CAREER

Navigating the job market without connections

ANICA BUSHRA RAHMAAN

Ever since I learned about the inner mechanisms of the job market, the term "networking" found itself in my dictionary. It meant that I had to form the right connections to make my career trajectory easier, unearth hidden opportunities, and get myself a head start.

However, not everyone has an uncle who can easily get them a corporate job at a reputable firm, nor is everyone born into generational wealth. Most importantly, not everyone is able to develop people skills to the extent that they can form proper connections. What about them? Will they always fall behind or be deprived of opportunities?

Sharika Shirin Huq, a senior system engineer, shares, "I always wanted a position where I could learn as a fresher and have enough space to grow. With that in mind, as soon as I was done with my undergraduate degree in Electrical Engineering from the Military Institute of Science and Technology (MIST), I applied to Next Business Leader Technology in Grameenphone, an opportunity I stumbled across on LinkedIn."

"Not only was the position incredibly competitive with nearly 3000 applicants, but the assessment process was incredibly rigorous as well. It consisted of five rounds: a CV screening, an online aptitude test, an initial interview, a group discussion, and the final interview. Fortunately, I was hired as a management trainee officer in one of the leading telecoms of the country," she adds.

For Meshkat E Rabbani Shrestho, a former intern at bKash and currently a trainee assistant at an international law firm, balancing academic and extracurricular pursuits paid off. "I have always been a career-oriented person. Since my aim was always to pursue the corporate line instead of having my own individual practice or being an entrepreneur, I was consistently dedicated to making myself as qualified as possible, to ensure I stood out from other candidates," he says.

"As a result, during my undergrad years as a law student at East West University, I was heavily involved in extracurricular activities such as debating and public speaking. Additionally, I was a teaching assistant for a brief period of time. I was able to get my thesis published too. During my final year, I applied to BNext, the internship programme of Bkash, where I was eventually selected in the legal department. I remember my manager telling me later on that I met their criteria of an active candidate who was not just solely focused on academia."

Despite their successes, there were hurdles in the path. Alvi Rahmaan, a prompt engineer who majored in Marketing from BRAC University, for instance, recalls his interview experience, "I found myself in a state of panic when I realised that the other candidates already knew the interviewee and had already established a good impression. At that time, I believed I couldn't do anything to stand out."

Although Alvi got the job, there were moments when he felt that he was being overlooked in favour of other team members. "Whenever there were any team meetings for pitching ideas, the others were given more favour. Their ideas were granted after mere minutes of them talking whereas, I had to go the extra mile and always elaborate my ideas," he remarks.

When navigating the job market without connections, it is not surprising that there are lessons to be learnt. Shrestho says that looking back, he wishes he had spent more time doing research work. "If I had focused more on research, on publications, and gone to more conventions, that would have helped. I wouldn't say I regret it, but it would surely have been a bonus," he claims. On the other hand, Alvi says that a lack of wisdom during the initial period of his professional journey got him caught in the trap of unpaid work. "I regret devaluing my skills and experience by not charging money for it. In fact, I had to spend my own money on commuting and other expenses," he says.

In spite of dejection and the feeling of isolation, there can be positive takeaways as well. Sharika claims, "The job market's increasingly competitive nature can actually be motivating in a way. Different job interviews have different modalities and evaluation processes. The more interviews you attend, the more you discover your weak points, how to answer interview questions better, and how to better present yourself."

Contrary to popular belief, acquiring the right skills to stand out in a job setting doesn't always have to be an extraordinary feat. Sometimes, expertise in just the basics will do. While the notion might seem daunting, there is no specific formula or strategy for effective job searching. It is something you get the hang of as you go. A good place to start may be a professionally written resume with the right formatting that is tailored to different job requirements.

Shrestho says, "In the case of assessment processes that are employed at Bkash, NGOs or anywhere else, you have to be very good in English, Mathematics, analytical problems and general knowledge. Surprisingly what helped me during my assessment were the tuitions I had been doing which allowed me to keep in touch with Mathematics and other disciplines."

Though there are some qualifications, skills and traits that can dispel the myth surrounding the job market, the significance of networking still cannot be understated. Sharika shares, "A potential connection is not just about an offer letter. It can help one access opportunities, increase knowledge, and sometimes receive career guidance as well. Although I got my first job without any connection, now I am focused on developing this skill every day."

Similarly, Alvi states, "When freshers confess to having no networking connections, that might be brushed off. But when someone with professional experience says the same thing, it will be looked down upon. When you're in the job market for a couple of years, it is expected for you to have a certain networking base. Moreover, through networking, you may not have to scour endlessly for a job. Knowing the right people helps because you can simply reach out to them for jobs. If you end up making a good impression, there are instances where they'll reach out to you as well."

Shrestho also mentioned that there are many job opportunities that he may not even know of and can't access as they aren't listed on mainstream platforms such as LinkedIn or bdjob. And that may simply be attributed to the fact these jobs are accessible to only those with the right connections.

Ultimately, like many other aspects of life, it boils down to resilience.

Alvi concludes, "Be selfishly and ruthlessly focused on your goals. A lot of the time, you will not be considered. That is a part of life. So, it is very crucial to not be disheartened."

Anica Bushra Rahmaan, a student of Economics, is not prepared for the corporate life, except for the money aspect. Reach her at anicarahmaan@gmail.com

ILLUSTRATION: **ABIR HOSSAIN**