

The Plan: Multi-year Job Interviews

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Here's a long-term job-hunting plan I've suggested to students since the mid-1980s. Some have followed suit, and those who have generally reported good results.

- [1] **The list:** Early in your college career, make a list of 5 to 10 people doing jobs that sound like something you MIGHT like to do in the future. Don't limit yourself. If you think it would be interesting to be chairman of Google, then put the chairman of Google on your list. Don't limit yourself to careers you think are your likeliest choices. Include different kinds of jobs in different kinds of industries. To repeat, choose jobs you think MIGHT be interesting.
- [2] **The letter:** Compose a relatively BRIEF letter (i.e., no more than one page) to each person on your list. Explain that you're just a freshman or sophomore and are not looking for a job – only for information and advice. Without being obsequious, tell the person you admire what he or she does and that you have some interest in a similar career path. Include a general description of the questions you would like to ask in person: What things do I need to do while in college to maximize my chances of breaking into the field? How does the field differ from popular perceptions of the field? What are the risks and opportunities of pursuing such a career path?
- [3] **The mailing:** At the end of each letter, tell the recipient you'd like very much to take a half-hour of his or her time. If you can afford to do so, offer to take them to lunch. They probably won't let you pay, but you never know. Carefully proof your letters. I suggest reading them each aloud to yourself or to someone else. Once this is done, send the letters by email AND by surface mail, telling the recipients in each that you're sending it by both modes.
- [4] **The response:** If you hear back from a recipient, great. If not, try contacting the person again a few weeks later. If that still doesn't work, either move on to someone else or, if you're really tenacious, try once more. Some people like to see the persistence. (Warning: Some don't.) While you're awaiting responses, come up with a few backups.
- [5] **The meeting:** Judging from my previous advisees' experiences, you'll get some positive responses. You may even find yourself having lunch with a really highly placed individual or someone close to that person. A literate, well-crafted letter from someone who's not looking for anything but advice will intrigue some recipients. Arrange a meeting and, if it works out that way, have lunch with the person or meet wherever they like. Plan your questions carefully. Be businesslike, organized, and calm in your discussion. Take good notes on the advice you receive. You'll want to ask some or all of the following: What courses will you need to take in college? What sort of internships will be helpful? Will grad school be necessary? What other experiences would be helpful to get on your résumé? What are the good and bad points of the job? Exactly what does one do during working hours (as opposed to what outsiders THINK the person does? What sort of person likes this type of work, and what sort of person doesn't? What are the risks and opportunities of pursuing this career path? What are the prospects of landing a job when you're out of college? How can you learn more about whether you would like the job or not?

- [6] **The follow-up:** After your meetings, send brief, warm thank-you notes, again by email and by surface mail. (Some people respond better to one or the other, which is why I suggest both.) THEN, start following the advice each person gave you. If one recommended a course in Accounting, take it. If another suggested an internship, find one. If one recommended that you work out at the gym to improve your image, sign up and hit the treadmill. For the rest of your college years, send each person a brief letter (surface mail and email) approximately every four to six months. In the letters, tell them which pieces of their advice you have followed since the last letter. Tell them how valuable the advice was, and thank them once again for the suggestions. Be brief, courteous, and businesslike.
- [7] **The end:** By the time you graduate college (or law school, or whatsoever), several well-placed people will have received a series of brief letters from you on a regular basis over several years. Some will be impressed by how organized you were in maintaining correspondence and in taking their advice. You are now in a position to say something like this: "You may recall that we had lunch three years ago and you offered me an extensive list of suggestions. In the years since, I followed every suggestion you made. I'm more interested than ever in this career path. I am going onto the job market as my graduation approaches. I was wondering whether we might discuss the possibility of my joining your firm." ... I believe you'll have an advantage over your competitors in getting through the door of this firm.
- [8] **The postscript:** Let me know if you follow this advice and if it does you some good. Let me know if you get a meeting with someone and, years from now, if the process results in a job. I would be thrilled to hear that the plan has helped a student. Best of luck.