



What a Hiring Manager Can Learn from Candidate's #FirstSevenJobs

Workplace experts reflect on hashtag trending on Twitter

By Dana Wilkie

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Chances are that, by the time a young adult applies for her first job out of college, she will already have had a wealth of work experience—maybe as a waitress, lifeguard, dishwasher, telemarketer, sitter, dog walker and newspaper deliverer.

And while those may sound like menial jobs, the sharp hiring manager can learn a lot about a candidate's professionalism, people skills and problem-solving approaches by asking about her first work experiences.

"These first jobs can potentially tell HR a lot about a young professional's ability to take initiative," said Ryan Gilliam, founder of the business coaching company Creating Success Associates in Orange Park, Fla., and author of *The Cost of Greatness* (Lulu Publishing Services, 2016). "For example, were they self-starters by being proactive about the position? Did they go above and beyond what the job required, or did they do the bare minimum? Did they seek opportunities for personal growth and professional development? The positions don't always tell a lot about someone, but the way they approached the opportunity does."

Trending on Twitter lately has been the hashtag #firstsevenjobs (www.shrm.orghttps://twitter.com/i/moments/762017894775390208) which inspired celebrities like comedian Stephen Colbert (www.shrm.orghttps://twitter.com/StephenAtHome/status/762295753981173760), former astronaut Buzz Aldrin (www.shrm.orghttps://twitter.com/TheRealBuzz/status/762306275107540992) and actress Mira Sorvino (www.shrm.orghttps://twitter.com/MiraSorvino/status/762297058518667264) to share their first work gigs. It all started when one Twitter user, Marian Call, tweeted her own first seven jobs (baby-sitting and working as a janitor were the first two).



Stephen Colbert
@StephenAtHome

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#firstsevenjobs construction, bus boy, cafeteria server, library data entry, futon frame maker, futon salesman, waiter

9:34 AM - 7 Aug 2016

732

5,890



Buzz Aldrin
@TheRealBuzz

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Mira Sorvino
@MiraSorvino

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24 143

"Junior candidates do not bring a proven track record or a perspective that is based on real-life work experience," said Roy Cohen, career coach and author of *The Wall Street Professional's Survival Guide* (FT Press, 2010). "Their early work experience must be factored into the interview process so as to paint a more reliable picture of their potential to be successful on the job."

Lessons for Future Work

More than half of teenagers worked summer jobs in the 1970s and 1980s (www.shrm.orghttp://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/06/23/the-fading-of-the-teen-summer-job/), while now about one in three do, according to a 2015 survey from the Pew Research Center, a nonprofit think tank based in Washington, D.C. Teenagers are instead volunteering, participating in extracurricular

educational programs or pursuing other activities that can help their college applications. (www.shrm.org<http://www.marketwatch.com/story/american-teens-refuse-to-get-jobs-2016-06-10>)

While a young adult's college experience, volunteer work and unpaid internships give an employer a glimpse of the candidate's potential, it's those very first jobs that can reveal a lot about how well he or she will fit in at a company.

The job titles themselves may say something about the applicant—that "they are willing to roll up their sleeves if the job is tedious or messy," Cohen said.

"Jobs that are not so easy or pristine, like washing pots or working an assembly line, show grit and a lack of entitlement," he said. Such jobs, he said, "also show that you know what it's really like to work."

Moreover, those early jobs can demonstrate whether an applicant has the qualities an employer is looking for in a new hire.

"Nothing sets up a young person for success in life better than low-wage employment," said Andrew D. Wittman, founder of Get Warrior Tough, a performance training, coaching and consulting company in Greenville, S.C. "Those jobs provide a controlled and low-risk environment to practice problem-solving, conflict resolution, working within a budget and time management."

In addition, said Cohen, such work may show that candidates "understand and appreciate the meaning of customer service and its impact on the bottom line. That they are accountable. It is easy to slide when there is no money involved, [but when you're paid to do a job] you learn an important lesson about how to make the best of a tough situation."

What a Hiring Manager Can Learn

Asking for details about a young applicant's very first jobs can be "an excellent fact-based indicator of their willingness to work, attitude, ability to be a team player and approach to dealing with customers in a stressful environment," Wittman said.

"A job interview is akin to speed dating," he said. "The HR person needs to assess whether or not to enter into a committed relationship with the applicant based on a resume and what the applicant's references say about them."

Martin Yate is an executive resume writer, a career columnist for the Society for Human Resource Management and the author of *Knock 'Em Dead 2016: The Ultimate Job Search Guide* (Adams Media, 2016). He said an interviewer can ask about the responsibilities involved in those first jobs to figure out if a candidate is willing to do whatever it takes to get the work done. Questions about how a candidate handled difficult situations with customers or co-workers can reveal much about communication skills. Inquiring about how one handled a manager's nebulous instructions can point to resourcefulness.

Said Wittman: "As an HR manager interviewing a candidate, I need to really ascertain two things about the person: Are they problem-oriented or solution-oriented? And do they solve conflict or create it?"

To determine if someone is solution-oriented, Wittman suggested asking, "Can you tell me about a time you creatively solved a problem at work?" Follow up with, "What was your thought process?"

To determine if someone will create or solve conflicts, he said, ask, "Can you tell me about a time you solved a conflict with a difficult co-worker?" Follow up with, "What was your part in the difficulty?"

"The pattern should indicate that higher-value problems are being solved [with each job]," he said. "We want to see that a candidate isn't just making a series of lateral moves, which could indicate they may not get along well with others, or at the very least, they

won't stay very long."

To determine an applicant's approach to customer service, Gilliam suggested asking how the applicant knew he or she was providing good service in a past role. Ask for specific examples, he said.

In his book, Yate suggested several other interview questions to ask about a young applicant's first jobs, including:

- Which summer job did you enjoy most?
- How many levels of management did you interact with?
- What was the job's biggest challenge?
- Tell me about a responsibility you enjoyed.
- What was your least valuable work experience?
- What did you do to show initiative and a willingness to work in that job?
- What experience have you had in leadership positions?
- When the pressure of work was high, where did your energy come from?
- Tell me about a time when unexpected events demanded that you reschedule your time.
- Tell me how you verbally convinced someone of an approach or an idea.
- Tell me about a time when you compromised successfully.
- Tell me about a time when someone lost his or her temper with you in a business environment.
- Have you ever worked in a place where it seemed to be one crisis after another?
- What makes you tense or nervous?
- What is the most frustrating work-related experience you have ever faced?
- What did you do in a situation when you were being pressed to make a decision?

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