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## A 29-year-old on the difficulties of landing a first job

By Rob Carrick  
Globe and Mail Update

*How hard is it to be a young adult these days? A first-hand account*

**My latest column** [<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-investor/personal-finance/rob-carrick/boomers-have-a-stake-in-gen-ys-success/article2435015>] **discusses how older generations must help dislocated young adults now - or forfeit their own financial well-being later. If you want to know what it's like to look for a job today as a young adult, read this e-mail from a frustrated but very eloquent 29-year-old. His name has been left out so as not to prejudice his job search.**

Hi Rob,

I thought I'd thank you for digging into the issues facing Millennials (a term I abhor, but anyhow) as they finish school and enter the workforce. Perhaps that should read "enter the ranks of the unemployed," but for some incomprehensible reason, I'm still hopeful. Don't worry though, it's fading fast!

My story's about the same as most, but I'm hoping that it might shed some light on some other issues that we face in working with what we've been dealt. I finished up at university at about the same time that Lehman Bros. went under, after having seen the very obvious warning signs at Bear Stearns et al. Admittedly, this wasn't great timing, but I thought that with a lot of hard work, sacrifice, and a bit of luck, things would work out alright. What I got instead was this:

- Short-term contract position after short-term contract position.
- Wages that weren't at all related to the realities of short-term contract positions, ie: way too low to make up for the short-term, no-benefits nature of the work.
- Experience that was almost completely unrelated to anything I was interested in, career-wise.
- Hiring freezes at a ludicrous number of places.
- A complete inability to "grow up," so to speak

At the age of 29, I've likely forever lost the following opportunities due to cost and probable inability to make up for lost wages and career potential:

- Getting married.
- Having children.
- Owning a home that's bigger than 500 square feet. (hint: that's not big.)

- Studying any more, whether that means grad school, law school, or even just night classes at a random community college.
- Retirement. Sure, I'd love to be investing for it. But with what money?

Am I bitter about all of this? Not entirely, because it all just sort of works itself out. If I can't get married (dating is tough when you're broke) and have kids, I don't need a home bigger than 500 square feet, nor is more study to obtain employment that I'm not only happier with and better at than what I already do but also more lucrative really necessary, since I'll only be supporting myself. As for the issues revolving around savings, investments, and retirement, you may be surprised to find out how much happier one can be if you simply accept that you'll be working until very close to your death. Why? Assuming I do end up doing this, I'll have a consistent income coming in until death, which should make up for lack of retirement funds.

What makes me extremely bitter is how poorly people of my age and younger have been treated by potential employers. You specialize in economics, personal finance, and business, but not what some call "Human Resources." Yes, the economy, inflation, etc etc etc, all make up part of the problem, but one of the biggest and most overlooked reasons for the issues surrounding people my age is the HR department. How so? Let me walk you through the steps involved in applying to an "entry-level" position these days.

- Troll career websites, Craigslist, university career centres, and professional associations for potential job opportunities, networking events, or possibilities to reach out for an informational interview.
- Line up 100+ legitimate job opportunities that you are actually interested in and qualified for (that's important), complete with job descriptions and a contact person if you can find one, which you usually can't no matter how much research you do. Why 100+? You'll see...
- Perform in-depth research on the 100 or so different companies you're applying to, including history, financials if they're publicly traded, growth plan, and what you can tell of their corporate strategy from public sources. Then scour the web for any press coverage of said 100+ companies, because the more you know the better off you are.
- While you're at it, be sure to reach out for 12 or so informational interviews. They're a great way to get more info on your potential career paths and gain contacts.
- Also, attend a few networking events, which will inevitably end up costing you a significant amount of money. Console yourself with the knowledge that your \$45 event ticket (you scammed the student rate, after all) "entitles" you to a "free" drink. You'll have plenty of time to sip on it too because pretty much no one will be interested in talking to you, possible exception being other newly finished students doing exactly what you're doing.
- Prepare your cover letters. This means 100+ completely custom, tailored, impeccably written letters that will likely end up being addressed to something along the lines of "Dear Hiring Manager."
- Email, mail, courier, or otherwise deliver your 100+ application packages.
- Wait. While waiting, do whatever you can to find 100+ more job opportunities that fit your skills, education, experience, and interests.
- Repeat steps 3, 4, 5, and 6.
- Give yourself a break. You've earned a beer, though you can't actually afford one. Call home, maybe mom and dad will sense that desperation in your voice that stems from only having had one meal per day for a week, take pity on you, and send you a bit of cash. Then go buy that \$3 tall can of cheap beer from the liquor store. Oh, you thought I meant a bar? Silly you, that's far too expensive! Be sure to feel so guilty about that beer that you end up not drinking it and leaving it hidden at the back of your fridge. This will help you cope with the feelings of shame that come with having dared spend \$3 on a beer when tap water is so much cheaper.
- After a minimum of a week, but more likely a month, you'll have anywhere between one to eight responses from HR departments, depending on whether you sent 100+ or 200+ application packages. These responses will excite you. That's a mistake, because a half to two-thirds of them will be generic, computer generated "thank you for applying" emails that will be utterly meaningless and contain no usable, actionable information. Out of whatever's left, consider yourself lucky if you get a single interview, which will likely be done over the phone. In person?!? Lucky. Very, very lucky.
- Have your interview. You'll be one of 12 or so being interviewed, so good luck.

- Send thank-you emails to interviewers.
- Find 100 more job opportunities, repeat steps 3 through 6 with them while waiting for word from and following up with HR at the company you interviewed with.
- After about 3 weeks, get an email response from the HR people at the company you interviewed with. Wait an hour or two to open it, because you're nervous, excited, and generally hopeful. Open it and feel the crushing disappointment of being told you won't be making the second round of interviews.
- Repeat steps 1 through 14. Ad nauseam.

Those 14 steps assume everything goes well and roughly according to plan. They don't, and I've got a couple of recent examples for you. I've recently interviewed with 2 companies, for jobs I'm very much qualified for. I've made it through 2 rounds of phone interviews for one job (it's a province away, otherwise I'd have interviewed in person the second time), and 1 phone interview, an in-person interview, and a reference check for the other job. The interview processes for both positions started at roughly the same time, about a month ago. I last talked to each company about 2 weeks ago. Despite diligent but not annoying follow-up, I've gotten exactly zero information as to the state of my application with both companies. Until today. One emailed me a meaningless "We're in the final stages of the process" email, which I should have expected. The other I managed to get on the phone. The conversation on her end consisted of random combinations of the words "um, yeah, see, like, I don't have, any info, but, if, when, there, you, will be contacted." What do I expect to come of all of this? About a month from now, I'll likely randomly get an email from an HR person at one of the two (but not from both) companies, telling me that while they really liked me, I wasn't the right person for the role and they hired someone else. That's it. The kicker? They likely didn't hire anyone at all and wasted everyone's time.

At this point, you're probably wondering why I'm not looking at retail, restaurant, or coffee shop jobs. The truth is that I am, but due to my resume, experience, and other such things, these places assume I'll leave as soon as something "corporate" pops up. Fair enough, and if I'm honest I probably would, but this all leaves me rather short of options. Also, due to job-hunt and financial issues, my age group finds it extremely hard to go out and be in social settings, so the usual networking and schmoozing that previous generations indulged in isn't nearly as possible for us, nor can we be as good at it when we have the chance to. Lack of practice has that effect.

I should also tell you that not everyone I know has suffered the same fate as I have. A select few of my friends made it out of school and got decent jobs. Most still aren't making enough to save, invest, or buy a place. Many barely get by, doing low-level work they don't really believe in with little job security. Exactly one of my friends has "made it," so to speak. He's on partner-track at one of the big accounting firms. Sounds good, right? It is, except for a few minor issues. First, the likelihood of ever reaching partner is so slim that it's essentially non-existent. Second, the hours have nearly killed him. His average workweek is 65-70 hours. Average. It's higher some weeks, topping off at nearly 90 hours/week. Yes you did read that right. He and his wife did at one point own a rather nice place. His wife still does, but with the guy she's with now that her lawyers are finally done with my friend through the divorce process. Happily, his firm offered him legal assistance. Why? Doing so made it a lot easier for him to continue working an average of 65-70 hours/week. How kind of them...

There's a glimmer of hope in all of this, and it's the one I'm still reaching for. Seeing as how a job that provides a decent income, some job stability, home ownership, savings, investing, and retirement are all but out of reach for me, I've discovered a way to make life bearable. I call it the "lifestyle job," and it consists of working at companies that are involved in non-work things, say sports or hobbies, that you absolutely love. In my case these include skiing, cycling, the outdoors in general. Yes, the salaries and benefits are generally terrible, but these companies make it bearable. They provide access to activities you love at a significantly discounted rate, cheap or free gear, and time to play. Making \$36 000/ year is a lot more bearable when you start with 3 weeks/year, the office has a bouldering room and a bar, you can bring your dog to work (just kidding! You can't afford a dog), you get gear you need to do what you love for next to nothing, and you've got time to go out and enjoy the sports you love. I'll never own a condo in a ski town, but at least I'll be able to make day trips, right?

It's far from what I wanted. I wanted 65 hour weeks in a high pressure corporate environment. I wanted the tailored suits, the chance at a high income, the BMW, the prestige, the respect, and the power. I wanted to be someone. I wanted to be able to afford to donate to charities that are important to me. I was considering children, marriage, the house, all of it. It's not happening.

Rob, we're not no-future losers. You know those high-school kids who study hard, get great grades, have part-time jobs, and manage to excel at athletics all at the same time? That was us. The university students who go to class, make the dean's list, run extra-curricular clubs, and still make it out to the bar once in a while? We were those guys. We've got nothing against hard work and earning our way. I'd argue that we're even rather good at it. You know who

gets jobs today? The CEO's kid. The CFO's niece. The VP of Marketing's next door neighbour's kid. Nepotism and cronyism are what it takes, and even that isn't always enough.

Being willing to work is absolutely USELESS if you can't get a foot in the door. The economy is only part of the problem.

All the best, and thank you again for writing what you wrote. It's about time someone said it.

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