

Finding a Job in the Environment

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Finding the right job for you in the environment doesn't differ that much from getting a job in any other field. The main difference is that it is more competitive than some other sectors and it may take longer for you to gain the skills and experience needed for a realistic chance of landing particular kinds of work. You will need patience and persistence. Each year a proportion of students who have studied environmental subjects decide against trying to use these in their careers, but instead use their degree as an entry qualification to other 'graduate' jobs. On the other hand there are many environmental graduates and others from different disciplines who have a keen interest in the environment and will be looking for related jobs. Whichever group you are in, how can you maximise your chances?

Deciding on a Job

Unless you know what you want to do, if only in very general terms, it is almost impossible to make well-prepared and targeted applications which are the key to success. As well as reading the various chapters in this book to help you decide what kind of activity or organisation you would prefer, find out where former students from your course have gone. Your university department should be able to help and the university Careers Service will have collected this information. If an organisation has recruited from your institution in the past they may be open to an approach from you.

Having made a first choice think about your fallback position - everyone needs a second or even third choice. Many people do not manage to follow a path directly from education to their ideal job. It may well be necessary to take the 'stepping stone' approach, approaching a career from an angle, sometimes several angles while accumulating skills and experience along the way which in the end will, hopefully, land you the job you really want. While your first job will not irrevocably commit you to a particular career path for the rest of your life, obviously the closer it is to what you eventually hope to do the better.

Consider taking a lower level job in the right kind of organisation: you will then be in the right place for when the right vacancy occurs, you will be known and will have proved yourself. With luck, hard work and the right attitude it is often possible to make a not-very-exciting job much bigger than it was seen to be originally. Many new graduates do not go directly into what are seen as 'graduate' level jobs, but after two or three years have found themselves working at the right level for them.

Assessing Yourself

Successful job applications result from a close match between what the employer is looking for and what the applicant has to offer, in terms of past achievement or potential for the future. How can YOU sell yourself? Firstly you need to be very clear about your particular package of KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, EXPERIENCE and, of course, personality. Is it the right sort of job for you? (Could you succeed in the job? Would you fit in with other people?) Would you be motivated to do it? (Would you want to do it to the best of your ability?)

Knowledge

The job advert should state clearly what the advertiser is looking for in applicants. If it is a job for a newly qualified graduate then they are likely to be most interested in what you have studied, options you have chosen, your final year project and any other subjects you have studied. You don't have to tell them every module you have taken but it can be useful

to give your final year programme or show that you have followed a particular pathway or stream throughout the course, for example planning or environmental law. You may have gained knowledge in other ways: through work, through attending conferences, from previous courses.

Environment-related Skills

Many jobs in the environment require you to have particular skills, including familiarity with methods, equipment or techniques. If you have done a relevant course you will most likely have gained skills such as scientific research, field survey techniques, data gathering, information gathering and report writing. Of growing importance in environmental work are cross-disciplinary abilities. Could you communicate and work with people from other disciplines, integrate knowledge from a variety of subjects, think in an interdisciplinary way and be comfortable crossing the natural/social science divide?

If you have not studied an environmental discipline at any stage (and even if you have) think about any voluntary or paid work experience you have. For example, if you have helped conduct a survey, produced an educational pack for visitors to a nature reserve, taken part in a traffic count, taken photographs for a publication, helped write a report or driven a minibus, you may find that these skills fit the bill and give you the edge over other applicants.

Relevant Work Experience

The key point to bear in mind is that university is not the only place where learning takes place. A degree is often just the starting point and it is additional expertise that gets you the job. It is impossible to overstate the value of work experience, whether paid or unpaid, in helping to develop expertise. In the environmental sector (as in health and social work or the performing arts) it is not just the skills and knowledge you gain from work placements that count in your favour but the commitment and motivation such placements demonstrate. The biggest hurdle many graduates face is the requirement by employers that they have 2 to 3 years relevant experience before applying for even quite junior jobs. How do you gain that experience if you can't get a job? How do you break out of this chicken-and-egg situation? There are a number of options, some depending on whether you can afford not to work for money for a while.

If you have the option of a one-year sandwich placement, take it if you possibly can, even if it is unpaid. It could provide you with an invaluable year's experience (see chapter 4). If you cannot do this, take advantage of the many voluntary opportunities around. If you are prepared to give up your weekends to pond or scrub clearance and spend a fortnight a year for four years helping with a conservation project, or if you take part in a sponsored fund-raising event or organise a recycling project, you will be showing an interest in the environment that extends way beyond what you have to do as part of a syllabus.

If you are reading this book before you go to university then try to get involved in activities to boost your experience from the word go. If you leave it until you begin to think about job applications in your final year it will be too late; work pressures may get in the way and by then you will be competing with applicants who have shown long term commitment. Check out what the employers want you to have gained from work experience and see if there is some way you could acquire this knowledge and skills via another route.

Other Skills

All jobs require you to make use of a range of skills that are not subject specific, but without which you will not be entirely successful. These skills (sometimes called 'key' or 'transferable' skills) will vary in the extent to which they are needed for a particular vacancy

or within a departmental team. Employers of graduates particularly seek the following skills or competencies:

- being a team player
- ability to manage your work and time
- ability to communicate in person, in writing, on the phone and through presentations
- ability to use Information Technology (IT)
- initiative
- numeracy
- ability to work alongside all kinds of people
- ability to communicate scientific data to non-technical people

Such attributes can be developed in many ways and this is where non-related as well as relevant work experience can come into its own. If you have worked in a busy sales environment, you will have learned to deal under pressure with awkward customers. You may have chaired meetings, written memos or designed publicity posters. These are all forms of communication. If you have worked on a production line or in a warehouse, you will know about shift work and the need for everyone in the team to keep up to speed. If you have held down a routine job for a long period you will also have demonstrated 'stickability'. If you have captained a sports team you will know something about leadership, organisation and motivation.

Job Applications

The Job Advertisement

While it is possible to generalise about the skills most important for certain kinds of environmental work, the exact requirements may vary from post to post. In any case job titles can be misleading. The same role carried out in one organisation may require a very different set of attributes when performed in another setting. It is essential to study job adverts carefully and understand the messages the employer is giving out. Before deciding whether or not to reply to an advert it may help to analyse the information given under headings such as:

Job description: Does the work genuinely interest you? Does it match your needs and values?

Qualifications: Are they essential or desirable? Might they accept an alternative qualification?

Experience: Essential or desirable? What skills and abilities do you have that come close?

Personal qualities: Does it sound like your sort of place? Do the adjectives used to describe the person they want make you feel comfortable?

Location: Be realistic. Would you relocate/be prepared to travel long distances?

Salary: This is usually a good guide to the level of experience and qualifications required, but you also need to know the going rate for the job. If it is low could you actually live on it?

Any other factors: Are there any health or disability factors which could affect your chances of getting the job? The Disability Discrimination Act means that employers over a certain size must not discriminate on grounds of disability and must be prepared to make reasonable adjustments to the workplace for a disabled person. However, it is important to think about what adjustments might be necessary and not leave it to chance.

If you cannot get enough information from the advert or their literature or website, contact the advertiser to ask for further details. Unless you know what it is they are after, you won't be able to tailor-make your application to give yourself the best chance.

Application Forms

Larger organisations and public bodies tend to use application forms, which are increasingly online. The advantage of an application form is that the employer has decided what to ask you about and how much prominence they give to education, work experience etc. The challenge comes in the section included in most forms, which deals with 'competencies'. Here you will have to answer extended and multi-part questions designed to test your level of ability in teamworking, problem solving, leadership or other 'key' skills. The essentials here are to check that you have answered every part of the question, that you have given sufficient detail and that you have made it personal i.e. what YOU did in the situation, not what the group did.

Some application forms ask you a question relating to their business. They are not likely to want you to know more than you can find out through their website, reading their annual report and scanning the business press, but you will need to think strategically. They will almost always ask why you have applied to that organisation or for that particular function. This is your chance to demonstrate enthusiasm!

The CV

Most smaller organisations ask for applications in the form of a Curriculum Vitae (CV) and covering letter. Essentially a CV needs to be seen as a dynamic document; by all means keep a basic one on disk but you will probably need to tweak it for each job you apply for. To create a basic CV you could start by profiling your assets. List:

- all your educational and training qualifications
- ALL your jobs with responsibilities, skills gained and achievements
- spare time activities, with your involvement/responsibilities and achievements

Emphasise what it was you achieved rather than just describe the task or event. Can you quantify it? For example, can you tell them how much you raised in a sponsored event, how many weekends you spent volunteering, or by how much did your team's sales exceed the target?

Once you have a basic profile to draw on you can then decide which information under each heading is significant, fairly significant, potentially significant or unimportant for the vacancy you are applying for and re-jig it accordingly.

You will find a number of good guides to preparing a CV on the market, but the essential points to bear in mind are:

- length - not more than 2 pages
- use white or cream paper
- include only material that is relevant
- use positive, dynamic language (e.g. 'I set up' or 'I initiated' rather than 'I did' or 'I had to')
- give EVIDENCE of the skills the employer is looking for

It may take the traditional form of a reverse chronological account of your education, work etc. Or it could be skills-based i.e. contain a list of skills relevant to the job with examples of how you gained that skill under each and just brief details of dates, course, employer, and job title.

Where to Look for Jobs

You will find useful sources of information for particular sectors listed in the other chapters of this book. Vacancies covering a wide spectrum of environmental jobs appear in The Guardian, New Scientist, Nature, the Environment Post and the Countryside Jobs Service newsletter. Also check local newspapers.

What if you cannot find any advertisements to answer? It is well known that many vacancies are never advertised in the press. You might like to consider speculative applications to organisations which interest you. You would need to find out the name of the person who recruits for the posts that would interest you (often a departmental manager rather than the personnel department). You could write a short letter outlining why you are interested in them and the kind of work you are after, enclosing your CV. If you know that they have previously taken people from your course or university mention it. Ask them to keep your CV on file in case anything suitable comes up.

Networking is another process which can lead to the discovery of a vacancy. Initially you would speak to someone you know, telling them what kind of work you are looking for and asking for advice on how to find out more about it. This could be, for example, your tutor, someone you know through volunteering, your manager when on a placement, or someone your cousin works for. Follow up any contacts they give you, stressing that you want information and advice, rather than expecting them to offer you a job. They will probably give you other contacts and eventually, with luck and persistence, you may find yourself talking to someone who actually knows of a vacancy. It is a long shot but worth a try as the worst that can happen is that you end up with a great deal more information about the work. There is a good video available in university Careers Services on this topic, called 'Can I have a few minutes of your time?' Joining a professional body as a student or graduate member can lead to good opportunities for networking, opening doors to meetings, seminars, courses and other events where you can meet like minded people and possibly future employers!

You may want to consider signing up with a recruitment agency. The advantages here are that they may know of jobs not otherwise advertised and they will also have specialist knowledge of their sectors. Remember, though, that they cover only a small part of the job market and they are not careers advisers - you have to be clear about what you are looking for. You may also find you have to keep in touch with them regularly to remind them you are still in the market.

Don't rely on just one method of job-hunting. Many environmental vacancies are much sought-after and competition is strong. By using all the above methods you will maximise your chances.

On a final note, most environmental organisations need the services of non-environmentally trained specialists such as lawyers, accountants, human resource managers, public relations and marketing managers, conference organisers and fundraisers. Becoming qualified and experienced in one of these areas may well set you on the path to a career in the environment.

Useful websites

Careers in the Environment, Food Chain and Rural Sector
www.growing-careers.com

CharityNet
www.CharityNet.org

Connexions
www.connexions.gov.uk

Ecological Recruitment
www.eco-uk.com

ENDS Environmental Data Services
www.ends.co.uk

Environment-now
www.environment-now.co.uk

Environment Post
www.environmentpost.co.uk

The Green Directory
www.greendirectory.net

www.jobs.ac.uk

Natural Environment Research Council
www.nerc.ac.uk

Nature
www.nature.com

New Scientist Jobs
www.newscientistjobs.com

Official Graduate Careers Website
www.prospects.ac.uk

University of London Careers Service
www.careers.lon.ac.uk

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