

Turning Students into Professionals

Written by Daniel Clausen

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/12/11/turning-students-into-professionals/>

DANIEL CLAUSEN, DEC 11 2017

The representative looked me in the eyes very seriously and said, “Just remember, when you’re interviewing for an internship, our organization doesn’t really care about you, we care about us. Tell us what things you can do for us on day one.” I won’t disclose exactly who this person was or what organization they were representing, but the person represented a major player in foreign affairs. The person was at the job fair to recruit the best and the brightest (who apparently wouldn’t understand the interest-based culture of a typical workplace). This, I would learn, is a fairly standard message given to all wide-eyed college students who are apt to walk into interviews and give their four-point plan for saving the world. This message and similar ones have been repeated to me *ad nauseam* throughout my university career. Focus on the institution’s goals. Make a compelling case for how you can solve their problems or help them accomplish their goals.

The point has been emphasized to me so many times that I began to wonder why it even warrants mentioning. And then I received an insider understanding of the problem when I had to help students craft their own cover letters and prepare for interviews. At university, students are often taught how to do personal reflective writing and how to tackle big ideas in their coursework. Students brought these same practices to their cover letters and mock interviews. The transition between university life and professional life can often be jarring, especially for students who have grown to love the intellectual challenges and freedom that come with coursework. For students who have excelled as intellectual wanderers and adventurers, the short-term day-to-day thinking and interest-based culture of professional life can be a shock.

So, what tips can students take with them to help them transition into the workforce?

Think about solving your employer’s problems. One of the most important things a student can do to transition into becoming a professional is to learn to see things from the employer’s point of view. The employer has their own problems and agendas. The quicker you can figure out what those are and begin to add value through your efforts, the better off you’ll be.

Be an anthropologist — learn the culture. From the outside, a particular office culture may seem strange and barbaric. Looking at these cultures from the point of view of first principles, they may seem irrational and inefficient. But if you allow yourself to become part of that culture, you learn that it has its own internal logic that may not have been clear at first sight. You may not like the logic, but until you let yourself become part of it, you might not be able to give it a fair judgement.

Where is your value-added? The dirty secret of professional life is that not everyone adds value to an enterprise. Sometimes, a few professionals are responsible for the bulk of the value of that organization (and an arcane culture and rituals might be there to disguise this fact). Many interns and new employees have a tough time because while they are new, they are doing little more than getting in the way. The quicker you can find a way to add value, the better off you’ll be.

Survive. If you feel overwhelmed, overburdened, if you feel that all is mysterious, I have one simple word for you: survive. You’ll be surprised just how well you can do by making it from one day to the next. With that end in mind, you should also work towards resources for long-term survival and feeling comfortable in your role.

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Keep your idealism safe for the right occasion. The transition from university to professional life can be daunting. You have gone from an environment where great ideas are discussed and innovative solutions are proposed routinely, where the perspective is long-term and mutually beneficial, to one where people may just be worried about making it from Monday to Friday. In this environment, you may be tempted to forget what lofty ideals motivated you in the first place.

My advice: Don't.

Your ideals are your compass. They will keep you sailing in the right direction in a turbulent professional world. And then, once you've overcome a thousand operational details and provided value for others who didn't care about you or your ideas, well, maybe, just maybe, you'll see your opening...and then your four-point plan for saving the world won't seem so unprofessional anymore.

Hopefully, you found some of these tips helpful.

I'd like to thank my friend Benjamin Carter, a political and fundraising specialist, for helping me come up with many of these ideas. His credentials in workplace realpolitik greatly outshine my own.

If you have any other tips or advice, please leave them in the comment space below.

About the author:

Daniel Clausen is a full-time special lecturer at Nagasaki University of Foreign Studies. His research has been published in *Asian Politics and Policy*, *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*, and *East Asia Forum*, among other publications. His teaching experience includes over seven years of experience as a TESOL instructor. He has also written several novels and short story collections. You can learn more about his work on his Amazon page here or on his Goodreads page here.