

Plan Your Life, Not Your Next Paycheck: Landing the Right Job Offer

by Scott E. Fable, *California Tau '96*, and Jengyee Liang

The job search process can be intimidating, stressful, and, the longer it takes, morale deflating. However, it does not have to be that way. Your job search is a golden opportunity to take stock of what you want from your career, not just your next paycheck. By taking a look at the bigger picture, you not only increase chances of finding a great fit in your next job, you position yourself closer to fulfilling your professional dreams. Once you realize this, you can turn the job-search experience, which seemed like a chore, into something more invigorating and meaningful.

If you want to make the most of your job search, invest time at the start to reflect on which work styles and environments suit you best, which kinds of interaction you want from your manager and co-workers, and what you want to learn from this job for the next one. This is time well spent because these elements are the foundation of your work experience, and, the more familiar you are with your needs,

the easier it is to identify which jobs offer you the best fit.

Even if you think you already have everything figured out, the *spiritual* side of your decision is not something to be taken lightly. Admittedly, spending extra time on such soul searching may seem a luxury when you have more immediate concerns—such as the pay, benefits, or security represented by a secure job offer. However, you will spend a significant part of your daily life in this job, and it will also build your expertise for your next assignment, even if you change roles within the same company. Approach the job search with this in mind.

Building on experience

Building on our collective experience and that of others, we offer this advice: Make sure that the position you take fits your needs in terms of compensation, compatibility, and career development. If one of these categories is seriously lacking, you should strongly consider moving on to the next opportunity. Even if the other two categories look promising, if you don't see a clear way to compensate for the deficiencies in the third, you may be heading for significant disappointment and frustration.

By the time you are interviewing, you should have a clear answer to the following questions, so you can explain yourself well and ask important questions of your own.

Compensation: You should determine a baseline of minimal salary and insurance coverage based on your current financial situation. Consider the following:

- ▲What are your near- and long-term obligations for student loans and other debts that you need to service/pay off?

- ▲What is considered a competitive salary range for your skill level and job target? Ask friends and campus alumni, have an informational interview (see our article in the Winter 2007 issue of THE BENT), and review online resources for your discipline.

- ▲How much do you currently spend on food, housing, car, entertainment, recreation, and other



“Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life.” —Confucius

regular expenses? How does omitting some of these change your baseline? Will omitting them significantly harm your ability to cope with job and life stress?

▲Will the company health insurance cover vision, dental, and any recurring prescriptions/medical costs you expect to have?

▲How much will housing, auto insurance, and other parking/transportation expenses cost you? Will you be able to save any money? Will you have enough to meet any near-and long-term investment goals?

Compatibility: You should have a sense of what types of people, company culture (including dress code), physical space, and working hours and expectations you are most comfortable with and are most conducive to your highest productivity. Practically speaking, your job offers may be a long stretch from your ideal. So, get to know your preferences before you talk to a potential employer, and an exciting perk or salary won't distract you—as much—from these important questions.

▲What work environment is best for you? Do you prefer:

•Lots of interaction with people or independent projects?

•A hands-off manager who provides little oversight or an active one who offers advice and suggestions regularly?

•Open-ended projects with broad goals or assignments with specific instructions and deadlines?

•Competitive or collegial work environment?

•Arriving early, working late, and/or traveling a lot?

▲Are you introverted or extroverted? How should your job complement this tendency?

▲What is your initial impression of your immediate supervisor and his/her manager? Are the feelings at least neutral?

▲How easily can you modify your work situation to mold it into a more ideal situation? If you like sound, can you play music on your speakers in your office? If you need privacy or have personal matters, do you have the option to work remotely?

▲Your environment outside work is also important to consider. Which of the following are important to you:

•Housing: urban/suburban, proximity to activities/affordability?

•Location: climate (both weather and social), diversity of local demographics, proximity to friends and family?

•Commute: total time, availability of public transit, with/against traffic?

•Travel: frequency and length of overnight stays, long flights/drives?

Career Development: You should know why you are pursuing this job in this industry. Remember, a job should position you closer to your dreams. Keep your outlook as distant as possible, but start with at least what you want to do in the next five-to-ten years.

▲What are your career goals after this position?

▲What skills do you need to gain to be in the best situation for your next job? Does this assignment measure up?

▲What do you want to learn from the people around you at work? Will the people around you be supportive and create opportunities for your success?

▲Will this assignment challenge you enough after six months or a year? What do you want to work on after the first project/year is over . . . after two or three years?

Note that these aren't necessarily questions that you will hear during an interview, but you should have an answer to them in mind. For instance, some of these questions may be appropriate when you first consider a job opening or conduct an informational interview (see our article in the Winter 2007 BENT). Ideally, by the time of your interview, you will have investigated the job requirements, location, and general workplace atmosphere. This saves the more interesting questions about potential assignments and workplace expectations for the final interview.

Keep in mind that a good rule of thumb for a job interview is

a 50-50 split in the time you're talking and the time the interviewer is talking. After all, if you have a clear sense of what you want, the job interview is a place where you and your potential employer are interviewing each other to see if there is a fit—and not an interview where you say whatever you can to secure a job offer. Even if you are eager to find a job quickly, don't pretend to like a job that's very different from your ideal. A bad fit will show in your work performance and then diminish your opportunities for either advancement or your next job.

What if your job is a lemon?

Aftermath of Jengyee's experience

After concluding an unpleasant internship—complete with a negative performance review that seemed the exact opposite of my manager's ongoing feedback—I returned to my third year of college and fell into a two-month depression. The bad experience left me questioning my education and career goals, and I found myself asking, "What is the purpose of a degree if the end result is an unsatisfactory job?" Although fully acclimated to college life, I contemplated quitting altogether. After much reflection and conversations with family members, a campus career counselor, and an alumnus mentor, I eventually crawled out of this hole and was determined to give school and work another try.

Ultimately, I was inspired to describe this and my positive work experiences in my book, *HELLO, REAL WORLD! A Student's Approach to Great Internships, Co-ops, and Entry Level Positions*. Although my later work experiences on the whole were positive, I was fortunate to have the resources (supportive people, finances, and time) to survive an emotional blow and properly recover. If I hadn't had that level of support—or if time and/or money pressures had required a quick decision on what to do next—I could have missed these later experiences.

Although you can't expect to avoid all bad experiences, I could have avoided much emotional toll if I had done my soul-searching before taking the job. In the case of my bad internship, I didn't understand that my typical communication and work style were at odds with that of my manager. If I had recognized this conflict during the interview—by simply asking about the manager's/company's preferred work style—I could have adapted or avoided taking the position altogether. Investing your time in soul-searching not only improves your chances of a good fit in your job, but can prevent unnecessary bad experiences down the road.



If you don't already know what you want, don't worry. It often takes time, a lot of thinking, and even some trial and error to figure this out. However, the earlier in the job search you define what you want, the easier the rest of the job search process will be down the line.

The Physical Journey

Just as we described the soul-searching exercise above as a spiritual journey, the actual job search is a physical journey, with many points of interaction with others. By definition, a job search is the act of promoting yourself to others in the industry, whether to learn more about the opportunities that are available or to get your name into consideration by potential employers.

At the very least, you should seek the help of a campus career center or online job-search service. They will give you access to at least some of the jobs that are available. However, you still need to investigate which jobs fit your needs and find ways to expand your network of people who can help you find a good match. We have described the steps of this process below and included references to our previous articles, as applicable.

1. Explore the careers and fields that interest you. Talk to the faculty on your campus, use any mentoring or alumnus/industry contact programs offered through your campus and career center, or just talk to friends and family about your interests to learn whom they recommend. You can also contact people working in the field, through engineering trade associations, TBPCONNECT, research/technical conferences in your field, and recruitment fairs. Get comfortable with conducting informational interviews—we offer an overview in our article in the Winter 2007 BENT (www.tbp.org).

2. Build and maintain your professional network. Your *network* is made of everyone you know. Your *professional network* could be the same group of people—just let them know you're looking for a job and in what area, and see if they have any recommendations. It doesn't hurt to ask, and even if they don't have any suggestions right away, you now have all these people primed to remember you the next time they hear of a lead.

Don't just tell the people in your network about your field of interest. Ask about resources for the job search in general. People who may know nothing about engineering may have a great resource for books on job searches, online videos of interviewing tips, or free classes on salary negotiation. For more tips on networking and building a professional network, read our articles in the Spring and Fall 2007 issues of THE BENT.

3. Build an effective résumé and cover letter. Talk to 20 people about your résumé, and you'll get 20 different suggestions. Talk to them anyway, starting with a career center and/or résumé workshop. Our résumé tip: use descriptive verbs to lead off your activities and work/project experience. Our cover letter tip: avoid generic cover letters—always incorporate the name of the company and position sought along with a succinct description of your interests and attributes that make you a good employee for the position. We have many more suggestions about these documents in the Fall 2008 BENT.

4. Schedule interviews with the companies that interest you most. This is the ultimate goal. Career centers, career fairs, and sometimes campus departments or professors have connections to recruiters, and sometimes you may have to contact the company directly to learn of opportunities. Keep in mind that after you leave college, job opportunities are often easier to find through contacts than through company websites or other public forums. Some industries actively work through hiring consultants or *headhunters* to locate potential hires. Scott's most recent job was found through a personal contact at ASME. The job before that was through a former co-worker who forwarded an environmental e-newsletter from her *alma mater*.

Ask Everyone

All of these are examples of a professional network—ask everyone you can think of, and have your résumé, cover letter, and soul-search results ready. After you have an interview scheduled, list all the questions you think the interviewer might ask, especially for those *situational interview* style questions that begin with “What is an example of a time that you...” and end with some sort of challenge you faced in a team/work environment. Then find someone to help you complete that list with more ideas. Then, practice—through a mock interview session at your career center, at the home of a supportive family member/friend, in the car, in the shower, or wherever. There are many resources for interviewing tips, but we recommend looking at our tips in the Winter 2007 BENT.

The end of one journey and the start of another

In short, the more you identify your needs in advance of your job search, the easier it will be to identify the jobs you want. The more you work out the physical logistics of the job search, the better positioned you will be for connecting with and landing the job opportunity that fits you. If you do this soul-searching and preparation at the start of your job search, the search will be conducted with greater confidence and produce better results, both in the offer you take and in the searches to follow.

A heartfelt farewell to my co-author and friend, Jengyee Liang, who died in November 2008 from complications



from lupus. Even in the face of her illness, she continued to participate in Toastmasters, collaborated with me on our series of articles for THE BENT, and endeavored to stay active in her community. She lived her life to the fullest. In her memory, I encourage all readers of our series to strive to make the best use of your talents and push yourself to grow both personally and professionally. May she be an example for us all.

—Scott E. Fable

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