

How I built work experience without a job: tips for students starting from zero

By Pooja Ajgoankar

Introduction:

A few years ago, I remember staring at my laptop, feeling annoyed. I was applying for part-time jobs, but all my applications were getting rejected. Sometimes this would be due to a lack of strategy when filling out applications, but most importantly, it was due to a lack of experience. I kept thinking, 'How can I get work experience without having any in such a competitive job market'

Over time, I realised that waiting for someone to hire me wasn't going to work. So, I started trying different ways to build experience. Some methods were more effective than others, but each one taught me something valuable and helped build my confidence gradually. I wish someone had told me this earlier, so if you're in a similar situation, here are the steps that helped me, and might help you too:

Five tips

- Build experience through volunteering



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- Volunteering was the first and most impactful step I took. Even though it wasn't paid, it gave me real responsibility, helped me understand how workplaces operate, and boosted my confidence every day. Beyond regular [volunteering, getting involved in events and conferences, such as chairing sessions at sustainability events](#), helped me develop public speaking skills, gain professional exposure, meet new people, and add unique experiences to my CV. These opportunities are open to learners and are a great way to build experience when you're just starting out.
- Build skills through online courses and micro-learning
- Volunteering helped, but I knew I still needed more experience. I began taking [online courses](#) to acquire practical skills and enhance my CV. These courses helped me develop skills that I could discuss in applications and interviews. For example, the University of Westminster has access to [LinkedIn learning courses](#), and when completing some of them, you receive a certificate.
- Get involved in university societies and leadership roles



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- Next, I joined a [university society committee](#). Roles like these teach essential skills such as teamwork, leadership, communication, planning, and project management, which employers value highly. You may help organise events, manage budgets, promote activities or collaborate with external partners. Even though these roles aren't traditional jobs, they provide real, demonstrable experience that strengthens your CV.
- Search for opportunities through [university platforms](#)
- I started checking the [University of Westminster Career Zone](#) and found internships, competitions, and research opportunities. My module leaders also shared openings, and with their encouragement, I began taking on small side projects. All these experiences gradually developed my skills until I landed my first part-time role as an Office Assistant at the [University of Westminster Students' Union](#).



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- Know Where to Find Referees (It's Easier Than You Think)
- One thing that held me back was thinking that referees had to be former job supervisors. That's not true. I got my referees by asking:
 - my [personal tutor](#)
 - module leaders
 - my volunteering manager
- I asked them politely by email before adding their names to any application. I was nervous, but everyone responded positively. People want to help more than we think.

What I would tell my past self and anyone reading this blog

If I could talk to my past self, I'd say not to worry about not having work experience. Additionally, this entire process taught me that experience does not necessarily come from a job title but can be built step by step through demonstrating initiative, curiosity, and a hunger to learn. I spent many hours of the day stressing for no reason, but what matters most is finding places where you are encouraged to grow, because everyone starts somewhere.

What did I learn?

- Networking and university platforms can lead to real opportunities.
- Alternative ways of experience, such as volunteering, society roles, projects, and competitions, count.
- Referees can be from supervisors in volunteering environments, personal tutors, or module leaders.
- Career building can take time sometimes, but it's a journey with ups and downs.
- Building multiple skills that employers are looking for can help you become a strong candidate.

I'd love to know what one step you would like to take next to build your experience.