Rules for Jobseekers Getting Hired in the AI Era

By Philip Levinson and Nicole Neshat

Like it or not, today's economy and job market show a key AI-related split. In August, 245,000 Americans ages 20-24 were unemployed -- the highest August figure for that group since 2014 -- with the unemployment rate for all workers in that age group reaching 7.1%, according to Labor Department data.

Meanwhile, unemployment among workers ages 22 to 34 without a college degree is near a 20-year low. What exactly is driving this divide?

"Skilled tradespeople are aging out of the workforce faster than they can be replaced," writes Mary Jacob. "At the same time, more Americans than ever are graduating college, right as AI starts chewing through the entry-level tasks companies used to hand fresh grads."

Indeed, with AI as front-page news on a daily basis, we find ourselves an agentic crossroads. So, how to navigate it?

Times Are Changing...Faster Than Ever

AI and intelligent automation are drastically changing hiring demands for college students and entry-level employees. But how? And what should college students do today to prepare and help ensure they have viable options when they enter the job market in spring 2027?

Admittedly, things are changing quickly. This is also not the first transformational change we've seen. In the past 20 years, we've experienced the mobile and smartphone revolutions plus a rapidly changing social media and online video boom.

What's unique about this revolution with AI and agents is the magnitude and speed of the disruption to work and the economy. As jobseekers and alums navigate these rapidly shifting AI tides, we've prepared three guidelines – or rules – that we follow ourselves and believe can help.

Rule #1: Become AI Fluent and Build Your Skills

In May 2023, Professor Richard Baldwin stood up at the World Economic Forum Growth Summit and famously said, "AI won't take your job -- it's someone using AI who will take your job."

This is a very prescient and insightful guideline for prospective job-seekers. Indeed, candidates should become as AI fluent as possible. What this means is you can keep up by doing the following:

- Learn how AI is changing the field you are in, or want to pivot to, and which skills employers value the most

- Stay curious about emerging AI tools and how to best leverage them in your day to day
- To whatever extent allowed, use AI in your projects, work, and everyday tasks, while building the judgment to evaluate its output
- Go beyond basic prompting: learn how AI tools and agents can be incorporated into real-world workflows

This does not mean you have to become an engineering or coding expert. Just as you don't need to be a mechanic to drive a car, you don't need to be an engineer or coding expert to use AI effectively. AI fluency is more accessible than you might think. A basic understanding of prompting and AI tools gives you a foundation. But becoming a power user – integrating AI into your daily work and building your own agentic workflows – is what puts you ahead of the curve.

Rule #2: Demonstrate Your AI Skills Through Real Results

Knowing how to use AI is important. But in a job market where almost every applicant can now say they "use AI," simply saying it is not enough. What tangible examples with impact can you point to?

AI lowers barriers to entry. That's the good news. It also means more people can build, create and compete, which makes things more competitive. The way to stand out is to not just use AI but make AI an integral part of how you work. Try using it to solve real problems and be able to show what you've accomplished. Then, try building it into your everyday workflows.

For example, if you work in marketing or are interested in the field and want to run events that generate leads, build an AI workflow to capture, organize, and score those leads, coordinate outreach, and manage follow-up. Better yet, measure the impact: How much time did your workflow save? How many manual steps did it eliminate? How did it improve the quality or speed of follow-up?

What you can build doesn't need to be particularly elaborate. What matters is that it automates tasks for you, and that you can explain the problem, why you chose to solve it, what you built, as well as what you learned.

Think of it as proof of what you can do. Go beyond telling prospective employers you understand AI - show them something you've built with it, or what it automates for you on a daily basis. As AI becomes part of everyday work, demonstrating how you apply it will matter more than simply saying you know about it.

AI fluency becomes more valuable when you can demonstrate results. Build a track record of meaningful impact, and develop relationships with people in your field who know your work. That combination of AI fluency, proven results, and strong connections can help you stand out in your next job search.

Rule #3: Create opportunities through networking, showing up, and contributing

The U of O alumni association and career center can help you make meaningful connections with other industry professionals. Start with your existing network, then expand your connections through alumni groups, professional associations, and industry events to explore fields that interest you, meet relevant people, and seek introductions. Focus on connecting with people whose roles align with your interests; for example, if you're pursuing marketing opportunities, reach out to a marketing manager or a recruiter who hires for marketing roles.

One of the best ways to expand your professional network is to offer your skills and contribute to real projects alongside people in the field you are targeting. Pursue internships, independent studies, or volunteer projects with organizations you admire, and use interviews as opportunities to demonstrate your skills by solving a real problem the team faces.

"Value delivery isn't just a strategy," writes one entrepreneur and early Uber employee. "It's a mindset that can propel you to the top of the candidate list and ultimately get you the job."

Doing these things will allow you to expand your network, while focusing on gaining hands-on experience that builds skills you can apply in the real world and delivers tangible results you can point to in interviews. Also, don't wait until you're looking for a new role to start networking. Build meaningful relationships throughout your career so you have a strong network of people that know your work beyond your resume when you're ready for your next move.

Connecting the AI Dots

There's one final paradox candidates should understand: as AI takes on more technical tasks, human skills like communication, collaboration, and building relationships become even more valuable.

"The people who will thrive in this new era are the ones who balance technical fluency with the uniquely human ability to connect, collaborate, and solve complex problems," said Marci Paino, Chief Learning Officer at Cisco.

That balance matters. AI fluency matters. But so does being a successful team player with strong cross-functional skills and knowledge. Develop durable learning and leading skills, as well as those "uniquely human abilities" cited by Paino, to keep up with the fast pace of AI-driven change.

Indeed, this transformation is unavoidable. The University of Oregon is also preparing for the next chapter of technological innovation. The UO recently announced that Phil and Penny Knight committed $1 billion to the University of Oregon to establish a college of engineering located at the Phil and Penny Knight Campus for Accelerating Scientific Impact. This is the largest gift ever given to a comprehensive public university – and is in addition to other key examples of action and impact now flourishing at the UO.

There are clear implications for current Oregon alums. Legendary Oregon track coach and Nike co-founder Bill Bowerman often shared an old saying about the pioneers who made the arduous journey west on the Oregon Trail. “The cowards never started, and the weak died along the way. That leaves us.”

Today, a new uncharted trail lies ahead – this one forged in AI and intelligent automation. AI is changing how careers begin and how work gets done. The jobseekers who start navigating this journey now will be far better prepared for the twists and turns of the trail ahead.

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