

# Early Jobs, Lasting Lessons: How 9 Leaders Turned Early Work Experiences into Future Success

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Heather O'Neill

6/19/2017

The hope is that we will learn something new from every job. However, in some roles – especially those we take early in our working lives – the lessons can be hard to mine. It may be years before we can look back and see the ways being a camp counselor developed our leadership skills, or how being a nanny informed our future management style. Whether it's just to pay the rent or your first role in your chosen field, early jobs can help us form opinions about the kind of workers we want to be, and the takeaways often play out in our professional lives long after we've climbed the corporate ladder.

BOLD has tapped leaders in a variety of fields to share the valuable work lessons they learned in early jobs. From nightmare bosses to near death experiences to being forced to see the bright side of rejection, all of these stories illustrate the subtle and unexpected ways that hard work can make us blossom.

## Chris Wooster

Executive Creative Director, T3

### The job:

Community Relations Coordinator at Borders bookshop

### The lesson: Do the work and they will come

Fresh out of college in 1991, I landed a job at the Borders bookshop in Atlanta. Borders was a small chain then, and the job was, in most ways, something I took to pay the rent.

Few ad agencies were hiring young copywriters like me, and I had rent to pay and a mouth to feed – my own mouth. The manager asked me to take on the job of programming and promoting the Atlanta store's events, which usually consisted of readings and book signings, or story time for kids. I had no experience in this kind of work, but I quickly learned a crucial lesson in how to make that job work—and all my jobs since.



You see, my job was to convince people to come out on a specific night and time to see an author they often didn't know. If I failed in this effort, an author would show up to an empty bookstore, both disappointed and likely a bit crushed inside, thinking that nobody wanted anything to do with them or their book. So I put everything I had into promoting each event, no matter how unknown the author. I cranked out press releases for every one and ensured that they were submitted well before local newspaper deadlines. I designed flyers, made displays in the store's front window, and wrote scripts for the local NPR underwriting. All this—and much more—to ensure that people showed up, bought books, and made the author feel like someone cared about their work.

If I skipped the hard work, nobody would show and the author and I would sit for an hour making small talk, both of us mortified at the awkward reality.

Still today, I sweat the little stuff. I hit deadlines and, no matter how small the job, put my shoulders into it. I invest myself in making things that intrigue and inspire people to pay attention. A win can be counted in time spent, in social actions, in the number of people who pause for a moment to show up at my creation and linger for a bit. I sweat the small stuff because if I don't, the awkward small talk these days isn't with a disappointed author, but an infuriated client who just spent \$500,000 to sit in an empty store.

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**Daniel Kern**  
**Chief Investment Officer, TFC Financial Management**

**The job:**  
Senior Consultant

**The lesson: Keep an open door policy**

Early in my career, I worked as a management consultant in New York. I worked with mid- and senior-level company management, creating solutions to improve business operations and reduce costs.



I worked on a project for a major oil company and was informed how rigid its corporate culture was. Executives and middle managers at this company had very few informal discussions with one another. At this company, managers would schedule meetings through assistants and weren't encouraged to meet outside of pre-arranged meeting times. On numerous occasions, I was told that resolution of a small issue or question would be delayed by a week or more because one manager wasn't allowed to walk into his next door neighbor's office to discuss the issue. I vowed to always have an open door approach as a leader and to support formal as well as informal lines of communication.

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**Elsie M. Fletcher, CFA**  
**Director, Tukman Grossman Capital Management**

**The job:**  
Guest Services Representative, Six Flags Over Texas

**The lesson: Networking will advance your career**

While I was in college, I spent two summers working at Six Flags Over Texas in Arlington, TX. I lived in Alexandria, LA, so it was exciting to live away from home in an apartment with another friend from college. I worked in Guest Services, which meant I worked on the rides. There were so many lessons learned that summer!



I was responsible for guest safety and enjoyment on the rides – mainly the trains or the log flume. I was also an assistant supervisor one summer and a supervisor the next summer. In that role, I learned to work with the public – that people can be very nice and, sometimes, really not-nice, but regardless I had to try to fix their problems. I also learned about managing people, budgeting to pay for my apartment, food, and gas and to be responsible for myself financially. I even managed to save enough money to make the “big trip” to Dallas to shop for clothes for the fall semester.

While this role seems unrelated to my current position in finance, no experience goes unused. I was promoted quickly in my finance career which meant having to manage people, some of whom were older than me. That summer job was great exposure to the challenge of working with people of different ages and from different backgrounds. I would strongly encourage summer jobs as a way to transition into the working life. As silly or fun or frustrating as jobs may be, summer work creates connections, and you never know where those connections will take you in the future. I firmly believe that regardless of the preparation – whether or not you choose to go to college, for example – your career will advance through networking and social skills.

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**Tony Sananikone**  
**Director of Fashion | JAKE Brand**

**The Job:**

Courtesy Clerk at Safeway

**The lesson:** Handle difficult people with kindness

Starting when I was 16 years old, I worked at a Safeway in Seattle, WA for two years as a courtesy clerk. I was responsible for bagging customers' groceries, restocking plastic and paper bags, collecting shopping carts in the parking lot, doing price checks and helping customers to their cars if they needed assistance. Sometimes I would also have to clean the meat department when it closed, which was not my favorite!



I learned a lot about customer service in that job, specifically that everyone's customer service needs are different. Some people are needy and want a shopping companion, while others require less attention. I also learned that you could get a glimpse into someone's life by looking into their shopping cart. You can tell if they are cooking for a first date, packing for a picnic, whether they have kids or are single. Even though everyone was different, I could almost always see myself in them somehow.

Another lesson was that there are some tough people in this world and at that job I perfected the art of killing difficult people with kindness, regardless of how awful their behavior. I learned to stay calm and ask questions until I was able to figure out a way to help them find what they needed.

Finally, I learned that people who don't have great hand-eye coordination should not bag groceries. The conveyor belt never stops, and if you are too slow, it all just piles up at the end of the counter. I was pretty quick, but there were instances where eggs and bread were smashed in a pileup at the end of the conveyor. If that happens, just run because someone is going to be very unhappy with you.

Over the years I have applied all of these lessons to my every day life. Self-control is the one I practice most, I deal with so many different personalities, and when someone becomes difficult, I just kick in my overly happy and smiley self and everything is usually OK.

**Dr. Kevin A. Quarmby**

Assistant Professor of English, Oxford College of Emory University

**The job:**

Actor

**The lesson: Dwelling on rejection can poison your career**

Before my academic career, I was a professional actor for nearly 35 years. In that time, I worked at London's National Theatre, The Old Vic, and Royal Court Theatres (among many others), as well as for the BBC, independent television companies, and in film.



Chief among the fundamental responsibilities for a professional actor are dependability, punctuality, commitment, collaboration, time management, flexibility, grit, perseverance. My greatest responsibility to the audience was to remain fresh and immediate in my performances. A professional never forgets that, although they might be reproducing a product in near-original state multiple times and over prolonged periods, for the first-time consumer the product must appear as fresh, perfect, and immediate as it was at the moment of conception.

Another lesson is one that anyone in an artistic occupation will confirm: one must learn to accept rejection. When an actor enters a job market, they are presenting themselves: their bodies, their looks, their voices, their ethnicity, age, and perceived sexual identity. You must face the inevitable rejections that will follow with stoic acceptance and absolute determination to continue regardless. Rejection might seem personal, but rarely is personal. Master the ability to face rejection and to maintain one's integrity, dignity and perseverance, and the grit will follow. Dwell on rejection, and the seeds of doubt will take root to the detriment of your future career.

My move into academe prompted the somewhat bemused realization that my years as an actor strangely mirrored the world of tertiary education. There were far too many highly trained and resourceful individuals, each with unique talents and skills, chasing far too few quality jobs. Rejection emails might replace the occasional rejection telephone call, but the same determination to succeed applies

Also mirrored here is the need to remain fresh. My students have taken the place of an audience, but they too deserve immediacy and freshness of performance when I teach. Did my professional experiences as an actor assist me in my current career? Most certainly yes, especially in allowing me to recognize my strengths and weaknesses, to see the power of collaborative engagement, and to accept rejection and peer criticism with an openness that will lead to many happy professional years to come.

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**Lorin O'Neill**  
**Creative Director, mcgarrybowen San Francisco**

**The job:**

Assistant to the Executive Producer of a tabloid talk show

**The lesson: Work for a person you respect**

When I was first starting my career about 20 years ago, I considered moving from advertising to television production. As such, I took a job as an assistant to the Executive Producer of a popular daytime talk show. I won't name the show, but it's still on the air – think about those shows that are primarily about paternity tests and boot camps for teens. It remains, all these years later, the worst job of my professional career.



The only thing worse than the subject matter of the shows was the woman for whom I worked. She was, by all counts, verbally abusive to me and everyone around her. She was vapid, more interested in my shopping abilities than my brain, and called people horrible names. My official responsibilities were to create the schedule for the monthly shows and help book guests. But my actual tasks consisted of buying my boss curling irons, bringing her shoes to the shoemaker, and picking up her feminine hygiene products. There are so many examples of the horrible things she said and did that they are too long to list. I realized after two weeks that I needed to get out of there. I left the role after one month, even though it felt like I was there a lot longer.

I learned from that job to recognize when I am unhappy in a role and to change it. I learned, too, that I can't be happy if I don't have respect for the person for whom I am working. I learned to trust my instincts about what felt right and what felt wrong at work at a young age and to trust that instinct. I also learned what I DIDN'T want for myself or my career.

Every job has difficult personalities; this experience helped me understand how to know when to work with them and when to walk away. When you're young, it's tempting to try to placate the people above you, either for fear of their power or of their wrath. I learned I am strong enough to stand up for myself and how to say "no" when something doesn't feel right. Sometimes walking away is the healthy and more productive thing to do.

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**Rama B. Rao, MD**  
**Emergency Physician and Chief of the Division of Medical Toxicology, New York Presbyterian Weill Cornell Medicine**

**The Job:** Waitressing

**The lesson: The ability to multitask is a plus in any role**

As a waitress at a formal dining establishment – with some time spent as a barmaid – I learned to treat all the tables as one. I'd scan the floor and see if anyone needed anything before initiating a response to be more efficient in my movements.

In many ways, it's the same in a busy urban emergency department. Instead of water, the check, or an extra spoon, in the ER it is administering pain medication, ordering a chest X-ray, and calling the Intensive Care Unit. It's multitasking at its best, some of which I learned as a waitress. Another lesson? Never to open a bottle of champagne with the cork aimed at someone's head. That was a mistake that I only made once and thankfully the patron was ok.



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**Eleanor L. Thomas**  
**Managing Director, Meteora Partners LLC**

**The job(s):** A variety of administrative jobs throughout high school, college, and beyond

**The lesson: Soft skills go a long way**

My early administrative jobs put me in contact with every personality and transactional behavior, which later helped me to work with and report to a variety of people and personalities in corporate settings. These jobs taught me how to get along with almost anyone, how to handle delicate situations with customers and bosses, and ways to help move the various goals forward. They also taught me that having a healthy sense of humor and a strong inner compass can go very far, and that being on time and fully participating in a role with a sunny disposition can also take one a long way. I also learned through trial and error that there is no shame in moving on to more fertile ground when what you are doing isn't a fit. In summary, these early admin jobs helped me learn how to go for it and achieve, while hanging on to my soul.



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**Chris McCurry**  
**Founding Partner, The Bark House at Highland Craftsmen, Inc.**

**The job:** Registered nurse

**The lesson: Everything is connected**

My early career as a Registered Nurse taught me many lessons that helped form the foundation for the work I do today. My specialty was in psychiatry, and I worked with all age groups and all diagnostic categories from severe psychopathy to behavioral disorders and chemical dependency.



First and foremost, I learned the importance of listening and that things that sound improbable or impossible are sometimes very true. I learned not to assume or to allow my bubble to cloud the facts. I learned to appreciate the whole picture as opposed to trying to break people and their lives into parts. I learned that people have more strength than they think possible and that each person is fighting their own personal battle despite how collected they may appear. As a nurse, I also learned that health problems are never convenient but that they always present an opportunity for learning and growth. I've learned similar lessons about the 'inconvenience' of sustainability as the co-founder of a regenerative business that holds the world's first and only Cradle to Cradle PLATINUM Product Certification and a B Corp Best for the World Company. The Principles of Regeneration come from nature and can be applied to larger human systems, like architectural design, healthcare, education, business, and government. What we are learning is that the 'take-make-and-waste' model does not work. When we enact the potential of connectivity, and regenerative capacity, systems re-align and life makes more sense. Our dis-ease is healed and life flourishes.

*Additional reporting by Liwen Xu*