

# Finding a Job without a College Degree

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Bill Gates never graduated from college. Neither did Michael Dell nor Steve Jobs. Outside of the tech world, Richard Branson has done pretty well for himself without a college degree, as has Barry Diller.

But Sharon Willis is a more common example of the challenges to American workers who never graduated from college.

Since February, Willis has been the acting vice president for external affairs at Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, a medical and health-sciences graduate school of 850 students. She will continue in that role until sometime in the fall, when she will resume her position as deputy vice president. The VP role is one she wanted to apply for when it became vacant but couldn't, even though she had the experience and knowledge. Why? She doesn't have a bachelor's degree.

Willis started at the university 28 years ago as a clerk typist and worked her way up through the ranks. She describes herself as the "go-to" person for just about everybody with whom she works. Willis has done the job of vice president, and the college president knows she is up to the task on a permanent basis, yet her lack of a college diploma — a job requirement — means she does not qualify for the position.

Willis has hit a professional wall at the university, and she realizes that things would likely not be different elsewhere.

"When we have vacancies here, I see the qualifications of the applicants, many of whom have master's degrees," said Willis. "I realize that if I were to leave here, I would probably rank at the bottom of the applicant pool because of my lack of a degree, despite excellent experience, job stability, a very strong work ethic and great references. It's disheartening."

What Willis suspects to be true about the world outside the university is only too real for many of the millions of people the recession unleashed upon the job market. Many of these people started at a company in an entry-level position and worked their way up the ladder. Not having a college degree may not have mattered — until the time came to apply for a new position.

Bruce Hurwitz, president and CEO of Hurwitz Strategic Staffing, said he sees this issue come up regularly. "Every time I have tried to get a client to waive the college-degree requirement in light of the candidate's exemplary work experience, I have been refused," he said. "They almost always say that it is their policy that all employees have at least a college degree."

Such jobs now account for most of the economy. Nearly 60 percent of American jobs now require at least a bachelor's degree, according to "Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018," a June 2010 report released by the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University. That number jumped from 28 percent in 1973 to 59 percent in 2008 and is expected to rise to 63 percent over the next decade, the report said.

## Resume and Networking Solutions

So is your dream job, even most jobs, out of reach if you don't have a college degree?

Not necessarily. Experts who spoke with TheLadders said solid, long-term professional experience and proven results can often supersede the need for a college diploma.

"I believe that employers want the right person for the job," said Karla Porter, director of workforce development and HR for the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Business and Industry and a private consultant on human capital and new media. "They're not looking for a certificate, a degree, a piece of paper; they are looking for a solution provider. If there is a person who can do that for them and has a proven track record and can show what they've accomplished for other companies, I believe they will be considered."

All of this must be conveyed in a carefully constructed resume. "To replace the college-degree situation on a resume, the person needs to stress the results they have been able to achieve due to their extensive experience," said Dianne Durkin, president and founder of Loyalty Factor, a consulting and training firm.

"Make sure the resume is very, very well done," Porter said. "If it's not, it will go to the 'C' pile."

Tony Deblauwe, senior HR partner at Citrix Systems and founder of HR4Change, agreed: "Your resume has to be rock-solid. It has to demonstrate your experience, your skills, your accomplishments. You're promoting your best skills so that people focus on that and not get to the end and say, 'Well, where's your degree?' "

Cheryl Palmer, president of Call to Career, said she has worked with many people who have been to college but never got the degree. When writing a resume for a person in this situation, she mentions the college major and degree program but does not state that that he has a degree. "I'm being truthful, but not drawing undue attention to the fact that they don't have a degree."

This strategy will also help you get your resume past the Applicant Tracking System (ATS) software that most companies use to screen resumes.

"If [a job description] says 'bachelor's degree required' and you don't have a bachelor's degree, your resume can say 'bachelor's degree not completed or not attained' so the system will pick up the keywords 'bachelor's degree,'" Porter said. "You don't want to say anything that is not true, but you want your resume to get in front of people. Make sure your resume contains the same keywords that the job description contains, and then rearrange them to how they fit for you."

All the experts who spoke with TheLadders emphasized the importance of describing any training, certifications or licenses you have to show that you have invested in some training for yourself. "I haven't found too many scenarios where people have done nothing," Deblauwe said. "They've at least taken some college classes or gotten some certifications or something to talk to. Or something internal from a previous company."

It's commonly understood that networking is one of the most important things you can do when pursuing a new job, but it's even more critical if you don't have a degree, said Palmer. "If you don't have a degree, the whole idea of networking is much, much more critical," she said. "Employers prefer to hire someone that they know something about. They prefer people who have come referred. If you are trying to land a job in this very competitive job market and you don't have a degree, you really have to take that networking to another level, to get around the fact that most employers are looking for a bachelor's degree at an absolute minimum."

Along those same lines, strong recommendations from clients, former employers, co-workers and associations can go a long way toward making up for the lack of a college degree.

### **It's Never Too Late**

So, what else can you do if you don't have a college degree? Well, you can get one – or at least begin working toward one, no matter what your age.

Once enrolled in a program, you can write on a resume that a degree is "in progress," experts suggested.

That's just what the Uniformed Services University's Willis is doing.

A busy single mother of three, Willis is taking classes in business management in the hopes that she can break through the barriers put up by the lack of a degree. Willis said her boss is very supportive and is giving her whatever time she needs. In addition, because she works for a federal institution, she gets tuition reimbursement. All of this, along with flexible options such as online classes, has allowed Willis to start on a path she hopes will lead to a higher-level position.

"I think in the long run, people are much better off just going ahead and pursuing the degree, no matter how hard it may be," she said. "That's what everyone will be looking for. You do get to a certain point where you just can't go any further, and that's where I am right now."

Debra Donston-Miller covers work-life issues and difficult job-search situations for TheLadders.