

Creating Your own Path

Chapter 1: Moving Toward Career Success

Many autistic people struggle in the job market for a variety of reasons.

Identifying Skills and Interests

The first step in identifying suitable jobs is identifying your skills and interests. Interests can help you in your job search because they can help you pinpoint a field you want to work in; skills are helpful because they are specific things you can target to employers. Skills are of particular importance because *you can market them in a concrete way*. “I’m interested in mobile technology” doesn’t make it clear what you can offer a prospective employer, but “I can program in Swift and have created numerous apps for the iPhone and iPad” does.

Examples of interests:

- computer science
- military history
- twentieth-century British literature
- the musical Cats
- computer fonts
- Ethiopian cooking
- the development of the modern refrigerator

Examples of skills:

- HTML/CSS
- cooking
- accounting
- plumbing
- house painting
- Photoshop
- Spanish
- welding
- JavaScript
- film editing
- C++ programming
- computer repair

There can be overlap between interests and skills, but remember that skills are specifically transferable and marketable; interests may not be. For example, you may be interested in computer science, so you can transfer that interest into learning programming languages and the theory behind them—or you may be the person interested in the history of the refrigerator, but it’s difficult to find work that’s specifically about appliance history. You can go into refrigerator repair and remember how different models are constructed so you can find the right parts, or do technical writing for appliance manuals.

Creating a Compelling Résumé

How should I write my résumé?

Use action words that describe what you've done at work. Don't present your résumé as a dry list of duties. For example, instead of saying "did data entry," you can say "managed data entry for a medium-sized company, ensuring that clients' accounts were processed accurately." A résumé is a way to show a potential employer your skills in action, and one of the keys to doing that is to make sure you're highlighting that experience.

Be concise.

Make sure your spelling and grammar are correct; have someone else proofread, and have a good dictionary on hand if needed. Remember that spelling and grammar checkers can't identify all possible errors.

Examples of good dictionaries include the *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, the *American Heritage Dictionary*, the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (British, but includes US spellings and definitions), and the *New American Oxford Dictionary*. Online options include dictionary.com, Merriam-Webster, and Oxford Dictionaries. If you use a Mac, the Dictionary application comes with two English-language dictionaries: the *Oxford Dictionary of English* (British, though US spellings and definitions are listed, too) and the *New American Oxford Dictionary*. Avoid generic "Webster's" dictionaries.

Keep your résumé to one or two pages, depending on your experience. Generally speaking, a recent graduate without much job, internship, or volunteer experience should keep their résumé to one page, while somebody with more professional experience can go up to two pages.

Don't bother with gimmicks with scented paper or video résumés. Infographic resumes are really only useful for graphic-design jobs, and the same applies to video resumes and video-editing or -production jobs. You can use nice typography on a résumé, but typography is an art; if you're not sure what you're doing, stick to the standard layout. Examples of good non-default fonts to use on a résumé include Hoefer Text, Palatino/Palatino Linotype, Corbel, Iowan Old Style, Constantia, and Garamond.

What should go on my résumé?

When tailoring a résumé for a particular job posting, or similar jobs within a field, make sure to use recognizable keywords that appear within the ads. If a hiring manager is posting a job that requires knowledge of specific computer applications, don't just write "proficient in Microsoft Office and Adobe Suite"; list out the specific applications they are asking for: Word, Photoshop, InDesign, Illustrator, Publisher, or Excel.

Place most of the emphasis on jobs that are related to the one you're applying for; unrelated jobs can be glossed over or omitted. Your résumé must be relevant to the hiring manager.

Write in a readable, but professional, style. You don't need to sound as though you've swallowed the thesaurus.

What shouldn't go on my résumé?

Personal information, like your passion for waterskiing or writing Harry Potter fanfiction, doesn't belong on your résumé: remember, it's a marketing document that exists to advertise how you can help them solve a particular problem.

Crafting Your Cover Letter

How do I write my cover letter?

Again, make sure that your spelling, grammar, and punctuation are correct. Watch out for commonly confused words like “you're” and “your,” “it's” and “its,” or “they're,” “their,” and “there.”

Try to find the hiring manager's name. Some job ads will list the relevant person—or people's—names, but you may have to do more work for other jobs.

Addressing a letter to “To Whom It May Concern” or “Dear Sir or Madam” can seem as though you're not bothering to find out more about the employer. If you genuinely can't find the hiring manager's name, begin with “Dear Hiring Manager:”.

Submit your cover letter according to the directions provided by the hiring manager.

Make sure your email looks professional: yourname@domain.com would be professional, but basketballdude45@hotmail.com wouldn't be. Professional emails generally include a form of your name (usually first name, last name, or first initial, last name).

What should go in my cover letter?

Networking Autistically

The word “networking” can strike fear into the hearts of many of us who struggle with social interaction, but it's not always as painful as it seems.

How do I “network,” anyway?

Hacking the Interview

Employers want to know how you can help them become a better company, agency, or organization—stress this as you conduct your interview. It's not about what they can do for you; it's how you can help them solve problems. Your goal is to convince them that you're the person that can do that for them using your unique combination of skills, experience, and interests.

If you need to calm yourself by stimming during the interview, bring a small stress ball or something similar that you can use under the desk if you're interviewing in person.

If eye contact is difficult, try looking at the interviewer's nose, or just in the general direction of their face. Eye contact can be really intense for us, but a lot of non-autistic people see eye contact as a sign of trustworthiness.

Dress appropriately for the interview. This can depend on where you're interviewing. There are some rules of thumb for dressing, though: avoid jeans, sweats, sneakers, shorts, flip-flops, and t-shirts. At business-casual and casual workplaces, come to the interview wearing business-casual clothes: khakis or other neutral pants, button-down shirts, tailored skirts, blouses, or sweaters. If you're interviewing at a bank, law firm, or other conservative work environment, you may want to wear more formal clothing, like a blouse, full two- or three-piece suit, suit jacket, necktie, tailored skirt, or slacks. Leave the Garfield necktie, Hawaiian shirts, Day-Glo clothing, and scuffed Nikes at home: they're not professional attire. It's generally better to overdress than underdress, but there are exceptions: business formal and evening formal are two different things—don't wear a tuxedo or ball gown to an interview.

Don't be this guy.



Don't forget to send your interviewer a thank-you email afterward.

Wrangling Your References

Check in with your potential references before you decide to put them down on an application. This allows them to be ready to have something to say if a potential supervisor or hiring manager decides to give them a call about your qualifications for the job. Make sure to choose references that you know you've had a good working relationship with and have indicated that they're happy with your work. Only provide references after the hiring manager has asked you for them. If you're no longer working with a reference, remind them of when you worked with them, some of your duties, and where you worked with them if they've changed jobs since you've left.

Other Ways to Make Yourself Stand Out

Create a portfolio demonstrating your past work that you can pull out during an interview. Make sure this work is relevant to the job you're applying for.

Concluding Remarks

References and Further Resources

Ask a Manager

Autistic Academic's posts on job searching

Practical Typography's guide to résumé layout

<https://www.themuse.com/advice/the-3-rules-of-addressing-your-cover-letter>