

Advice to Job Seekers

Accepting that the world is full of uncertainty and ambiguity does not and should not stop people from being pretty sure about a lot of things.” – Julian Baggini

As recently as early March, the dramatic shifts that have taken place in our daily lives were inconceivable. The public health measures necessary to manage the spread of the coronavirus have disrupted so many aspects of our lives. We are all dealing with high levels of uncertainty and ambiguity, which can lead to increased anxiety and stress. At the Nicholas Institute, we know that you, as Duke students, may be particularly concerned about the future of the job market and how to manage the uncertainties you are facing. While we are not professional career counselors, there is one thing that those of us who work in the environmental policy world know something about—how to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity.

Most of the challenges and problems in the environmental policy world are ambiguous—it’s sometimes unclear what the problem itself is, which makes finding the best solution all the more challenging. In addition, responses to problems often need to be swift. Hurricanes, forest fires, and, yes, pandemics require rapid responses from policy makers and decision makers. Election cycles bring more regular but inevitable shifts in the policy directions of governments at all levels—federal, state, and local. Being nimble in response to constantly and sometimes rapidly changing situations is a necessary skill and, based on our experience, one that can be learned.

It may be tempting to stop networking or searching for internships and jobs right now. But if you can, we recommend identifying a few small actions you can take. We’ve put together the following list of strategies for helping to manage these uncertain times in your job search.

Keep networking!

You have likely been inundated with advice to network and set up informational interviews. That’s because it is good advice! It’s what our professional staff do when faced with a fuzzy policy problem with no clear solution. Most environmental issues have no one perfect fix or outcome. So, as environmental professionals, we have to talk to a wide variety of people. We call on our existing networks, and we also seek out people in other policy arenas for new ideas and brainstorming sessions. Even though we do it on a regular basis, that doesn’t mean that it isn’t sometimes frustrating and even intimidating. In spite of those frustrations, we recommend that you continue reaching out and building your networks.

Be unattached to the outcomes of networking.

Know that you may not get anything out of a call other than a pleasant conversation and an opportunity to practice your skills at connecting with others. The vast majority of your networking efforts may feel like they are leading nowhere, but it is worth the effort. There is strength in even the weakest ties you build through networking.

Researchers have long known that when it comes to job seeking, weak ties can be even more important than deeper connections. In his influential 1973 research paper, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” Mark Granovetter surveyed people who got their jobs through their networks. His research showed that most of these successful job seekers found their positions through “weak ties,” relationships characterized as diffuse and flexible rather than deep emotional connections. The implications are that people with many weak ties in their networks have more open channels through which to learn about opportunities and to mobilize quickly in response to social and environmental change.

So, let go of any expectation that a particular conversation and/or informational interview will lead to a particular outcome. But know that forming that tie may build a bridge to an opportunity that will not arise until sometime in the future. Companies, nonprofits, government agencies, and other employers will hire again, and you want to be top-of-mind with them when they do.

Don't worry too much about any awkwardness.

Sometimes your networking conversations will flow beautifully, and sometimes they will feel strained and awkward. Don't force connections if the people you talk with have experiences or do work that does not resonate for you. Our networks emerge quite organically and, as we've already pointed out, even weak ties are valuable to have.

Recognize, too, that the people you are talking with do not want you to flounder or have an awkward interaction. In fact, they have likely been in your position in building their own network and have empathy for being the person reaching out. Each conversation is an interactive exercise, and the person you are talking with will likely help keep it going. That is no excuse, however, for a lack of preparation; research the person you are talking to and be ready with questions!

Ask "how" over "why" questions.

Careers—and policy solutions—don't develop as linearly as we like to think. And in uncertain situations, it can be really important to get as firm a handle as possible on why one path may lead to better outcomes than another. But merely asking "why" questions does not give a clear sense of the connections that underlay a particular person's career decisions.

Instead of asking your networking connections *why* they became an environmental consultant, lawyer, etc., ask them *how*. Focusing on "why" questions when talking to people about their careers may yield helpful insights into their values and justifications. But asking "why" questions first may influence or prime how they answer any later questions you have about their process of getting where they are in their careers. Hearing about that process is likely going to be helpful to you given that you are just starting your journey in your new fields. Focusing on "how" questions first is more likely to give you candid takes on the, more likely than not, winding paths that led them to where they are. The challenges they have faced in their careers along the way could be relevant to those you are facing, and how they dealt with them can give insight into their values as well. So, use the "how" questions to understand their path first, and you may find that they reveal their "why" without you ever needing to ask.

Follow up.

Networks need nurturing. While "weak ties" can help you land that dream job, you can take small steps to strengthen those ties and activate your network. A thank you note or email goes a long way! Tell the person how much you appreciated meeting them and mention one thing that you learned during your conversation. If the person introduced you to a colleague, follow up after you've met with that colleague to report on your conversation. Not only does this show you valued the connection, but it reflects other positive skills that would-be employers like to see—attention to detail and the ability to self-direct by following through on a task that is not strictly required.

Know that experience comes in all shapes and sizes.

Some of you may be feeling pressure to find a job to pay off student loans or cover rent. This economic reality may be running headlong into your dream of becoming a [fill in the blank environmental dream job]. Know that you can do both! Taking a job that pays the bills does not mean the end of your aspirations. Find creative ways—perhaps through your networking or your own research—to remain involved and active in the environmental issues you care about. Volunteer. Many organizations have hiring freezes during the pandemic, but they still have plenty of work to go around. Write op-eds. Work on that research paper or book of nature poems that you didn't have time for in school. These activities will feed your soul—and look good on your résumé.

Finally, start with us!

The staff of the Nicholas Institute are happy to talk with students about career paths, our work, student research, and more. Please look at our staff profiles and continue building your networks by reaching out to one of us. We would be happy to help you turn these recommendations into action!