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Graduates have got to up their game or dial back their expectations in this tough job market. Post-graduate internships can help with the job search, says Sharon Yeo.



(Photo: Unsplash/Annie Spratt)

SINGAPORE: When 25-year-old fresh graduate Jared Tay received a full-time job offer, he turned it down for a 3-month contract at an e-commerce start-up.

The firm couldn't hire me initially because their business case for an additional headcount was rejected. So they offered me a 3-month contract position. They plan to submit another full-time headcount application after.

"But they said no promises it would get approved," he explained.

While the other full-time job offered certainty of employment, the contract position was in an industry he was more passionate about, the job scope suggested better exposure, and had more experienced people on the team he could learn from.

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A job seeker holds a "We're Hiring" card while talking to a representative from Target at a City of Boston Neighborhood Career Fair on May Day in Boston, Massachusetts, US, May 1, 2017. (File Photo: REUTERS/Brian Snyder)

I rather spend three months for a shot at a job I really wanted, than to settle for something I wasn't as passionate about and be stuck in that role.

Advertisement

With impending economic headwinds, the struggle is real for many fresh graduates who must adjust their job expectations - including embracing short-term contracts, instead of seamlessly hopping into a dream job of their choice.

Understanding employer's expectations, and managing some of their own aspirations can also help their employability.

But it takes two hands to clap. Employers also have an important role to play in aligning expectations between both sides.

CAN YOU HIT THE GROUND RUNNING?

Many top companies are adopting a cautious hiring approach this year while running on lean teams. They have limited capacity to train someone with zero experience or expertise.

They expect fresh graduates to come in with a certain base level of relevant skills or past internship experiences and be able to hit the ground running. But not many graduates can deliver on that.

One local digital marketing agency told me they found that many fresh graduates were not equipped with the skills needed to do a marketing job, despite majoring in marketing. They found a huge gap in what graduates learnt in university and they needed practical knowledge.

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Attendees at a job fair line up for an interview carrying their resumes in leather bags. (Photo: REUTERS/Jason Reed)

For example, many candidates understand marketing concepts but have never run a Facebook advertising campaign or do not know how to go about implementing Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) – basic skills that many marketing roles require.

Taking a proactive approach to solving the problem, this company turned to running hands-on marketing workshops for undergraduates and fresh graduates on practical marketing skills. Fast-learning students who excelled in these programmes were shortlisted for their hiring pipeline.

HOW MANY INTERNSHIPS DO YOU NEED?

Students themselves can take action to appeal to employers. The wisdom passed down from university seniors to juniors on the best strategy to meet employer expectations is to - you guessed it - do more internships. But how many is enough?

Just a few years back, completing at least one internship before graduation used to be enough.

Fast forward to today. In a 2019 study of 274 local undergraduates ran by my company TalentTribe, a Singapore-based millennial job search platform, four in 10 said they have done or plan to do three or more internships before graduation.

Last month, I asked a first-year student from Nanyang Technological University (NTU) interning at a local startup if it was common among his friends to do an internship so soon in their university journey.

“It’s a sensitive issue”, he said.

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(Photo: Unsplash/Christin Hume)

Most of my friends want to do internships starting from their first summer break. But not everyone manages to find one. So we don't really talk about this.

Another undergraduate told me: "If you don't do an internship during summer, even in your first or second year, most people will feel like you're losing out to others."

Undergraduates recognise the high stakes in getting more industry experience.

While fresh graduates are doing more to meet employer expectations, they also must manage their own ambitions to avoid getting disillusioned with what tasks they're given when starting on their first job – some which might seem mundane.

DON'T HAVE EXPECTATIONS OF DOING 'STRATEGY' WORK

One of the most common frustrations employers have – and the number one expectation jobseekers should manage – is this desire fresh graduates have to "do strategy".

Many fresh graduates enter a job thinking they will do exciting "strategic" work, only to get an unpleasant reality check after their first week on the job. Many find their job "operational" and beneath them.

Instead of developing strategies and charting new pathways for their organisations, they find themselves doing grunt work, churning slide decks or sending out email newsletters.

Many do not realise these tasks help them build knowledge of the company's modus operandi and gain exposure to the key departments and people whose buy-in will be needed for their line of work, a baseline knowledge essential to any higher-order work they may undertake in the future.

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Employers are often perplexed at their unrealistic sense of urgency to get started on strategic work.

Why? “You need to understand how the business works and get your hands dirty, before you can even understand or develop the strategy”, as a HR head of a large technology multi-national company (MNC) lamented to me.

But it’s hard to blame graduates.

One of the biggest illusions universities have seeded in fresh graduates is the idea that they are qualified to jump into strategic work from day one.

Many university modules today involve project work based on real-world business problems that aim to better prepare them for working life. But these can create false expectations.

The reality is graduates may have good grasp of frameworks to think through a problem. They are often asked on business case studies to “develop a marketing strategy for this SME’s product launch” or “analyse the supply chain data for this MNC and develop recommendations on how they can streamline costs”.

But what they’re missing out on is context. Many strategy-based roles require years of work experience precisely because they require the candidate to have a mastery of the industry and its complexities.



(Photo: Unsplash/Charles Deluvio)

Employers must recognise these aspirations, and manage candidate expectations from the hiring phase.

They must communicate clearly the job responsibilities and refrain from painting an overly rosy picture to jobseekers who might otherwise feel “scammed” when they start work.

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LOOK TO POST-GRADUATION INTERNSHIPS

For many fresh graduates struggling to find a job, my advice is to take up an internship after graduation to gain work experience, explore if a certain career path is right for them, and better adapt to employer expectations.

Jobseekers themselves are picking up on the utility of these post-graduation internships.

In a 2019 poll of 176 fresh graduates and undergraduates ran by a local early-jobseeker Telegram community WerkWerk SG, nine in 10 recommend doing an internship after graduation, though more than six in 10 recommended doing so only if the internship offers a conversion.

David Leong, a fresh graduate from National University of Singapore (NUS), has a job in a venture capital firm lined up in August, but opted to do an internship between his graduation and his new role to gain more real-world work experience and better evaluate if this industry is right for him.

Communications major Jennifer Ong did two PR internships during her undergraduate days in MNCs, but didn't feel this career path was a good fit.

After she graduated, she did a six-month internship at a local advertising agency – before eventually converting that into a full-time position after she and her employer felt there was a good fit.



Employees work inside an office in San Francisco, California January 7, 2014. (Photo: REUTERS/Stephen Lam)

It is easier to land a post-graduation internship than a full-time job or short-term contract. Post-graduation internships help companies alleviate their manpower crunch during the post-August season, when undergraduate interns return to school.

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Fresh graduates are typically also able to commit for longer periods, with the possibility of extending this employment, giving companies flexibility they value.

In this tough job market, the silver lining is that short-term contracts and post-graduation internships allow jobseekers and employers to explore if there is a mutual fit before committing to a longer-term relationship.

Just like how Jared eventually got converted to a full-time position after proving his worth to the company – and gaining the confidence this was a career path he wanted to pursue.

Sharon Yeo is the co-founder of TalentTribe, a millennial job search platform that provides an inside look into different companies and careers.

Source: CNA/nr(sl)