



# *it's not so bad to* **START** *at the* **BOTTOM**

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**IF YOU'RE CURRENTLY A STUDENT** working at what you consider to be a dead-end minimum wage job....well, congrats! Working your way through college is an accomplishment itself and you shouldn't be afraid to share your stories and what you've learned when you are looking forward in your career.

When AgCareers.com polled more than 400 HR professionals in the agricultural industry, the professionals said the most valuable skill set for new employees was work ethic. Work ethic can be described as many things but often encompasses reliability, hard work, professionalism, diligence, positivity, commitment and respect.

"All experiences are learning opportunities, whether they be minimum wage jobs, volunteering or internships," said Sheila Waldrop, Sr. Recruitment Specialist, BASF – The Chemical Company. Companies want to know that you have potential to learn and grow and are looking for transferable skills such as communication, collaboration, focus and innovation. Waldrop adds, "These are skills that everyone should have, no matter what level. For example, you could explain how you worked well as part of a team, whether it be at McDonald's or on a farm."

Muddy mornings detasseling corn, cleaning out a hog barn or working on the family farm demonstrate hard work and teaches you the inner workings of some agricultural operations. Balancing those overnight shifts stocking shelves at the grocery store while taking a full class load teaches you time management, perseverance and dedication.

"Just about every job has some aspect of customer focus, even if the customer isn't external. A customer could be someone in another department, or anyone who relied on you to accomplish something for them," shared Waldrop. Taking a job as a retail clerk will help you develop sales and customer service skills, while being a server hones your ability to work with difficult customers.

Commitment to any entry-level job shows your reliability and diligence. Being punctual is an expected trait of employees at all levels. A small pay check forces you to stick to a budget. You learn cost-saving measures and money management skills.

All job experiences help you learn your likes and dislikes in the work world and guide you in determining your career path.

## **STARTING FULL-TIME**

When you enter your full-time career, organizations really don't want to take the time to teach basic tasks that can so often be learned through part-time work, such as processing a credit card payment, running a mail merge or sending a fax. Your part-time work can teach you basic office or field skills to make the transition to a full-time career easier.

Internships and related work experiences are important in securing full-time employment; the largest percentage of ag companies said their new graduate hires had previous internship or work experience. We can't underestimate the power of internships and jobs in your chosen career field, but all work experience helps you develop needed skills and grow in your career.

## **WORKING YOUR WAY UP**

Starting at the bottom and working your way up can be especially daunting to new graduates, who stereotypically desire immediate rewards and can have a false sense of entitlement. Just because you hold a degree doesn't mean you are entitled to a management role. Be patient; the real life work world can be very different from your collegiate career.

Many organizations have a 'promote from within' culture. This may mean you need to get your foot in the door by taking an entry-level position at the bottom and working your way up.

Growmark's Becky Ropp worked her way up to become the Director of Talent Management. Ropp first interned at Growmark and then started part-time in a secretarial/coordinator position in advertising which led to a full-time communications position, then a marketing role until she was promoted to Director of Talent Management.

Entry-level positions have distinct advantages to consider. Starting at the bottom eases the mentality that you need to 'earn your stripes' before you become a manager; there can be resentment from other employees if a new grad starts at a higher level.

"Working your way up can really help you understand the workings of the organization, where employees are coming from and who the people are that can help you get more done," shared Ropp.

"In order to be successful, you need to really understand what all employees in the organization do," said Carlos Gerle, Training & Development Manager, Murphy-Brown, LLC.

“When you work your way up to a management role, your employees will give you respect because you’ve been there, know what it takes to do their jobs and have experience doing it.”

## TRAINING PROGRAMS

It is difficult to be a productive team member if you don’t understand every aspect of the business. Trainee programs can help new grads sharpen technical proficiencies and hone soft skills such as time management and adaptability.

Many companies offer structured trainee programs that will expose you to day-to-day operations and introduce you to the organization from the ground up with hands-on work. You’ll also be exposed to a large range of departments on a rotational basis, from sales to production and HR to operations. Trainees are given a foundation in all areas of the business to help develop the skills and knowledge needed to assume a management role. Exposure to all of these areas allows you to get to know more people in the organization and build your network.

The structured training programs also have a very clear, detailed

succession plan and timeline. They will probably specify that you will be in the program for X number of months and then be placed in a supervisory role within X months. In general, it can be anywhere from six months to a few years.

Murphy-Brown, LLC has a manager trainee program that can lead to a management role within two years. The timeline is not set in stone, as it depends on the progress of the individual and their flexibility. A willingness to relocate to other locations around the country or even the world will significantly increase the number of opportunities available to you. Management trainees at Murphy-Brown can eventually take on roles such as farm manager, grower relations, resource specialist, production manager, R&D and logistical management, just to name a few. Gerle started as a manager trainee at Murphy-Brown 14 years ago and is now Training & Development Manager in their corporate office. “Don’t be closed to all the options in agriculture; production was the last thing on my mind in college, but it turned out to be a very good career,” said Gerle.

BASF has several different Agro Professional Development Programs for new grads. “They are hired into this

program because they have demonstrated to us, via previous internships, volunteer positions, leadership roles in college and during their interview, that they have potential to be developed within BASF,” shared Waldrop. “These are the people we expect to move into leadership roles and we require that they are mobile.”

Not all companies start employees in a training program right away. Growmark has several training programs for different experience levels; the internship program for college students, but also programs for current employees. The Emerging Leaders program for employees that have been with the organization 2-3 years features a series of courses and gives participants a broader base of knowledge to understand the organization as a whole. The Lead program is for employees that have been with Growmark for 5-10 years and its goal is to develop future executives.

Starting at the bottom can be beneficial and worthwhile for new graduates and young professionals looking for career growth opportunities. Develop work ethic, basic skills and learn about all aspects of the business, all while you earn respect from coworkers and managers. See...it’s not so bad to start at the bottom; there is only one way to go, and that is up!

## *What if I can't*

After years of studying, you’ve finally earned your degree. But your graduation date has passed and you still haven’t landed your dream job. Potential employers are bound to question, or at least wonder, about gaps on your resume after graduation. What are you to do?

**VOLUNTEER:** Not only are you helping a greater cause, you are building and showcasing your skills. Volunteering is also a fantastic networking opportunity.

**INTERN:** Not all internships require you to be currently enrolled and they can lead to a full-time career.

## FIND A JOB

**CONTINUE EDUCATION:** Take a class at a local community college, online, or enroll in graduate school.

**TRAVEL:** No school, no job, no commitments = perfect opportunity to travel! Take this chance to enhance your foreign language skills and explore your adventurous side. Or, combine volunteerism with travel in the Peace Corps or another mission group.

**JOIN CLUBS AND ORGANIZATIONS:** Look for groups on Meetup.com that relate to your desired career.

## *after graduation?*

**CONSULT:** Do you have expertise that could benefit a small business in a consultant role? For instance, many new grads are tech-savvy and could consult with an organization that is developing their social media presence.

**WORK PART-TIME:** Take a part-time job in the industry, or even one outside the industry that could enhance your sales and customer service skills. Work on your family or neighbor’s farm.