

## Advanced Degree, Entry-Level Job? Reconcile Your Ambitions with Employers' Expectations

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Earning an advanced college degree is a huge accomplishment, especially if you're only in your early 20s. But for many employers, it won't fully substitute for something that's even more critical to them: Experience.

"There will always be employers that believe education is a complement to, rather than a replacement for, relevant, related workplace experience," says Brendan Courtney, senior vice president and group executive for Spherion Professional Services Group. "Hiring decisions are typically made based on one's ability to perform the job and deliver the expected results -- not solely on one's academic knowledge preparing for a job."

So if you're planning to go right into a graduate program immediately after finishing your bachelor's degree -- or if you've already done it -- be prepared for potential conflict between prospective employers' expectations and yours. The type of job you ultimately land with your graduate degree, not to mention its accompanying salary, may be more entry-level than you might think.

### Having an Advanced Degree May Mean Special Job-Hunt Tactics

That's the reality 27-year-old Kelly King had to accept. In 2001, she earned her master's degree in marketing communication after finishing her bachelor's degree in communication the year before at Florida State University.

"I completed my bachelor's [degree] in three years and felt that sticking around to graduate with my class, but with an advanced degree, would be an asset, both to me and potential employers," says King. "The most difficult pill to swallow was that this was not true and, in fact, getting a master's may have actually hindered my initial ability to get a job."

Why? Because employers assumed she'd demand a higher salary than her early-20-something peers would, even though she had little practical experience. Indeed, she quickly learned her resume was routinely being passed over -- and that it would continue to be ignored unless she was able to get in front of employers and explain her true intentions and expectations.

"So I met a company executive in a social setting and was able to convince him of my talent and drive and willingness to be entry-level before he ever saw my resume and had the opportunity to set it aside and choose someone 'cheaper,'" says King, now a partner in Fulcrum Business Solutions. "In the end, the position I gained was entry-level, but I was given much more responsibility and at a far greater pace than my peers."

### Making Peace with Entry-Level Reality

Twenty-four-year-old Liz, who asked that her real name not be used, a public relations professional at a Midwestern university, found it equally discouraging to swallow the idea that her recently completed master's degree in management wouldn't necessarily lead to a higher-paying mid- or high-level job. Having a twin brother who had just finished his MBA didn't help.

"But ultimately, I realized that he and I are in very different fields, and sometimes certain sacrifices, like long hours and cutthroat competition, just aren't worth the higher salary," Liz says. "Finding a nurturing environment where I could cultivate my existing skills was important to me."

That's exactly what she has in her current position, and she credits her master's degree with helping her narrow her focus and sharpen her communication skills in a setting not unlike the one she's working in now.

Both women say that if they had to do it all over again, they'd still pursue their graduate degrees right after finishing their bachelor's degrees -- but that they'd invest more time and energy gaining experience through internships or volunteer activities. They both also stress, as do others, that once you've come to terms with the notion of pursuing an entry-level job with your graduate degree, it's critical for you to communicate to prospective employers -- in your cover letter or, better yet, a live conversation -- your willingness to start at entry-level and prove your way up.

"Show initiative and a willingness to do whatever it takes to advance," says Jennifer Kushell, cofounder of YSN.com -- Your Success Network and author of *Secrets of the Young & Successful*. "An advanced degree coupled with a more comprehensive understanding of the business, grounded in reality and not theory, is sure to help you make the most of your degree."

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