

What History Majors Can Do Personally to Get (And Succeed In) Jobs and Careers in Business and Tech

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Company executives and historians need each other. But each group knows relatively little about what the other group does. Historians and management often do not speak each other's languages and don't realize the potential to solve each other's most pressing challenges. Here, we want to suggest how this can be changed: how historians can add value to companies while engaging in solid, fascinating, and well paying jobs, regardless of whether they have undergraduate or advanced degrees in history. The American Historical Association has tracked hundreds of its members who add value to organizations in the private sector. You too can pursue a rewarding career in business and here we want to help you understand some good ways to start.

Your options have most often been defined for you very narrowly: teach at the K-12 levels or in college; become a park ranger or a diplomat; work at a library, museum, or archive; or join your family's business (a step often thought to involve a radical break with your liberal arts education, as opposed to a move that builds on it). Most of your history professors know little more than you do about options.

We propose that to broaden your career options, you stop thinking about yourself as history majors and historians and start identifying with the skills your history training has provided you. Start by thinking of history as the source of development of extremely useful skills: the ability to research diverse topics, analyze various sources and problems, formulate hypotheses about solutions to complex challenges, and communicate your findings to different audiences. Think of history as the Mother of All Case Studies. Your teachers and professors used historical case studies to teach you those other skills, which you can use to pursue interesting careers in diverse, cool companies and across fascinating, impactful industries. Other humanities and social science disciplines also teach you valuable skills. As history students, you chose to use the broadest source of learning examples that encompass other social sciences. Instead of thinking of yourself, for example, as someone who knows a lot about making vanilla ice cream, think of yourself as someone who can make any kind of ice cream, milk-based deserts, and even can learn quickly to bake cookies and cakes, if that is what your employer wants. So, begin by reshaping how you think about yourself.

When you do that, instead of being held captive in traditional historians' jobs, many of which are at the moment shrinking in number or under political siege on both sides of the Atlantic, think of yourselves as potential candidates for the

many tens of millions of jobs in the US economy alone. In over half of those jobs, you could succeed pretty quickly. But to get those jobs, you need to get in the door and persuade the hiring manager that you know how to do a lot more than discuss some historical event (as much fun as that might be!). Remember, only several hundred people make a living being experts on the American Civil War. But millions use the historian's skills in over 185 industries to live out happy, long, and economically successful careers.

Whom Employers Want to Hire

So, recognize what businesses need, want, and will hire.

- Employers increasingly value employees who can adapt fast to new environments and who can perform tasks that robots and AI systems cannot: think critically and creatively, navigate ambiguity, manage complicated, sensitive projects, form judgments based on an understanding of layered contexts, understand various perspectives, "read the room" to communicate effectively with different audiences, and show empathy;
- Employers want people who think analytically and creatively;
- Employers want curious lifelong learners—another cognitive skill;
- Employers want people who can communicate verbally, in presentations, and on paper;
- Employers want team players that can collaborate but also can lead and be independent workers, too.

Recognize Your Marketable Skills Employers Want

Second, recognize what are your real skills. In business language, these are known as your "assets," your "value proposition," your "offering" or "product," and "what you bring to the table" that management acquires by hiring you. Your skills consist of the following:

- Chronological Thinking, (thinking about change over time);
- Historical Comprehension ("reading creatively, so that you can imagine yourself in the roles of the men and women you study," empathy);
- Historical Analysis and Interpretation ("following and evaluating arguments and arriving at usable conclusions based on what evidence you have);"

- Historical Research Skills (finding, evaluating, and contextualizing different kinds of data);
- Historical Issues: Analysis and Decision-Making (being "able to identify issues and problems in the past and to analyze the interests, values, perspectives, and points of view of all of those involved" to understand and evaluate causes and effects of decisions, as well as alternatives to the decisions that people have made in the past);
- Students learn to communicate their ideas, hypotheses, findings, and critical feedback to different kinds of audiences (professors, classmates, and overtime experts and the general publics), and to do so orally, in writing, and increasingly through an array of other mediums such as blogs, podcasts, images, films, and social media posts;
- Students of history develop these diverse and sought-after skills over the course of their training in addition to historical knowledge and geographic or thematic expertise. As they grow, many enter graduate programs, where they engage with more theoretical work, assume more responsibility, work more independently, and come to manage complex research projects. These projects are most often MA theses or PhD dissertations, which require sophisticated analytic skills, knowledge of languages, and ability to communicate research to various audiences; interpersonal and entrepreneurial skills that make it possible to liaise with archivists, librarians, and other scholars; and to supervise graduate student assistants. Many develop sophisticated social media strategies to promote their research globally.

Do the Following to Find Meaningful Careers Outside Traditional History Jobs

- Pick industries that are going to grow in your lifetime, and among those, identify interesting companies to work for. Use online US Bureau of Labor Statistics and US Commerce Department data to pick your target industries; Google industry associations (each has one or more) to ID potential employers; local Chamber of Commerce if you don't want to relocate;
- Use LinkedIn to follow interesting people and to learn about diverse roles, companies, and industries, and about career trends. Use it to connect with people who work on interesting projects, people who inspire you, or who you may simply be curious about;
- Network, network, network! Reach out to people who hold appealing roles in interesting companies and industries. Ask to conduct informational interviews. Many people are busy and won't respond, and that's OK.

Some people will agree to talk to you and you will learn a lot about the jobs they are doing, their companies' cultures and growth opportunities, salaries, skills required, etc.

- Network with other parts of your university (e.g., employment offices) while you are still a student; they won't help once you are graduated;
- Leverage your family's connections outside of academia for interviews. The 6 Degrees of Separation rule is real, and often 3 degrees is all you need. Your family has friends in many industries, and so too do your friends and peers;
- Use Glassdoor to learn about the salaries at specific companies and within industries;
- Write 1-2 page resumes that emphasize skills, not the content of history or historical expertise. Make sure to use words that recruiting software will grab onto because you have to get to a live interview and that requires getting past an AI system. Your local business school tends to teach students how best to write resumes, so ask it for help. History departments sometimes—but not often enough—can help too. There are lots of resume-building tools online, many of them free;
- Research an employer before an interview so that you, too, can ask intelligent questions. Nailing an interview is a skill so get as many as you can to hone your performance;
- In a large organization the key objective is to get hired into it, no matter what the entry-level job. That's because once in, you can find many interesting opportunities that are far more diverse than in academia and, too, within your employer's industry; If still taking classes, consider minors outside of history (e.g., business administration, accounting, environmental studies). Some universities are allowing students to earn professional certifications alongside their formal degrees--if your institution does that, make sure to take advantage of it;
- If you prefer taking 100% history courses, consider choosing classes, writing term papers, and theses and dissertations on more contemporary issues(e.g., in science, technology, business, and economics) because that makes your value increase because then you have contextual knowledge immediately relevant to an employer. Would an employer prefer to hire a history major that understands business practices of the Middle Ages or of the Post-World War II IT Industry? Many of the intellectual/history issues are similar in both instances;
- Attend meet-ups and informational webinars organized by people, organizations, and companies of your interest. You'll be able to learn, and

meet people. You might even become recognizable to future employers, who will see you as more than a dry resume.

Working Outside of History Is Not an Either/Or Decision

A concern for those who have almost completed or finished a PhD is did they just waste a lot of time preparing for a career they no longer will/can pursue? No. They can continue to love history, pursue it aggressively like a sport or hobby, and even research and write while pursuing a career outside academia. This is done all the time. Think of it as a work/life balancing issue.

However, once in another industry or job understand and embrace its values and commit to being successful in that new world as defined by that new career, just as you did when you embraced the academic ethos taught to you in college and graduate school. Thus, when you leave the history profession, assume you will never work as a full-time historian again—move on psychologically, using your academic training for both fun and profit. Continue to maintain connections with friends in academia, of course, and subscribe to those history journals of interest to you.

You can also become a part-time—hobbyist historian of your company or industry which over time can open up new career opportunities, not just jobs over the course of your lifetime. This practice makes you a recognized expert within your employer's organization and across its industry. That research also improves the quality of your insights, hence decision-making, as you move into more senior positions, because you will be informed by questions, issues, and facts that are missed by everyone else in the room.

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