



# Graduate Voices: Job Searching in Your 20s



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Learning to Leap

# Graduate Voices: Job Searching in Your 20s

Expectations can feel more like a curse than a blessing in the world of work. The expectations you put on yourself and those put on you by others. Especially when it comes to job and career choices, and when you are young and inexperienced.

Unfortunately, the voices of young people are too often left out of the noise that proliferates about employability. Partly because other stakeholders have competing agendas that can lose sight of how they impact on young job seekers.

So, I asked graduates from my LinkedIn connections and wider network what it is like searching for a job during their 20s. This e-book reflects their experiences, perspectives and opinions.

Their voices are a snap shot from August 2017 and qualitative in nature. The 20 graduates who commented have varying degrees (5 with Masters), different jobs and sectors (not all Graduate-level). Of these, 12 are employed permanently and full-time (2 yet to start), 4 part-time (1 on a fixed-term contract), 1 self-employed, 1 internship, 1 not in work, and 1 going travelling. The age range is spread evenly from 21 to 30.

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## Summary

There are jobs out there.

Work experience matters.

Mentors and peer support make a difference.

Networking is important for leverage.

Being resilient helps.

Learning from trial and error.

Job searching feels demoralising (unhelpful recruitment processes).

It takes time and dedication.

Lack of responses from employers is frustrating.

Effectiveness of careers support is patchy.

Expectation gap between employers' desire for experience and graduates' offer of potential.

Competition is fierce.

Showing who you really are is a challenge.

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## How would you describe your job search experience since graduating?

Tedious and frustrating. I graduated in accounting and finance and for whatever role (even the most basic which is a purchase ledger role) I was either rejected for not having enough experience or got being over qualified. Being rejected for being over qualified is very frustrating.

Since graduating, I haven't been through another job search. Stayed in current role I'm afraid! But while I was searching for the grad job, it was pretty demoralising to be honest!!

It's difficult. A negative being a lot of employers don't even respond to applicants. A positive being there are a lot of job opportunities to choose from.

I found that job hunting during my Masters made me feel very anxious, especially going to an elite university where everybody seems to be getting the best and most prestigious jobs. Many fellow students started looking for jobs in their first few months during their Masters. It was very stressful, especially after having worked before. I think I set myself very high expectations as to what my second job after graduating should be like. At the same time, I was able to use my studies to make very important connections and build a network of potential employers. In the end, someone who I interviewed for my Masters dissertation offered me a job and I will be working with him starting in September.

Need to be dedicated and put in a lot of time sitting down and doing applications. Also need to put in time and availability to go to interviews. Bad experience - travelled all the way to London from Leicester for the day for a vetting process with a recruiter. I was there 6 hours before going home - to this day, I have never received an email from them regarding a job. Good experience - did a whole day workshop with a company (10-3) - heard from them on the same day whether I had the job offer.

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I've had no problems finding a job so far since graduating, however I think that's because I've been looking at EFL Teaching. In fact, I was accepted for the first job that I applied for.

Post-Crash in the arts and culture sector was very tricky. It felt like a lot of unpaid internships and creative work on top of more office based work to pay the bills.

I have been searching for a training contract for about two years now and it has been quite difficult. In what is a very over-crowded market, I have found it difficult to find a job. I have been to a few assessment centres, however, have not been successful as yet (most of the time due to a lack of experience). I have found the whole process very demoralising and mundane in all honesty. It is hard finding the motivation when your application isn't even acknowledged as being received - I would say that is by far the worst part about it. I guess the good parts are when I have passed initial tests and interviews to be invited back for assessment centres - at least I have been doing something right! *(Happy update: Quite ironically, I received a phone call about 10 minutes after I sent this message to you from a solicitors' firm asking to interview me over the phone tonight! What a coincidence).*



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**POSITIVE:** I found that most people genuinely want to help you find your way and are very forthcoming with advice and introductions, so long as you find the right way to ask. I struggled, initially, to find opportunities doing the kind of work I found interesting and exciting, but the networking and relationship building skills I developed while working through that difficulty have become the bedrock of what I do now. I was lucky to meet a number of people quite senior in their industry who were incredibly generous with their time, expertise, and networks and I wouldn't have experienced the interesting and fulfilling career path I've had so far if it weren't for their support. People want to help you, you just have to find the right way to ask. **NEGATIVE:** I had no real clear idea of what I wanted to do, which wasn't ideal given the first step of any good job application or interview was persuading the company that I definitely absolutely wanted to work for them. I had a lot of rejections, and felt totally directionless. I had to do a lot of exploring, and go through a lot of trial and error before I found something that felt a good fit for me. Job hunting can be really, really hard and demoralising, but struggle and rejection are part of working life, it's all good training.

When leaving university, I found it quite hard to find a full time, professional role. I ended up falling into recruitment and stayed in the industry 1 ½ year. After this I decided that I wanted to work in the social enterprise, 3<sup>rd</sup>, voluntary sector which was a lot harder to find the right role in. It took me around 9 months to find the right role and company.

I was fortunate to have a graduate position waiting for me when I graduated. This was a result of spending one year with the organisation (infrastructure company). I did apply for other positions during my final year at university though, getting to the latter stages of some assessment processes and being offered a couple of other graduate roles. Other roles I went for included questionnaires that I didn't always progress due to the personalities the organisations were looking for. I think the key thing to highlight for me is how important and beneficial the year in industry was for my career (it helped me progress into a role sooner at my current company too).

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I've done a lot of job hunting since graduating! I found it very difficult to find a full-time job, so for a while I worked in 2 (or 3!) part-time jobs. For a long time, I worked 2 jobs which were 3 days each so working 6 days a week, because that's all I could get. My first full-time job was an internship (as part of a graduate scheme), which was obviously fixed-term. Then my first permanent full-time job, followed in my field. My success rate for interviews was maybe 1 in 5 applications, I feel like I've done a lot of them. And maybe out of 10 interviews I've done, I've been given expenses for just one.

Easy to find a graduate job and then secure a permanent position. More difficult to progress due to lack of opportunities with organisation.

Lots of opportunities available - sometimes too many and difficult to know which direction to take. Highly competitive roles - it's hard to compete with others unless you're a specialist in something and it's hard to become a specialist if people won't take a chance on you. I have found it fairly easy to get jobs I have built specialist skills in but a lot more difficult to branch out into different roles. The process of applying for jobs is dull, uninviting and the whole process can be intense. I think it's getting more rigorous.

I have found it very difficult to go through the job search process since graduating. I have found that there is a lack of opportunities for recent graduates, as most roles I have applied for I have been unsuccessful due to a lack of experience. Although I completed a number of different work experiences/volunteering whilst undertaking my degree, I have been told a number of times that this is not enough. The only positive experience I have had so far is in securing my current role as a Retail Sales Assistant, and although I am grateful to have the opportunity to work, I would like a position where I am stretched and challenged to a further extent.

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To be honest it's really tough. Education doesn't prepare you in the slightest for navigating the world of work and there is no satisfactory support to help you either. It's one of those things I feel people are expected to survive for rather than get any practical help or advice. It has caused me a great deal of stress and anxiety. One good thing I would say is that my internship (of which I in part found out about through volunteering) has helped me enormously moving forwards. Internships I feel are a really positive step in supporting people post education and helping them work out what they want. A bad experience (of which there are many) would be that I really regret chasing after what I thought was help and support when it turned out to be very unhelpful.

Pretty tough! Recruitment processes are often overwhelming and scary. They also tend to concentrate more on your academic skills and much less on your personality. For example, many of the grad schemes want you to complete a Maths test through the recruitment process, I'm terrible at Maths and therefore often avoided those grad schemes. I was also very aware of the competition and coming from a non-redbrick university, I felt it was, at times, pointless in me applying.



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It's really hard with lots of hurdles. First, you're figuring out what you want based on what you're like and what you've done. Next, where do you find the jobs that fit. It's not as simple as looking in one place. It could be social media, researching specific organisations, job sites, networking, ex-colleagues. You're looking at whether those people are hiring, the type of role, the organisation, and the field. After all that, if you find something, and it's more likely you don't, you have to compromise. You're working on what's there and what you want, then make yourself believe that's what you want. It's difficult to create your own job in your 20s. It's more likely later in your career. The application processes as a whole are so long. Pointless information, it's not standardized, inputting again and again the same information. It's soul-destroying taking hours rejigging what you've already done. It's often a tick box exercise so really hard to get across who you are as a person. It always involves an application form which seems a really out-of-date approach. Prior to interview, it devoids you of a personality in a lot of ways. You're thinking about how many applied, who you are you up against, and are you going to get a chance. I've found it significantly less stressful at interview stage. It can be formulaic but because you are there, if you don't get it then it's about performing on the day. The bit that frustrates me the most is the application process, how lengthy it is, will I get looked at and the finding of the right roles. You're never sure you've crossed that hurdle. It feels demeaning in a lot of ways.

Fairly frustrating. A lot is based on applying online these days. You spend a lot of time shooting in the dark. It removes that interaction with people you're applying to. When I've been more successful finding jobs it's always been through friends or word of mouth, meeting someone. Then through those jobs you find more jobs. Referrals. You feel lost in a sea of other people applying for same jobs as you. Hard to have strong direction. I was applying for stuff not related to my degree. Then I turned to learning a trade.

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So far, at 23 my job searching experience has been a mixture of successes and failures. Coming out of university I had managed to gain an internship through the University. The process was long, yet rewarding. After my internship had ended however I found that it became a much harder and more grueling experience. This was due to ratio of jobs I'd applied to how many interviews I was invited to.

## What helped or is helping you?

Nothing has, I'm going to have to network until I find an in to the industry.

I was doing all of this whilst in my final year of university, so the quicker they are to get you in for a face to face meeting, the better! But I was surrounded by a group of people who were all applying and being rejected just as much as I did, so that really helped, knowing I wasn't the only one! I found I wasn't really getting anywhere with actual 'graduate schemes', so changed my search for entry-level jobs instead!

My old university is helping me and online job boards.

While university offered many employability and careers services, I tried them, but found them too impersonal. I did not start job hunting till this summer as I wanted to focus in my studies and reached out for help, as I felt quite lost. I found a mentor who supported me throughout. Having guidance of a mentor was hugely beneficial for me. She asked the questions that I was possibly to scared to ask myself. I was able to write my own story and internalise it, which gaveme the confidence to reach out to the right people at the right time.

Network - have kept in touch with old bosses who have helped me with introducing me to potential employment. Recruiters help too by bridging graduates and employers together. They also helped in terms of practice interviews, prep you by giving you information on who will interview you, what kind of questions would come, etc. All three jobs that I've had since graduating have come from recruiters.

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I think my experience has helped me. Since I was qualified to teach English, I've been teaching at summer schools.

Finding someone who is a couple of years out of the graduate scene and getting their advice is great.

Putting things into perspective and realising I am not the only one in this position. I know I will eventually find something right for me.

Psychologically: it can be so tough, destabilising, and demoralising going through the job hunt. Even if you're one of those people that gets the first thing you apply for, there's always that potential for the "is this really the right path" existential crisis. Psychologically, what helped me, was to turn the job hunt into a social thing. I used to meet up with a couple mates who were in the same boat, swap stories, read each other's applications, sit with each other trawling through job sites and LinkedIn. Sharing that experience softens it, and helps you reflect and learn better. Also, working at maintaining the stuff that feeds your soul. You are not your job, or your job hunt, but work can be all-consuming. Make sure you protect time to do whatever it is that sustains you - for me it was playing music. Practically: Learning what networking means and getting good at it. I used my dissertation as an excuse to contact interesting people "for research". It genuinely supported my dissertation, but also helped me make some key introductions that led to me getting work.

Family and friends support, understanding the right job boards, areas to look in.

A year in industry was very helpful. In addition, attending workshops with universities proved helpful (this is where I met myself and others!). In terms of helping my career currently, networking events are crucial - the Young Rail Professional is a fantastic example of this.

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I think what helps is all the regular emails that exist, and social media for jobs, there's lots of places you can find jobs yourself. I've found recently that recruiters are finding me on LinkedIn which will hopefully be useful at some point! I honestly found the advice from you really useful in how to judge whether jobs are suitable, I now look more at quality over quantity. You also gave me great advice on my CV which really helped! I was quite lucky that I was interviewed for a job by my mentor and it went pretty badly!! But she was able to give me really amazing (and brutal!) feedback, which has changed my whole approach to interviews and seems to be working!

Working from the age of 16 has helped, always having plenty of examples when completing application forms and at interview. Having a mentor has also helped.

Building networks and personal presence within a specific field.

I find certain websites have been useful for a more specific job search, for example [charityjob.co.uk](http://charityjob.co.uk) and [Doing Good Leeds](http://Doing Good Leeds). I have also found that advice from my parents has been very useful, as they both are in two very different job sectors and therefore have a range of advice to give.

Participating in an internship is hugely helpful for me. I would never have had this opportunity if it wasn't for the scheme I was on. I really hope more employers take note of what my current employer has achieved.

Throughout my years at university I got my hands on every work experience, internship and summer job going - often in very different environments. It helped me identify what my strengths and weaknesses were and where I might like to end up working. In the end, I spent every summer working in summer schools with adolescents and now I'm training to be a children's social worker.

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Doing a lot of applications helps because it speeds up the process as you've done a lot of the work. More a case of rejigging old stuff to make it fit with the new specification. People are asking for the same attributes mostly. Finding good localised websites appropriate for your job search, location and field condensed in one place. You accept it's the only way to get a job, everyone else has to do it. I could stay in jobs longer but I like the change, so it's my choice. A mindset thing. It's easier when you have a break from it. The last thing you want to do when you're in a job is do an application at the end of the day. You don't have the mind space to be actively engaged. Good to get feedback from friends and family. You get stuck in a rut using the same examples. You end up stripping them back and making the more job specific.

Getting advice from friends who have been successful in getting jobs such as writing CVs. Showing that you're willing to commit yourself such as volunteering. That led to a job there.

At this current moment, I'm not job seeking (going travelling). What I found helped at the time was speaking to those who had been through it before, older siblings and friends who had had similar experiences. On top of this, the University provided support for me and still does, placing me in recruitment processes and helping me with job searches.

## What did not help or is not helping you?

The university did nothing to help my employment chances, they promised an internship at an SME and it ended up being a charity workshop for crafts. The government also provide no assurance and thought that it would be beneficial to help graduates into employment (if they ever want their student loans paid back).

I remember hating psychometric tests! I found they were so unfair and really didn't help me showcase what I was like as a 'person'. Endless online application forms didn't help me either, nor did user-unfriendly websites!

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Some applications request for your CV to be uploaded and then also want you to fill out an education/employment history section. Therefore, repeating yourself and wasting time.

What does not help is trying to focus on who you are right now. Really try to focus on who you want to be and build your network and CV around that.

The cost of getting a visa and all the hoops I have to jump through isn't helpful at the moment!

A lot of jobs are still very male dominated at senior level, it would have been great to have more diverse managers, in terms of gender, ethnicity etc.

Pressure from family, friends and peers to find a job immediately, and not understanding perhaps how over-crowded and difficult the legal market is.

I suppose everything helps, in a way. General job hunt sites were pretty useless when I was first looking for work - it felt like they were all looking for people with experience, the application processes were inflexible and impersonal. Now that I have experience, I find them very useful.

Lack of feedback from applications/interviews. No real structured support from university – just the generic answer with a STAR response in interviews etc.

Trying to be someone I wasn't, be yourself and don't copy other individuals is some advice I would give to graduates. Don't let your degree suffer as a result of volunteering, applying for jobs, working part-time etc. (I've seen this happen with some of my peers!)



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I think what is not helping is how competitive jobs are! People with PhDs are going for junior jobs so it's really hard to get an edge. I did my unpaid internship when I already had a Master's degree and quite a bit of experience under my belt. The thing I found most difficult recently is how to get out of work when you have an interview. Sometimes it's really difficult to take annual leave at short notice, I recently had 4 interviews and found it extremely stressful trying to find excuses and "appointments" to get me out the office.

Lack of opportunities to progress. I enjoy my job but it's not always clear what the next step is.

Competition.

I've found that employers in particular are not helping me for a number of reasons. They often claim that their job is entry level/graduate level and needs no prior experience, yet take on someone who has years of relevant experience. This leads to graduates having very few opportunities available, and can often be a waste of time. Employers tend to not want to take chances on graduates in my experience, and the experiences of my friends, and this is really unhelpful. I've found there is also very little that the University is able to do to help me other than practice interview questions, and their job opportunities mostly lie in a similar field so do not apply to all graduates.

The biggest unhelpful thing at the moment is people who give such generic, unhelpful advice about your career path whenever you try and seek support. It just doesn't really exist anywhere unless you already have contacts who will go out of their way to help you. I have been fortunate enough to acquire a valuable contact who is going to offer me support, but it is still hard.

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A criticism of my university is that my motivation to get experience during my degree came from my own drive. I think that this should be something all universities focus on, because now I know a lot of grads that have a good degree but no work experience and end up getting jobs in coffee shops and supermarkets.

I can't find anything I feel excited about. Am I looking in the wrong place or the types of roles are not there in the third sector. I'm looking for part-time jobs which is more difficult because there aren't as many. There's an experience gap. Employers are asking for experience when the job you're applying for would give you it. I'd vouch for employment on you as a person. You shouldn't be judged on your experience in your 20s, it should be more on potential. You could have 5 years in something crap but no experience of change.

Trying to figure out what employers really want. In my trade, a lot are asking for 5 years' experience. I'm applying for apprenticeships now which wasn't really on the table before.

Comparing yourself to those of your peers who are close to you that have managed to overcome what to me seemed like a difficult thing. The university help to an extent, reading over CVs and cover letters. However, they don't prepare you for interviews. This was quite a daunting experience fresh out of university having only really done 'informal' interviews for part time jobs. Interviewers not providing feedback on applications. This would allow me focus on what it I needed to do improve myself.

## Any other views on job searching in your 20s?

There's no appreciation for the hunger and they expect you to have so much experience by this age but don't understand that education takes a vast majority of time growing up.

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I don't think it's difficult to find jobs as there's plenty on the jobs boards. I think the application processes are difficult and there's a lot of competition which is why some young people find it hard to get a job after graduating.

Recruiters definitely help.

I think it's generally difficult for people in their 20s to get a job because employers are looking for both experience and education, but experience is difficult to come by in certain areas and education is expensive.

I guess time is on my side, but it's not really been a happy hunting ground for me! As I said, there's a lot of pressure to find a job, and the whole process is very repetitive and mundane. It's difficult to stand out on a Word Document and any subsequent interview days. I think companies/recruiters need to be a bit more creative and give us something different to be assessed by, and really get to know the person. People can be quite different at an assessment day to what they are actually like - I have experienced that first hand!

It takes a great deal of resilience to make your way in the job-hunt, that you need to work on strategies to look after yourself mentally as much as the practical, systematic work of finding job opportunities.

I think it takes a long time to build your confidence for interviews, especially if you don't get the job straight away, or receive any feedback whatsoever. I think at the time I was applying (5 years ago) I wasn't as well networked in the sector, and I didn't really know the best place to look for opportunities. If you were applying for a job at a university you'd look at Jobs.ac.uk. Also jobs in my sector are not in demand i.e. there is a gap in digital / engineering / construction, so perhaps easier to get a job. If I were to look for a job now, I'd say networking would be my first point of call.

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Be yourself! Be resilient (you will get knock backs), use your support network, use your university, join LinkedIn, read the paper (I got asked at interviews the current interest rate, and 3 major things in the news this week for example - some graduates don't know this stuff!).

Job searching in your 20s is really hard! But also really exciting! Even though I was a little unconventional juggling part time jobs for about 4 years because that was my only option, it meant I got really broad experience, and got to try a few different avenues. I looked at job hunting in my 20s as a bit of a process of elimination. Now I'm in the early 30s I feel a bit more specialised and a bit more selective about the jobs I apply for....

It's a difficult process and I think employers need to take more leaps of faith and encourage the success and development of graduates, rather than dismiss them due to a lack of experience.

I don't think people really appreciate just how hard it is for people in their 20s navigating employment and reaching their full potential. The support just doesn't exist for the majority of people to access and I believe that it should not be a fight for survival which is what it feels like currently. My view is in the future employers should be more flexible and more willing to appreciate people's value and potential rather than degrading them and offering no practical solutions or advice. Universities and government also have a part to play in addressing this problem.

I wish I had a bit more confidence in my abilities and applied for those jobs that I thought were out of my "league".



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I know loads of people in their 20s who don't have a particular laid-out profession from their degree. It's hard when doing an application that it's really obvious you don't have direction. People are finding their feet and trying to find things out. For me, it's a source of insecurity. It should be seen as a positive that you've done lots of different things. Shows you aren't scared to change. People associate length of time with commitment, development and dedication to a role. From my experience, I've seen people stay in jobs too long and pass on their bad practices. It's harder for them to make things better because they don't reflect and step outside to see how things are. I really hate the question at interviews when they say, 'I see you've moved around a lot and not stayed anywhere very long, are you going to be committed to this role?' How do they know what my commitment was like when I was there? It's more about what you do when you are there. Six months is a decent amount of time to be there and show commitment. Employers need to understand that about this generation as it's more and more common. It's not as easy to have a set career or profession now. Everything is changing at an exponential rate.

I think more vocational training rather than everyone going for degrees. And more options for older people to do apprenticeships. It's cheaper for an employer to take on an apprentice under 19 because they can pay them less. Easier in some European countries to get an apprenticeship at any age.

The way in which I approached job searching required a colour-coordinated Excel spreadsheet to keep track of all the jobs and interviews. This I found was a helpful tool for myself as it visually laid out my progress and highlighted the areas I needed to focus on to make myself a more desirable candidate. (That's IF the company were courteous enough to provide interview feedback).

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## Top takeaways

1. Explore during your 20s to become clearer on your direction.
2. Focus on who you want to be and build your network and CV around that.
3. Don't copy others or try to be someone you are not.
4. Be patient to find the right role for you.
5. Build confidence by using the learning from rejections and your struggles.
6. Soften the experience by making the job search more fun and social.
7. Get mutual support from friends and peers also going through the job search.
8. Work at feeding your soul by protecting time to do whatever sustains you.
9. Be resilient using strategies to look after yourself mentally.
10. Build a network of potential employers at different levels.
11. Contact interesting people for research to build networking skills.
12. Keep in touch with former bosses.
13. Go to professional events related to your field or interests.
14. Find the right way to ask for support, advice, introductions, and referrals.
15. Get a mentor/coach (including Alumni) for guidance and to be challenged.
16. Be on LinkedIn to get found by recruiters/employers.

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17. Use recruiters as part of your job search strategy.
18. Get organised to be ready and available for job interviews.
19. Focus on quality over quantity of job applications.
20. Stay up-to-date with current affairs so you don't get caught out at interviews.
21. Develop specialist skills and/or enough depth and breadth in other areas.
22. Do paid internships to increase your experience and credibility.
23. See job searching in your 20s as a process of elimination.

## Conclusion

The evidence from this group of graduates suggests a haphazard journey of finding a job that fits, picking up skills and insights through trial and error, and managing expectations in the light of experience. While every individual's experience, approach, and ambitions are personal, there are some common themes around relationship-building and self-management.

Happily, most of these graduates are succeeding despite perceived barriers around existing recruitment processes and the quality of career advice. Nonetheless, dull assessment and conformity to playing the game can stifle authenticity. Every generation deserves attraction, selection, and retention by employers in effective and engaging ways. Everyone wins when hiring is designed deliberately to enable young people to show their full capabilities and potential.

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In conclusion, what stands out from these graduate voices is the desire not to settle for less, persistence, and adaptability. Life after graduating can be exciting and daunting. Some struggle more than others with navigating their way through uncertainty and fragmented career advice. Yet, graduates have a greater chance of success when they:

1. recognise and adopt a balance between optimism and realism in finding meaningful work;
2. have a mix of the right support and guidance, personal initiative and responsibility, and the know-how you need to engage with an ever-changing job market; and
3. take ownership of their ongoing learning to stay up-to-date and be employable.

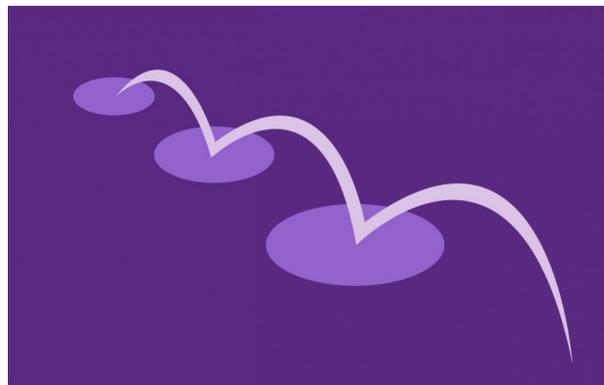
That's a solid platform from which to explore during your 20s. It's a time to learn about who you want to be, to identify your contribution to the world, and how best to manage yourself along the way. Because career navigating needs **21st Century skill sets and mindsets** in an uncertain world.

**And finally...**

# Check out Learning to Leap!

Career Coaching, Online Courses, Blogs, and Books to help you become clearer, more confident, and purposeful so you choose the right job and career actions for you.

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