

## The New Reality for Entry-Level Jobs

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If you graduated from college in 1984, this might have been your mind-set as you looked for a typical entry-level job:

A bachelor's degree in hand means an entry-level position is virtually assured. Look for extensive on-the-job training to make up for your lack of professional work experience, and expect to stay with your new employer for five to 10 years or more.

Those days are gone, and if you think the same scenario exists in today's work world, think again. Here's why:

### Your Degree Is Helpful But Not a Ticket to a Job

While jobs have never been guaranteed, not long ago, a college degree alone could set you up for some kind of entry-level position. Today, most bachelor's degree holders will be taken seriously by entry-level employers, but the degree won't land you a job by itself.

### Experience Is Not Optional

“Twenty years ago, employers were a little more patient about the profitability of new hires,” says Colleen Kay Watson, CEO of Edina, Minnesota-based Career Professionals, a firm specializing in placing recent college graduates into entry-level jobs. “Today, employers aren't as patient.”

“In the past, 3M, for example, would hire someone and expect to lose money on them for 18 months while they trained them, knowing they'd get another 20 years out of them as an employee,” says Watson, who has worked with entry-level candidates since 1974. “Today, employers know that a person who stays five years is a long-term employee. So new college grads need to be up and running faster -- and need to have more real-world experience to bring to the table if they want to get hired.”

Of course, this raises an old and often-cited dilemma: How do you get experience if you need experience to land a job in the first place? Answer: Through [internship](#) or [co-op](#) programs, even unpaid.

### Clarity Is Critical

**“Today's entry-level job market is looking for extremely focused individuals,” says Randy Miller, founder and CEO of Ready Minds, a company that offers distance career counseling services. “The pool of applicants is larger, thus the talent level is higher. And due to the shortage of jobs at higher levels, there is a surplus of overqualified candidates.”**

Job seekers should start “planning far ahead, talking to career counselors and other experts to ascertain ways to leverage the experience and internships you get while you're in school so that you'll stand out from a sea of applicants,” says Nancy Murnin, senior vice president and general manager of the St. Louis office of Lee Hecht Harrison, a career services firm.

### Technology Skills Matter

You won't be able to fake your way through most of today's entry-level jobs if you don't have at least average computer skills.

“In 1984, employers sought a candidate with a solid liberal arts education,” says Eli Spanier, director of career development services at Westwood College in Denver. “Today, employers are seeking candidates who have technical skills that complement their liberal arts education.”

This includes technology skills you may take for granted, such as Microsoft Office applications like Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Access, says John Challenger, CEO of global outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas in Chicago. “Be careful not to overlook these attributes,” he stresses.

### Soft Skills Matter Too

Soft skills, such as working effectively with others and knowing how to solve complex problems, are essential to landing and succeeding in most of today's entry-level jobs. In addition, your written and oral communication skills need to be not just acceptable or even good, but “superb,” according to Nancy Stamp, vice provost and dean of the Graduate School at [Binghamton University](#) in New York.

“Senior staff at an environmental consulting firm told me that if a job candidate has an advanced degree in science, [the firm] will assume science competency, but it cannot assume good communication skills,” Stamp says. “Yet good communication skills are just as critical to the job as the science expertise.”

Don't expect the employers of 2004 to treat entry-level job candidates the way the employers of yesteryear did. If you do, you'll likely end up angry, frustrated and unemployed.

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