

# Where to Start: Job Search Tips for Students

(updated July 1, 2025)

Finding your first professional job after college is often the hardest job you'll ever search for. It's usually more challenging than landing your second, third, or even tenth job. Why? While there are many reasons, one of the biggest is that many students have focused almost entirely on academics and haven't yet had the chance to build experience or professional networks. A second reason is that landing a job is usually an organic process - not a simple plug-and-play experience. It often involves networking, follow-ups, timing, and sometimes a bit of luck. It's not always as straightforward as submitting an application or resume and immediately getting hired.

This handout focuses on key principles to help increase your chances of landing your first professional interview. While there are plenty of resources available to help you prepare for the interview itself, this guide is all about getting you to that point. It also includes a sample strategy you can use - or tailor - to fit your individual goals and circumstances. Let's start with a few foundational principles:

## Core Principles for Landing Your First Interview

- **Start Early.** Don't wait until after graduation to begin your search. The sooner you start exploring and applying, the more opportunities you'll have. Depending on your major and the job market, it can take six months or more to secure a job interview and relevant employment.
- **Use Your Network.** Talk to professors, advisors, family, and friends. Most jobs are found through personal connections - either people you know directly or those they can introduce you to. In fact, securing a personal referral can make you up to 12 times more likely to land the job!
- **Be Open to Entry Points.** Consider alternate or supporting roles to get your foot in the door, especially with larger organizations. Many people secure full-time positions through internal moves or referrals. Your first goal: get in. Once you're inside, there's often room to grow and move into positions better aligned with your long-term goals.
- **Tailor Every Resume and Cover Letter.** Generic applications rarely stand out. Customize each one to reflect the job description and highlight your most relevant experiences and strengths.
- **Stay Organized.** Track your applications, contacts, and follow-ups. Job searching is a process - not a one-time task - and staying on top of the details makes a big difference.
- **Don't Take Rejection Personally.** Everyone hears "no" at some point - sometimes a lot. What matters is learning from each experience and continuing to apply. The people who succeed are the ones who keep showing up every day with a positive attitude.

# Getting Started

## 1. Understand the Real Job Market

Before you dive into your job search, it's crucial to base your approach on facts - not hearsay or social media buzz. Here are five key realities to guide you:

- **Online Portals Have Limited Reach**  
Fewer than 10% of entry-level or specialized roles are filled through major job boards (Indeed, LinkedIn, ZipRecruiter). Job Boards are the # 1 job search strategy used by applicants, but it is the *last* place employers look for candidates. See the graphic below.
- **The “Hidden” Job Market**  
Up to 70% of positions are filled before ever appearing online. These roles are often filled via referrals or internal hiring. See the graphic below.
- **People Power Your Search**  
Over 70% of job seekers land positions through personal connections - not public job boards. See the graphic below.
- **Company Websites Beat Aggregators**  
Applying directly on a company's career page generally yields better results than submitting through large, generic job sites.
- **Be Strategic, Not Scattershot**  
You're more likely to succeed by targeting 10 well-researched jobs than by blasting out 200 generic applications. Treat your job search like planning a trip: know your destination, map your route, and choose your stops wisely and strategically.



[SOURCE](#)

## 2. Your Career Tools: The Resume & Cover Letter

Your resume and cover letter are your most powerful tools for landing an interview - and that's their primary purpose. To stand out, both documents must be relevant and tailored to each job you apply for.

Avoid relying on the same generic documents for every application or using "Quick Apply" features without tailoring your materials. Personalized applications show effort - and that effort gets noticed.

Think of it this way: no two jobs are exactly the same, so your resume and cover letter shouldn't be either. Customize them to reflect the specific skills, qualifications, and experiences that match the job description. Make it easy for employers to see why you're a strong fit.

\* Learn more about effective resume development through additional [career handouts](#) or from a Career Coach.

## 3. Making the Most of AI in Your Job Search

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools are becoming valuable resources for job seekers. You can use AI to help draft sample resumes and cover letters, practice common interview questions, explore potential career paths, or summarize key qualifications from job descriptions. These tools can save time and help you feel more prepared by giving you a strong starting point.

However, it's important to remember that AI works best as a starting point, not a replacement for your personal insight or judgment. Always review and customize AI-generated materials to reflect your voice, experience, and the specific job you're applying for. When used well, AI can boost your confidence, save time, and sharpen the quality of your job search materials.

## 4. Leverage Your Relationships

Most interviews - and ultimately, job offers - come through personal connections, whether directly or indirectly. This process is often called "networking," but at its core, it's simply about having conversations with people you already know - professors, advisors, classmates, coworkers, family, and friends - and expanding from there. These are your circles of influence, and they matter more than you might think.

Stop telling yourself, "I don't know anyone." You do. And when you clearly and confidently communicate your goals, target companies, and desired roles, you dramatically increase your chances of success. Consider this: job applicants referred by someone in their network are up to *12 times* more likely to get hired!

Why? Because a current employee who recommends you is putting their reputation on the line. Employers trust candidates who come with an internal endorsement. But referrals only happen when there's a genuine, trusting relationship. People don't recommend just anyone - they want to be sure you'll succeed and reflect well on them.

Begin by identifying everyone within your circle of influence - people who know you fairly well, even if they're not your closest friends. This list might include family members, friends, classmates, coworkers, professors, advisors, or other professionals you've interacted with.

Once your list is complete, decide how you'll reach out to each person - whether that's by text, email, phone, or in person. Use the opportunity to share when you're graduating, the types of roles you're pursuing, and any specific companies you're targeting. When appropriate, given general target location. A sample e-mail template is included at the end of this document.

Be as specific as possible. Casting too wide a net – telling your network you'll take any job and move anywhere – often makes it harder for them to help you effectively.

It's important to stay in regular contact with your network and keep them updated on your progress in the job search. The frequency of your follow-ups should reflect the nature of your relationship with each individual.

## **5. Be Mindful of How You Spend Your Time and Energy**

Searching for jobs can be mentally exhausting. It's easy to spend hours browsing and applying for countless positions on online job boards - much like getting lost in an endless scroll on TikTok or Reels.

This approach is often time-consuming and drains your mental energy without producing strong results. Instead, take a more strategic approach. Focus your job search by identifying specific geographic areas you would consider living and the companies in those areas that genuinely interest you.

Research shows that you're more likely to land an interview by applying to *fewer* positions while investing more time, energy, and intention into each application. Quality beats quantity in the job search process.

## **6. Target Key Locations to Live**

Let's begin with a critical step in the job search process: deciding where you'd like to live when you land your first job. Keep in mind, this isn't a lifelong commitment - just the place where you'll launch your career. Larger metropolitan areas often offer more job opportunities, but your decision should also reflect your personal values and preferences about where you want to live. It's a good idea to select 2 - 4 key cities or regions you'd be open to starting your career in.

## 7. Identify Key Companies or Organizations in the Targeted Locations

Start by identifying up to 40 companies or organizations that are of interest to you in your targeted locations. You could find these targeted companies in a variety of ways including:

- Your network
- Search engines (e.g., “top engineering companies in Nashville”)
- AI tools such as ChatGPT
- Career platforms (e.g., LinkedIn, Glassdoor)

This targeted approach can save you a great deal of time by helping you avoid the distractions of broad job boards that often lead you in multiple directions. Stay focused. Be intentional.

## 8. Strategies for Approaching Your Top Target Companies

Now that you have a focused list of target companies, you may be wondering, “What’s the next step?” This is where the process becomes more personalized and flexible. Below are some suggested strategies to get started - but feel free to adjust, add to, or customize them based on your style and goals.

Keep in mind that people land interviews in many different ways. The key is to be persistent, intentional, and to use a variety of targeted approaches as you pursue opportunities.

- **Prioritize people, not just postings.** Most job offers come through connections. Focus on the people side of your job search. Ask your network if they know anyone at the company or in a specific department. Look for WKU alumni on LinkedIn and consider setting up informational interviews to learn more about the company culture and hiring process.
- **Monitor company websites regularly.** Check the company’s career page daily or a few times a week. If you find a job that fits, aim to apply within the first 72 hours - it increases your chances of being noticed before the initial screening happens.
- **Follow the companies on LinkedIn and other social media platforms.** Many organizations post job openings, hiring events, or company news on social media - sometimes before listings appear on official job boards.
- **Stay informed and do your research.** Read up on news, press releases, or updates related to the company. Understanding current projects, challenges, or values will help you tailor your application and prepare for interviews.
- **Customize every application.** If you apply for a position, carefully review the job description. Tailor your resume and cover letter to clearly show how your skills match what they’re looking for. Make it easy for the employer to see the connection.

- **Engage with their content.** Like, comment on, or share company posts on LinkedIn to stay on their radar in a subtle, professional way. This can increase your visibility to recruiters and hiring managers.
- **Look for events or webinars.** Companies often host virtual sessions, info events, or industry panels. Attending can give you insider insights and new contacts.

## 9. Create a Job Search Tracking System

Staying organized during your job search is essential. A tracking system helps you be more strategic by keeping all the important details in one place - such as the positions you've applied for, submission dates, follow-ups, and status updates. You can design your own system or use a template like the one provided below.

Sample Job Searching Tracking Table							
Company Name	Position Title	Date Applied	How Found	Contact Person	Follow-Up Date	Application Status	Notes
Example HCA Healthcare	HIM Analyst	4/10/202x	Company Website	John Doe (HR)	5/1/202x	In-person interview Scheduled 6/1/202x	Directions for interview will be sent 2 weeks prior.

### Tips for Using This Table:

- Update it daily to stay on top of applications.
- Add a color code (e.g., green = interview scheduled, yellow = waiting, red = not selected).
- Keep notes on who you spoke with, how the interview went, or when to follow up next.

## 10. Taking Care of Your Mental Health During the Job Search

Job searching can be stressful, discouraging, and mentally exhausting - especially when you're met with silence, rejection, or uncertainty. It's completely normal to feel overwhelmed or even question your self-worth. But remember: rejection is rarely personal. It often comes down to timing, fit, or factors beyond your control. Make space to rest, talk with others, and take care of your mental and emotional well-being. Persistence matters - but so does giving yourself grace. Get up each day, keep moving forward, and approach the process with a positive attitude. That mindset can make all the difference in the world.

## 10. Connect with Your Career Coach

To schedule an appointment with a Career Coach, visit our website: [www.wku.edu/career](http://www.wku.edu/career)

## Sample Email to Network

**Subject:** Exciting News – I’m Graduating and Seeking Opportunities!

Hi [Name],

I hope this message finds you well! I’m excited to share that I’ll be graduating from [Name of College] this [Month] with a degree in [Your Major]. As I take the next step in my journey, I am looking to relocate either in the [Name of City # 1] or [Name of City # 2], although I am open to other locations that might be a better fit. I’m reaching out to let you know that I’m actively seeking full-time opportunities in the following roles:

- [Role #1, e.g., Environmental Analyst]
- [Role #2, e.g., GIS Technician]
- [Role #3, e.g., Sustainability Coordinator]

I’m particularly interested in working for companies in the [Name of City # 1] or [Name of City # 2] areas such as:

- [Company #1, e.g., U.S. Geological Survey]
- [Company #2, e.g., Terracon Consultants]
- [Company #3, e.g., The Nature Conservancy]

If you know of any open positions, have contacts at any of these organizations, or can offer any advice or recommendations, I would truly appreciate your support. Even a quick introduction or suggestion would be incredibly helpful.

Thank you so much for your time, and for being part of my network. I’m looking forward to this next chapter, and I’d love to stay in touch!

Warm regards,  
[Your Full Name]  
[Phone Number]  
[Email Address]