What I Did When I Couldn’t Find a Job

By Andrew Dana Hudson

Gangtok, India

It was a bit of a shock, losing all expectations. For years—all my life, really—parents, teachers, and guidance counselors had told me that if I went to a good college and did well, I would be able to find a job after graduation that would, with a little ladder-climbing, keep me comfortable and financially secure. After I graduated in May 2009, in political science, I moved back home to St. Louis to start my career, but there simply were no jobs to be found.

Over several months, I sent out more than 500 résumés for all sorts of jobs all over the country, but I got only two interviews and no offers.

I couldn’t find a job, but neither could anyone I knew. Now, more than a year after graduation, most of my college friends still live at home, and many of those who have moved out are borrowing money from their parents to eat and pay rent. A few have internships, but most of those are unpaid, and few are likely to lead to jobs. Two friends who studied psychology for four years now work off the books at a sandwich shop. Another, who got her master’s in development studies from Cambridge, became a barista at Starbucks.

Some are applying to grad school just to have something to do, but the prospect of racking up thousands more dollars in student debt is crushing. The rest are still looking, sending out résumés, going to career fairs, volunteering for experience, and networking. Some have given up. We are a whole generation graduating into a job market that has no room for us.

So I moved to India.

Two years earlier, I had spent a semester abroad in the Nepali-speaking regions of northeastern India, learning the language and culture through a fantastic study-abroad program at Pitzer College. In India, I met Pema Wangchuk, editor and publisher of Sikkim NOW, the most popular local English-language daily newspaper in the state of Sikkim. A couple months into my job hunt, I sent Pema an e-mail asking if he knew anyone who might be interested in hiring a young, enthusiastic American college graduate. "We’d be quite keen to have you here," he wrote back.

After lots of e-mails and late-night international phone calls, I got on a plane and went. I had been unemployed for eight months.

My arrangement with NOW is informal. I help out doing a little photography, a little feature writing, and a lot of copy editing. Native-level English proficiency is a rare skill in much of the developing world. I take garbled press releases from local nongovernmental organizations and government departments, and equally garbled correspondent reports from remote districts of the state, and fix the punctuation, syntax, usage, and spelling to turn them into real news stories.
I also write feature pieces for our `Sunday edition, interviewing NGO's about their projects and local experts about social trends. I’m learning a lot about reporting, writing, and running a small newspaper, not to mention life and politics in northeast India and Asia in general. I suspect I am getting more intimate and comprehensive journalism experience here than I would in almost any internship, temp position, or entry-level job that I could have found back in the States.

In exchange for my work, Pema found me a flat to stay in and arranged for my meals. The cost of living here is so cheap that, with my room and board taken care of, I can live comfortably on around $10 a week. If I were back in the United States, even with the most austere lifestyle, I would be costing my family far more than that by just eating their groceries, running their utilities, and burning their gas.

My Nepali, gone rusty in the two years since studying abroad, is getting better, and I’m picking up a few words of Hindi. Once a week, I volunteer at a small village elementary school, teaching tae kwon do. I’ve made some friends here to hike and go out on weekends with. Every day I see interesting and beautiful things: Tibetan monks playing soccer, stray dogs napping in twisty alleys, snow-covered mountains white (and high) as clouds.

When I Skype and correspond with college friends back in the States, their frustration with the job hunt is palpable, and I wonder: Why don’t more recent graduates move to the developing world to wait out the recession?

Plenty of college grads apply for Fulbrights or the Peace Corps, but those programs are increasingly competitive. For those who don’t make the cut, or who want to just try something different, why not design their own programs, as I have tried to do in Sikkim, finding NGO’s, schools, businesses, or families willing to trade meals and a place to stay for help teaching English, writing grant applications, or editing press releases?

In tough economic times, living in the developing world actually makes a lot of financial sense. In the more prosperous 90s and aughties, plenty of educated and highly skilled Indians moved to America and Europe to find jobs. The cost of living there was higher, but if they made even a little above their expenses, that money would translate into a huge amount back home. What I’m doing is a reversal of that. With opportunities for making ends meet so hard to come by in the States, I have moved to a place where a little savings and family support go a lot farther. Globalization can flow both ways.

Making such a jump isn’t easy. Working out visas and permits is always frustrating, and moving to India or Brazil or Ghana won’t help pay off student loans—but then, neither will futilely sending out résumés every day while racking up credit-card debt.

Some parents may be nervous about letting their kids go abroad on their own, but to them I say: Stop worrying. In many parts of the developing world, Westerners are in no more danger than they would be commuting on the highway every day, and if your children are willing to work and give up a few luxuries, the trip will save you money in the end.

Though I suspect it isn't impossible to just pick a country, show up, and work something out, I’m not sure I would recommend that. My own "program" was made possible by the contacts I developed studying abroad. So even in a bad economy, a semester abroad—especially in a location more exotic than London or Paris—can be a great investment that opens a lot of doors.

Colleges can help, too. Academics are a worldly bunch, and universities could use their professors’ contacts abroad to find informal volunteer arrangements for many graduates to support them for a year or two while the economy, hopefully, recovers.
It's raining today, and as I write this, I am sipping sweet tea and watching clouds dance like titans in the valley below. I grew up among the corn and soybean fields of the endlessly flat American Midwest, and the foothills of the Himalayas are an astonishing sight.

I'm not sure how long I'll stay in India. I'm returning home in November to spend the holidays with my family, and I may test the job market again. Asia is my economic escape hatch. If things don't work out in the States, I'll go back to a place where I can live cheaply and make my savings last.

There might not be room for us recent college graduates in the job market at home, but the world is a big place. I bet somewhere out there is an opportunity for each of us. So go.

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