

Programming Career Q&A

# When Your GPA Is Less than Stellar and Other Obstacles

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**N**o one ever said getting a job would be easy. First-time job seekers have to overcome lots of obstacles to be competitive. But a willingness to work hard and gain experience can lead to success.

Martin Yate, New York Times best-selling author of the *Knock 'em Dead* books and the new *Knock 'em Dead 2009: The Ultimate Job Search Guide*, says, "One of the biggest obstacles is getting your foot in the door. You are entering your 50-year work life. You have to get some experience and then leverage it."

### Check your aim.

Margaret Rooney, a graduate of Elmhurst College in communications agrees. She says, "I was shocked when an interviewer called me 'green.' I've worked since I was 14, so felt I was pretty qualified for many of the jobs for which I had applied. It was a rude awakening." Rooney kept her options open and broadened her search. "I realized I needed to aim a little lower. I tried to think more long-term and recognized that I had to start at the beginning." She accepted a job with Emmis Interactive in office administration. Eight months into the job, she's gotten her first promotion.

### Accentuate the positives.

In the highly competitive job market for college grads, having a less than stellar GPA may seem like a big obstacle, too. But don't panic. Julie Doman, a director for the retained executive and management search firm Victory Search Group, says, "In most cases, there is always a way that your college experience can be highlighted positively. If there was an area in which you excelled, talk about it."

Doman recommends isolating job-related courses; for example, you may be able to say you had a 3.5 in your core engineering or finance classes. If you started out in one field of study and switched majors to a subject for which you were better suited, focus on that part of your GPA.

She also notes, "If your grades suffered somewhat because you had to balance work and school to put yourself through college or pay for part of your education, make a note of it either in your cover letter or with a bullet point on your résumé. Many employers appreciate this effort and may make grades less of an issue."

### Be persistent.

Dani VanHouten's roadblock had nothing to do with grades, she graduated with a 3.9. Hers was more about geography. VanHouten really wanted to work in Toronto where her boyfriend lived. During her junior year as an accounting major at Northwood University, she started cold calling businesses in Toronto seeking an internship opportunity.

"It was really hard, as many of the companies didn't have a local HR contact," says VanHouten. The Ernst & Young office where she now works wasn't actively looking for US-based interns, either. "I found them. They said they wanted me to call back in the spring, but I really wanted this opportunity. I told them I was going to be in Toronto in November and would like to talk with them then. They agreed, and I was offered an internship for the summer. VanHouten joined E & Y's Toronto office after graduation as a staff accountant for their US tax practice, where she works with Canadian companies with US subsidiaries.

### Compensate with experience.

That's exactly what happened to Angela B., customer relationship manager at a major transportation company. Halfway through her freshman year, her mother passed away. She went back home to help with the family business. Then her father passed away.

"Life happens," says Angela. "I had to get a job and put my education on hold. I took a position in customer service for a large bank and handled calls that escalated to the president."

She has parlayed that experience into a solid career in customer service management. Now she's looking to finish her degree in an accelerated program online.

### Test the waters.

Michelle Payne faced other obstacles. She started out at a community college taking specialized classes, first thinking she wanted to go into education. She changed her mind and tried a few business classes. Next it was fashion merchandising.

"While it was helpful to explore these different areas, I realize now that I should have started out with getting my gen ed classes. Taking these 'fun' courses doesn't translate into transferable credits," says Payne.

Last year, at age 22, she underwent open-heart surgery to correct a congenital heart defect. This spurred her interest in cardiology and a desire to work with patients like herself. Payne now works for Midwest Heart Specialists in Naperville, IL, in reception and patient accounts.

"I wanted to see firsthand what was involved in the administrative and clinical sides of the business." Payne is planning to go back to school part-time to get her associate degree in applied sciences.



### Try a new approach.

Andrew Standaert, who majored in magazine journalism at Columbia College, found it wasn't an easy field to get into as he began his search for internships and jobs. One of his instructors, an operations manager at Neiman Marcus, helped him obtain an internship at the store during the holiday season. He went on to work full-time at Neiman's, while juggling his journalism courses.

Upon graduating, Standaert applied at a number of magazines without much success. That's when he decided to look seriously within the company for opportunities.

"I initiated a conversation with my boss last summer and created a PowerPoint presentation to show my desired path to ultimately work in corporate marketing and publications."

Gaining in-store experience was an important step, so Standaert accepted a transfer to the company's San Francisco location to become the Gift Galleries and Children's Manager.

"When I realized the doors weren't really opening to me, I had to try a different door."

### Continue self-improvement.

Some may consider an online degree an obstacle compared to earning a degree on campus. Not Daniel Bates. He's one of the first graduates from Axia College of the University of Phoenix, which is structured to allow students the flexibility to earn their degree online while earning a living.

After high school, Bates enlisted in the US Navy and served in Operation Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom as a Navy flight line manager and aviation airframe and power plant mechanic. With a desire to stay in aerospace upon completing his outstanding military service, Bates took an entry-level mechanic job at Gulfstream Aerospace and immediately enrolled in Axia.

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"Upper management noticed that I was working hard to better myself. When I earned my associate's degree in business management, I got promoted and nearly doubled my pay."

He's now a product support engineer at BE Aerospace and is just a few weeks away from completing his MBA with University of Phoenix.

"I have worked very hard and given up most of my free time and family time to come this far, but it was absolutely worth it. If I hadn't pursued my degree, I'd still be turning wrenches."

### Start early.

A final word of advice, Yates suggests starting as early as possible to gain experience.

"Don't wait until graduation, start now. The best people are always hired by the time graduation rolls around."

### About the Author

As Collegiate Marketing Manager, **Megan Stumph** leads the marketing effort that drives college students and recent college graduates to **cbCampus.com**, **CareerBuilder.com's** college job search site. In this role, Stumph works to bring relevant content to cbCampus.com to help college students and recent college graduates find internships, part-time jobs and after-graduation careers. Stumph also manages strategic relationships with career centers across the country, supporting the centers with job search resources. Prior to her role as Collegiate Marketing Manager, Stumph worked as an account manager and sales team leader at CareerBuilder.com. Before joining CareerBuilder.com, Stumph worked for BMG Distribution and Sony Music. During her college years at the University of Iowa, she was actively involved in the campus radio station. She may be reached at [Megan.stumph@careerbuilder.com](mailto:Megan.stumph@careerbuilder.com).