

# How Should Students

This month's column is written by **Ashok Kumar**, Professor and Chairman, Department of Civil Engineering, University of Toledo, Toledo, OH. E-mail: ashok.kumar@utoledo.edu.

Successful students have one eye on the job market as they progress toward their college graduation. They are interested and ready to participate in a variety of activities at school to help with their job search after graduation. Today's job market is tough, and the global economy is going nowhere. However, the 2010–2011 job outlook report from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicated that the employment of environmental scientists, engineers, and specialists is expected to increase by more than 25% over the next decade. Job growth is likely to be strongest in private consulting firms.



# Prepare for the Job Market?

New complex laws and regulations in the areas of clean air and groundwater contamination, population growth, and public awareness of environmental degradation are spurring the growth in employment in this area. The emphasis in the coming years will be on preventing future environmental problems rather than controlling existing ones. I tell my students that there is enough work for environmental professionals for the next several decades.

The question is: How should you prepare for the job market? Securing a job in the current economy may seem like an impossible task. However, a systematic approach will land you the job of your dreams. Below, I have outlined some of the steps you can take to find a job and ease your anxieties; the list is based on the tips I have given to the students who have graduated from our program over the past 30 years.

## Step 1: Assess Yourself

As you think about your job search, you should ask several basic questions:

- ① What do you want to do?
- ② What will you enjoy most while working?
- ③ What are your strengths and weaknesses?

This first step may be the most difficult. The response will vary from person to person. Your responses, however, will help you choose the appropriate course for your job search.

## Step 2: Engage in Activities Outside the Classroom

You should regularly attend colloquia, workshops, and invited lectures that are organized on campus to broaden your knowledge in your field. You should also indulge yourself in reading professional journals, business magazines (including *EM*), and other literature in your field. Listen in on the career webinars organized by A&WMA. They are generally free to members. Think about participating in student organizations to build your management

and people skills. Hobbies related to your profession are also useful for your résumé.

## Step 3: Sharpen Your Public Speaking and Presentation Skills

Many students are afraid or hesitant to speak publicly. As an environmental professional, you cannot avoid public speaking. The key to reducing anxiety is to prepare adequately for any presentation. The more you prepare, the less tension you will experience when delivering your presentation. There are many books available on public speaking and plenty of tips can be found online. I encourage students to give presentations on the courses they are taking and volunteer themselves to give lectures on their research in their advisor's classes. Use every opportunity you get to speak publicly. This will help sharpen your presentation skills. Do not worry about question/answer sessions. You will be able to respond to audience questions if you have prepared well for the presentation.

## Step 4: Participate in Student Poster Presentations

You should try to present student posters about your research during conferences held on campus and at A&WMA meetings. This gives you exposure to prospective employers and will improve your soft skills for the business world. Most of our graduate students participate in one or the other activities.

## Step 5: Engage in Networking

Networking is very important and easy in the Internet age. However, you should make sure that you are involved in the right networking from the vantage point of your job search. General social networking sites will not help much in finding a job. Attending the conferences and workshops hosted by A&WMA is one of the best sources of networking. The student program, put together by A&WMA's Education Council, is a nice way to meet prospective employers, learn how to job search, and participate in poster sessions. You should be active in asking questions during technical presentations, while meeting exhibitors in the exhibition

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area, and during social gatherings. It is also useful to build your network with other poster presenters because some of them will be working soon. Join discussion groups and be active.

### **Step 6: Take Advantage of Internship Opportunities**

Many employers and government agencies provide internship opportunities in environmental areas. Take advantage of such offerings to build your experience. Some campuses have summer research opportunities for undergraduate students that are funded by external agencies.

### **Step 7: Think Certifications**

The required certifications will help to position you for opportunities in environmental areas. Engineer-In-Training (EIT) certification and the Institute of Professional Environmental Practice's Environmental Professional Intern (EPI) credentials are useful for those who are beginning their career in the environmental arena.

### **Step 8: Prepare a Current Résumé**

Developing a current résumé is an important step toward your job search. It is never too early to start writing a résumé. The perfect résumé is targeted to a specific job and includes all the important keywords and phrases, so that it can pass through the initial screening process. Many hiring companies now employ computers to check résumés using automated tests to rank the candidates. You may want to test your résumé using computerized screening technologies to learn about the potential results, several of these are available online. Be sure to also give your résumé to several professors and academic advisors for further comments.

### **Step 9: Develop a Cover Letter**

A cover letter is an important tool in selling your skills to a potential employer. You should be confident, positive, and focused in writing the letter. Be concise, accurate, and polite. Differentiate yourself from other job seekers. The cover letter should be revised for each job application.

### **Step 10: Research Your Field**

Research is a critical part of the job search process and it can help you in the following areas: identify companies that may be hiring in your field; focus your job search on employers whose values and

expectations meet yours; and prepare yourself for a scheduled job interview. Resources available from the American Academy of Environmental Engineers are useful in locating environmental companies and the names of certified environmental professionals. Be sure to check A&WMA's online Career Center. You can also post your résumé and look for job openings via the A&WMA web site, [www.awma.org](http://www.awma.org).

Do not overlook your academic advisor, professors, thesis supervisor, college employment office, and other resources and facilities available on campus.

### **Step 11: Prepare for an Interview**

Interviews are a very important part of your job search. In recent years, employers often conduct initial interviews by phone before calling candidates in for face-to-face interviews. The purpose is generally to gather information about soft skills, such as communication, as well as technical abilities. Students should spend some time preparing information about their research work and area of interest before giving a phone interview. Such interviews should be taken seriously. Also, students should keep themselves up-to-date with current news, information, and discussions in their areas of interest.

Prospective employees should learn about the prospective employers and their needs. This will help you match your skills with the job for which you have applied, as well as demonstrate your seriousness about the job to the interviewer. Think about the questions your prospective employers may ask. You should know about the old material you put on your résumé and be prepared to discuss your past job and volunteer experiences.

You should be prepared to answer questions related to your weaknesses also. For example, a question related to lack of experience could be explained in terms of different projects you completed in your environmental courses. One of my students took samples of key assignments from his courses that related to the job for an onsite interview. Another student showed the course Web site toward the end of the interview process. The idea is to successfully communicate your qualifications to the employer. Prepare yourself to ask questions about the company, as well as the job for which you are seeking.



## In Next Month's *EM*...

### Air Quality Measurements for Science and Policy

The May issue focuses on air quality monitoring practices and procedures from both research and regulatory perspectives, and will cover topics such as adequacy of current monitoring network for properly characterizing the magnitude and spatial extent of air pollution, monitoring pollutants that pose the highest health risk, and new methods for 3-D characterization of air quality.

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### Step 12: Prepare for an Academic Career

Students who are looking for an academic career will find that task more challenging than getting into a graduate school. In addition to the above steps, you should develop a statement on your teaching philosophy, research plan, funding sources, and instrumentation needs. A curriculum vita (CV) is more appropriate for academic positions than a résumé. Professional societies, online newsletters (e.g., [www.AcademicKeys.com](http://www.AcademicKeys.com)), the American Society of Engineering Education, and the Association of Environmental Engineering and Science Professors are important sources to find potential jobs. Academic jobs typically require presentations in front of faculty and students. You should be ready with questions during the interview in order to learn about the working environment and expectations.

Some research areas may require you to look for a position conducting postdoctoral research with an established faculty member. This will provide you an opportunity to build a research program, learn new techniques, and get some experience at grant writing. It is an opportunity to become an independent researcher.

### Step 13: Choose References

Employers often ask for two to three professional references, unless they are familiar with you and your work. You should think carefully when you

develop a list of references. Make sure that your referees know you well and talk positively and enthusiastically about you based on your course and/or research work. It is always a good idea to share a copy of your recent résumé with whom you use as a reference, and tell them about receiving a potential employer's phone call or letter of inquiry.

### Step 14: Thank You Letter

It is important to send a thank you letter to prospective employers after an interview. Note that the job search requires a lot of patience because most of the companies spend quite a bit of time to find the right candidate. Do not forget also to send a thank you note to your references after you have found employment.

Searching for a job is a time-consuming and involved process. You must be patient; do not give up if you are getting rejection letters or if you are not getting responses. Continue your search with a positive attitude and you will land a job in the coming weeks. You should be flexible in the current tough job market and be willing to look at opportunities outside your comfort zone. Get ready to face a diverse workforce. One of my professors once told me: if you can fill a need, you have a job. I hope you can. **em**