – possibly all on the same Fox reality TV show!

And in real reality, your ability to work part time, volunteer, and maintain honours standing at school will suggest to a future employer that you would also be able to multi-task, time-manage, and work very hard as an employee. There are other reasons, however, that BD questions are popular. BD questions force candidates out of providing generic answers – your story about your greatest success at work will be different than someone else's. Therefore, they make interviews more interesting for both interviewers and interviewees. It is also more difficult – and there is less necessity - for candidates to (how should I say this politely?) provide "creative" answers. In other words, more BD = less BS (to heck with being polite).

BD questions do, however, require more preparation than other questions. It is crucial to think about the job for which you've applied and anticipate the type of behaviours they'll want to know about. For instance, if you are a CST student and you're interviewing for a software developer position, you might be expected to design programs, troubleshoot problems, assist clients, and work on a team. Therefore, you'll want to delve into your work, school, and volunteer experience and identify when you've demonstrated skills in these areas. Think of a likely question, such as, "Tell me about a time when you played a key role on a team," and then write down the situation using the following formula:

- 1) Mention a *specific* situation – refrain from generalities
- 2) Stress the *transferable* skills you employed
- 3) Describe the *action* you took
- 4) Explain the *results* – what happened?
- 5) *Self assess* – what did you learn? What would you do differently?

Use the acronym STARS to recall this formula when you're interviewing. People tend to be vague, not specific, about the situations they describe and forget to self assess, so try to remember these important aspects of your answer. A good interviewer might probe for more details, but it is better for you to be proactive. They'll be impressed by how you've learned from your mistakes and taken steps to improve.

The beauty of BD interviews is that they give you the rare chance to tell your story and talk about your accomplishments (and really, how many times in life do we get to do that?). If you prepare properly, you should come out of a BD interview feeling confident about yourself and your abilities. Want to know more about interviewing? Come down to Career Services (O117) and ask to speak to a Career Advisor.

Breaking the Case Wide Open: Investigating Companies

Ever feel like being a private detective? Wonder what it would be like to uncover important clues and solve mysteries? Want an excuse to wear a fedora, smoke cigarillos, and skulk about in dark places? Well, here's your big chance! No, I'm not talking about Murder Mystery Theatre at the Nest. I am talking about getting the goods on companies and organizations in your particular industry when you apply for a job. Sometimes researching a company can feel a lot like doing detective work. There are just fewer femme fatales, car chases, and sucking chest wounds to worry about.

So, why should investigating companies be part of your job search? First, if you want to have a beautifully targeted resume and cover letter (what do I mean by targeted? – find out next week!) and give a stupendous interview, you need to find out as much as you can about your prospective employer. Many employers, for example, will ask interview questions like, “So, what can you tell us about our company?” In this question, employers are obviously interested in whether or not you have taken the time to learn about them. Your answer to a question like, “What skills of yours would be of most use here at Acme, Inc.?” will also improve if it is based on your knowledge of the company.

Second, if you are offered a job, investigating the employer will help you decide whether or not to accept it. Believe it or not, there are jobs out there! The first offer won't always be the best offer. The last time I had to look for work, I searched in vain for months when, all of the sudden, I was offered 4 jobs in 2 weeks. Researching my potential employers kept me from jumping at the first offer and squandering a better one. If, for example, you feel uncomfortable about some aspect of the company (maybe they sell a product line that you dislike), then wait for a better offer. Or perhaps you find out that the company is planning to move your division to another city (like Calgary – ugh!). Knowing this will help you make the right decision about which offer to take.

How do you get started? The first place is pretty obvious – the company's website. A typical website will include information about the company's vision and values, history, awards, recent projects and acquisitions, charity work, financial information, as well as their products and services. Try comparing the company with one of its competitors. Asking people in your industry about the company will also provide valuable information that the company is unwilling to promote. Libraries like our very own McNally Library, the Winspear Business Library at the U of A, and the Labour Market Information Library also contain excellent objective information on their shelves and websites about companies, their annual and financial reports, and position within industry.

It is really important to venture into a job search or a new job with all the facts. Doing some detective work will prepare you for the application process and help you make the right decision when you're offered a job

Available Upon Request: Your References

You don't want this to happen: "Hi, is this Dr. Jones? This is Matt Smith. I was in your chemistry class this semester and, well, I'm about to look for work and need some references. Would you be able to give me a reference? Dr. Jones? What's so funny? What do you mean I might not like the type of reference you'd give? Yeah, I know I wasn't the best student ever Hey, I showed up on time sometimes! I did so know that your lab wasn't a cafeteria! I even offered you fries once! Hold on, I thought you wanted discussion in your class Oh, not that kind of discussion That explosion wasn't all my fault – some blame must go to my lab partner If I say I'm sorry really nicely, will you still give me a reference?....Hello? Dr. Jones? Hello?"

Hopefully, you won't have as much trouble asking a NAIT instructor for a reference. Yes, instructors can make excellent references, – after all, they've been evaluating you all year – but only if you've given them some good things to say about you! On the other hand, you don't have to be a straight A student to get a good reference from an instructor. If you've been a hard worker, a good participant in class, or overcome difficulties with perseverance and dedication, then they can mention those stellar qualities to a potential employer.

So what references are for, anyway?. Employers like to be reassured that they are hiring a good person. The opinion of a candidate's former supervisors, instructors, and even coaches or co-workers can give them confidence about their final decision. Employers usually contact a job seeker's references following the interview and, typically, when they're one of the top candidates for the job. Since references aren't usually contacted before this point, it isn't necessary to include them on your resume (References Available Upon Request is sufficient). Simply print off a sheet listing your references and bring it to the interview. This will pre-empt the off chance of a potential employer calling your references out of the blue when they aren't prepared to give the kind of response you'd like.

So who should be your references? Like everything in your job search, be selective. Employers usually ask for 3 references, but, ideally, you'll have more than 3 that you could ask. There are a couple of reasons for this. Sometimes, one reference, because of her connections or position in the field you're trying to enter, might be preferable than another. Or, one of your references might be on a business trip, sick, or on vacation. For this reason, it is crucial that you contact your references prior to your interview to make sure they're available and to inform them of the job qualifications so they have a better idea of what to say about you.

If you can't think of who might be a good reference for you, look around yourself. If you've done well in certain classes or developed a good rapport with certain instructors, ask them. Remember, instructors want to see that you get a job, so they'll be inclined to give you a good reference (unless you're more Bart Simpson than Lisa – heaven help you if you're a Homer!). Supervisors, whether it be for full-time, part time, summer, or volunteer positions, also make excellent references. Other people in your network might do the trick, especially if they've had

the chance to evaluate your growth as a person over a long period of time – coaches, religious leaders, and co-workers come to mind. Still can't think of anyone? Then start finding ways to develop a bank of references. Start volunteering, making connections with your instructor, or get involved in industry associations.

The final word on references is to treat them with care. Thank them, update them on your progress, and, if ever possible, return the favour. In the last stages of the hiring process, a glowing reference can seal the deal.

Interview Fashion 101

Skirt or slacks? Sweater or blouse? Tie or no? Flashy pink or conservative grey? These aren't the questions I ask myself before a hot date, but they are questions that interviewees ask themselves. When a first impression could mean the difference between your dream job and "Would you like fries with that?" it becomes important to consider what you're wearing.

My sister Liz experienced this dilemma a few years ago. She was about to graduate and was eager to land a good job. She had been doing all of the right things - networking, cold calls, targeting her resume – and finally it paid off. An energy company called her up to interview her for a lucrative internship. Liz was thrilled. The internship would give her experience in four key business areas and virtually guarantee her a permanent job if she wanted it.

She competed with 50 other candidates in a complicated interview process. First the company did a series of group interviews, had the candidates write a series of tests, and then invited them all out for a meet and greet with company executives. This winnowed the group down to ten, two of which would be chosen and, happily, Liz was one of the ten chosen to interview with all of the bigwigs.

At this point, she began to worry. The first stages had been rather surreal. She had just been herself, done her best, and maintained a pretty relaxed demeanour throughout the process. Now that she was within striking distance, she started to freak out. One concern she had was her attire. So far, she had dressed pretty conservatively, wearing dark pantsuits, minimal make up, and a conventional hairstyle. But would this help her stand out?

Everyone had an opinion. Our dad, who was a businessman, offered to take her shopping for a skirt and a brightly coloured sweater or blouse that the interviewers would remember. Unconvinced, mainly because she didn't usually wear dresses and skirts, Liz asked for my opinion. I asked her why she resisted such an outfit. She said that she felt uncomfortable wearing a skirt, was scared that she would fidget in it, and was worried about how to cross her legs. She also didn't want to get a job based on her appearance in a hot pink sweater.

After thinking about this, I suggested that while she should dress appropriately, she should also wear something in which she'd feel comfortable. I told her to go shopping with Dad, but to buy something that she would feel good wearing. And she did – a classy grey pant suit. She also got the job.

Don't get me wrong. It is very important to look smashing for your interview – make sure you shave, brush your teeth, iron your shirt, polish your shoes, skip the perfume or aftershave, maybe get a hair cut, and rid your jacket or skirt of all pet hair (and shouldn't we be doing these things everyday?) – but it is also important to be yourself. Wearing something completely out of character might hamper your interview performance – which is really what matters.

One suggestion is to think about what you'd wear on the job and then take it up a notch. For example, when I worked as a golf course landscaper, my work duds would be a t-shirt and shorts. But at the interview, I wore my best golf shirt and a pair of tan pants, something I'd wear if I was playing the course, not mowing it. When interviewing for jobs where there's even a hint

of professionalism, I wear my best pair of pants, navy blazer, and a lucky tie. Women have a bit more flexibility, but there are also more risks when it comes to the skirt length, colour of clothing, and accessories. It is usually best to err on the side of caution, but balance this by wearing something that will make you feel confident and comfortable.

In the end, it is you that matters, not your clothes. Do your best to look good, but don't worry *too* much about it. Spend your preparation time preparing, not primping. Once you get in the habit of dressing well for an interview, looking good becomes second nature and you can focus on wowing the interviewer with your skills and experiences.

The Follow Up: An Icky, Annoying, and Essential Part of Your Job Search

I'll be honest with you. Some aspects of a job search aren't pretty. Waiting for the phone to ring, buying stamps, paper, and envelopes, trying to determine from the sound of an employer's voice whether she's going to hire you or not, seeing an annoying classmate get a job even though he is a scummy parasite who said that he was going to prepare the visuals for your group presentation but didn't and you ended up getting a low mark which didn't matter to him because, after all, his uncle owns a company and promised him a job – oops, got a little carried away. But let's face it – a job search isn't all beautifully written cover letters and perfectly answered interview questions. Some parts of it just plain stink.

One of my least favourite tasks during a job search is something that is becoming more and more expected from job searchers, specifically, the dreaded follow up. It's recommended that after you submit a resume and after you have an interview, you follow up with the employer in the form of a phone call, letter, or email. For example, after submitting your application, you might phone the employer up to make sure they received it and to introduce yourself. After an interview, you might send an email thanking them for the interview and maybe adding something about yourself that you didn't get a chance to mention during the interview. Admittedly, following up is an excellent way to distinguish yourself from the other candidates, to ensure that the employer remembers you and your application, and to show them that you're really keen for the job.

And maybe that's why, even though they are a terrific way to make a good impression, I find following up aggravating. It's just not in my personality to be an eager beaver. Plus, after all the other work you do to write a targeted resume and cover letter and to prepare for an interview, having to follow up is a nuisance. It also feels un-Canadian to market oneself so aggressively. And believe me, I feel your pain! But do it anyway.

The fact of the matter is that if you fail to follow up and someone else makes a better connection with the employer, you might be out of a job. So do it! Anyway, a follow up doesn't have to be as difficult as I am making it out to be. All you really have to do is make some form of contact with the employer to remind them who you are, thank them for the opportunity, and inform them of anything else you want them to know. Keep follow ups brief – the last thing you want is to appear desperate or annoying. Even if you don't get the job, your follow up might encourage the employer to think of you in the future or refer you to someone else. Sometimes, employers will even request that you don't contact them (“Don't call us, we'll call you”) – then you're off the hook.

Following up with employers is a good habit to get into, like flossing and eating broccoli. It may not be a lot of fun to do, but it will pay off eventually. For all your job search needs, come down to Career Services and ask to speak to a Career Advisor.

Top Ten Reasons to Stop Swearing at NAIT

Brought to you by Counselling and Career Services

10. Studies show that swearing causes hair loss, weight gain, and makes your breath stink (what with all of the filth coming out of it).
9. Swearing lowers your IQ 25 points – well not really, but that’s what people will think when they hear you.
8. You never know who might be around the corner - employers conduct interviews here at NAIT: “Nice to meet you Ashtray Mouth, what are some of your other weaknesses?”
7. “Creative swear word practitioner with a knack for offending people from many ethnic and religious backgrounds” just doesn’t look good on a resume.
6. You’ll contribute to the survival of much more colourful and interesting phrases like “Jiminy Crickets!” and “Egad!”
5. Swear words – “The less you say ’em, the less you’ll spray them.” Think of all those F’s, P’s, S’s. and B’s – all classic spittle-inducing letters.
4. Ladies don’t dig curse words. They really don’t. And if you think they do, maybe that’s why you were alone for the last 37 Friday nights in a row.
3. Guys don’t dig gals that swear. Would you bring that filthy mouth home to your mother?
2. Seriously, would you want your kids to talk like that?
1. NAIT is equipping our fire alarms with anti-swearing sensors. If you don’t want to spend all year listening to sirens and that disembodied voice saying, “There has been an obscenity in an adjacent zone! Please prepare to evacuate if required,” you’ll kindly watch your language.

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