Ten Tips for Getting a Startup Job
Even If You Have No Experience or an MBA

I’ve applied for hundreds of jobs, been ignored or rejected almost as many times, read thousands of applications, been on one side or the other of hundreds of interviews, and been part of hiring over a hundred people across three startups and in finance, law, and advertising.

So, as a follow-up to my recent blog post: From Lawyer to Startups: My Poorly Executed But Successful Career Change, I wanted to share some things I learned about how to increase your likelihood of getting a startup (or almost any) job.

Ten tips for getting a startup job:

1. **Know yourself.** Write down what you’re looking for and why you want it. If you can’t explain that, you’ll have a hard time finding the job that’s right for you and convincing the employer that you’re right for the job.

2. **Get your name out there in every way possible and take every opportunity to learn.** Blog, comment on blog posts, Tweet, reply to Tweets, Meetup, send emails to people you know and don’t know, LinkedIn, attend events, ask for intros and intro yourself (an introduction from someone, if you have that option, is much better than approaching someone cold), ask for informational interviews, read everything relevant, network however you can. The more you’re out there, the more you’re educating yourself and meeting people who can help you. One warning, while doing these things, don’t cross the line between being persistent and showing initiative to being annoying and spammy. As you might guess, that does more harm than good. You’ll become that “crazy person who keeps spamming everyone.”

3. **Have an online presence.** Having an online presence makes it easier for an employer to get to know you through your application, shows you’re interested in and very familiar with the internet, and sets you apart. Too many people apply for jobs at internet companies while having almost no internet presence. To work in the internet, you need to use it a lot.

4. **Know the market, company, and job.** Start by learning what jobs are available are by finding startups you like and looking at their jobs pages and at their employees’ LinkedIn profiles, and by finding people to ask questions (as discussed in point 2). After you find the companies and jobs you want, learn as much as you can about the company and that job. Read the website, press coverage, and social media. Get to know the culture and employees. Read their blogs and Tweets. Talk to people who know the company or have similar jobs elsewhere. If you know the company, you won’t get laughed at for wearing a fancy tailored suit to a startup job interview, like I have. “It’s an interview, obviously I have to wear a suit” is not always true.
5. **Tailor your application.** One tailored application is better than a hundred generic ones. After you do your research, apply that to the application. Show your interest in that company and that job specifically. It should take a lot more than five minutes to apply for a job.

6. **Set yourself apart.** What can you do to stand out? Use the company’s product. Do a project that they might need or be impressed by. Write a relevant blog post. Attend a relevant Meetup or conference. Join relevant organizations. Give them useful feedback through social media. At my last job, we saw one job applicant in various places around the internet talking and answering questions about us. He got hired.

7. **Present yourself in a quick and easy to consume manner.** Long, formal cover letters accompanied by long resumes in small font are difficult to digest. Would you want to read that? I used to think I needed to squeeze in every detail because any of those tiny points could be the one that gets me the job. Now that I’ve been on the other side of so many hires, I think I was wrong. The employer should be able to get an initial feel for you in less than a minute, should be able to consume the entire application in a couple of minutes, and should be able to follow links you provide to really get to know you. Unlike Mark Twain, who said, “I didn’t have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead,” take your time and make it tight.

8. **Be likable.** Few people will hire you if they don’t like you. Your other skills matter, but one very important skill is being likable. This may be easier to say than do, but keep it in mind. Winning an argument with the interviewer might not be the best way to win their endorsement. Likable people are good for company culture, productivity, work quality, recruiting, employee retention, and lots more.

9. **Focus on what YOU can offer to THEM.** Ask yourself: Who will be reading this? What would I be looking for if I were hiring someone for this position? How can I show it’s me? Many job applicants focus on what the employer and job can offer them. The employer’s primary goal in hiring is to get the best person for the job, not to satisfy your goals and needs. Show who you are. Show you have skills. Show you have initiative. Show you’re willing to do whatever it takes to move the company forward. Show your persistence, curiosity, and ability to learn and problem solve. (MBAs: DO NOT use the word “strategy.” Almost none of you will start there and no one wants to hear that.)

10. **Get in the door, then do your best at everything.** The rest will take care of itself. Be open to taking a job that isn’t at the level you think you should be. Startups are often true meritocracies. You’ll end up where you belong. And if not, you’ll move on to somewhere that you believe treats you more fairly.

Hope that helps someone. □

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