Advice for Non-Business Graduates

Idea In Short

Non-business graduates succeed by doing the work, connecting genuinely, delivering measurable value, finding mentors, and learning business fundamentals through consistent practice.

Do the Work

Mark Cuban says, "Don't follow your passion, follow your effort." This principle anchors everything for non-business graduates entering the workforce. Be willing to do what others are not. Mop the floor. Work the night shift. Think like an immigrant: live, breathe, and own your work. Actively seek opportunities to present and share your work with others. Get more at bats. Do great work with your assigned tasks before asking for greater responsibility 1.

Take care of yourself, and when you go after something, really go after it. Be organized. Athletes are typically good at estimating the time it takes to accomplish work. Do not burn out. Think like a corporate athlete: run, run, run, rest, think, run, run, run. Earn the right to choose your work. After you have relational equity, everything gets easier. Use generative artificial intelligence tools to get started or proofread your work rather than reinventing the wheel.

Connect

Be willing to look beyond corporate titles and ask good questions. Connect with lots of people, not just those in your department. People do business with people, not with Wells Fargo or the Atlanta Braves. It is Bob and John. Put yourself out there. Be the first to smartly introduce yourself. Be likable. Be helpful and find ways to add value so people want you around. Be present, because no one likes a business robot.

Listen to what people say. You would be surprised how often the person sitting next to you may be your client in 15 years. Networking is not transactional. It is the slow accumulation of trust and goodwill. The colleagues you impress today become the decision-makers who hire you tomorrow. Approach every interaction with curiosity and generosity.

Deliver Value

Ask yourself how you are bringing value. Treat your boss like a customer. Learn what you are good at and what you do better than others. When things do not work out, forgive yourself. Laugh it off. Comedians enjoy the bomb, and so should you. When responding to negative news, be specific about what you will correct.

It is all about your skill set. What value do you bring? If a recession hit, what can you deliver? What is your unfair advantage? What do you do well even though it comes easier to you? Examine your effort. If you did the exact same thing for six months, would it be something worth talking about? Would someone be willing to pay for what you are working on now? Read a lot of Seth Godin's blog for perspective on value creation 2.

Get Mentors

Think about what is in it for them. Make it easy for them to help you. Are you uplifting to your mentors, or are you draining them? Mentors are not life coaches. Only ask advice from people you have a 50/50 chance of taking advice from. Friends of your parents can be mentors, as long as there is a reason to connect. Choose different people as mentors depending on the specific questions you have.

Test the validity of the advice. Not all advice is good, right, or even useful. Over time, evaluate particular moves and decisions, not just the mentors. Listen to lots of podcasts from winners: entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, and artists. The excuse for not learning in the age of generative artificial intelligence is zero. Mentorship is about proximity to wisdom and the humility to absorb it.

Get Experience

Find out who is paying for your internship. If the business is paying for the resources rather than corporate overhead, they will be more motivated to put the interns to work. Do not assume the company has all the answers. Ask how they are doing it today. Ask what they could do better. Learn critical thinking and how to break down problems.

Be consistent. You cannot believe that you are one way at work and then different at home. It is okay if you are not good at something, but you need to show willingness to learn and grow. This is the creator economy. Publish on Kindle Direct Publishing, write code on GitHub, or play your song on Spotify. Do meaningful work even if it is free. If you are getting great experience and relationships, you are winning.

Learn Business

Non-business majors have the experience of going deep in a specific area. Business students are more naturally confident, willing to share their perspective even with 60 to 70 percent confidence in their answers. Some areas require a specialized degree, but business is more flexible. On paper, everyone looks qualified. Focus on intangibles like intellectual curiosity.

Make the complex simple through communication. Be able to influence people. Business is fascinating, because behind all the brands and products are people with stories. You can learn many business basics for free through Coursera, edX, and YouTube. Read a business article, then use generative artificial intelligence to explore the topic for an hour. The barriers to learning have never been lower.

Start a Business

College may help open doors, but ultimately success is about your character. Make your current employer your first client. If you work for a company, learn as much as you can. As an entrepreneur, no one is paying you to learn on the job. Tap into the frustration when things are not getting done. The market will tell you what it wants. Follow the demand and respect the money.

For every business, the biggest problem is meeting payroll. Most businesses get profitable in years three or four. Do you have enough capital to wait it out? Watch startup accelerator content from Y Combinator, which is gold for aspiring entrepreneurs 3. You can start a business on the side. Do not think you have to be all or nothing.

Be You, Hire the Rest

Be confident and believe in yourself. Fortune 500 employment does not equal job security.

Are you a visionary, implementer, or operator? Get a team of different people around you. Hire for a diverse mindset, but people who share the same values. Remember that employees will never work as hard as the owner, which is the principal-agent problem.

Understand when you work best during the day. Write things down, because you do not know what you think until you write it down. Use generative artificial intelligence as an executive coach. Have it ask probing questions so you discover yourself. What is your Venn diagram of things you are good at, like to do, and can monetize? Self-awareness is the foundation of sustainable career growth.

Serve Clients

Be proactive. Do not wait for direction all the time. Know the end goal and push to get there. Under-promise and over-deliver. Always go above and beyond. Execute correctly and on time. Manage expectations. It is easier to say yes, but do not shy away from real dialogue. Understand the specification.

Be a professional. Follow the golden rule: treat others as you would want to be treated. Be like John Stockton and pass the ball. Make other people successful. Work with high-quality clients you learn from, clients who respect and like you, and clients who share credit. Surprise them with your professionalism. Develop a brand for punctuality, clarity, insight, and enjoyment.

Do What Makes You Better

Do what makes you uncomfortable but makes you better. It is not a straight path. You cannot script it out. Be smart and flexible. Do not do the same job over and over again. Collect different experiences. Identify the macro-trends in society that you believe in and that are under-indexed. Get involved in what resonates with you.

Do things that add to your narrative. A great tagline to live by is to have a story-worthy week. For young people, seek diversity of opinions and connect with people who have more experience than you. Older people like to give back. Everything is about timing. If you still have passion, then do not give it up.

- 1Mark Cuban: Don't Follow Your Passion, Follow Your Effort

- 2Seth's Top 100
- 3Advice from a Y Combinator Alum

Summary

Career success for non-business graduates comes down to effort, relationships, and value. Do the work others avoid. Connect with people authentically. Find mentors who uplift you. Learn business basics for free. Treat your employer as your first client. The market rewards those who persist.