

INCREASING YOUR CHANCES OF EMPLOYMENT AS A COUNSELLOR

NATHAN BEEL



Reality hit me hard when I graduated with my first counselling degree. I was 23 years old and confident that obtaining my degree meant that I would become employed as a counsellor in the first weeks of looking for work. I diligently applied for successive positions and on the occasions when I received replies, they politely declined and indicated that I needed more experience. I learned the hard way that degrees in counselling were not a guaranteed ticket to employment.

I returned to study for a graduate diploma in counselling with a 200-hour internship for experience and was fortunate to gain a counselling job soon afterwards. After two decades in various counselling related roles, including being on panels interviewing for counsellors, my understanding of counselling employment has increased, and I can see how naïve my presumptions were in the early days.

Supply and demand

A key assumption I operate on now is that counselling employment is a competitive supply and demand market. Employers aim for the most attractive candidate who applies. This attractiveness is based on the perceived value the applicant can bring to the role. Value is subjective depending on the position, the hirer, and the field of applicants.

What applicants rarely know is who they are competing against. This is an important factor that shouldn't be overlooked. Missing out on a job does not mean that one was necessarily deemed inadequate or under-qualified. It may mean that there was another applicant with more diverse or specialised experience and training who gained the position. Whatever is deemed important for the role, the applicant who gains the job is assessed by the panel to offer the role the most potential value compared to the other candidates. The challenge for the job seeker is to help shape the panel's perception that they are the most valuable applicant.



Don't disqualify yourself

Some counselling job seekers will miss out on positions because they disqualify themselves from applying. They may believe they are underqualified for a position, that the position is too difficult for them, or that others going for the position will be more qualified and experienced. However, if these job seekers do not apply, they may potentially miss out on gaining the job they may have otherwise gained. If they were to apply, potentially they may be the most attractive candidate compared to the other candidates. I recommend against self-selecting out of applying when there may be a few criteria that are not met or when the position description may appear intimidating.

I have gained positions which I perceived were above my capabilities and experience; if I had not applied, I would have missed out on the experience of getting the job—and discovering that I could do the role despite my self-doubts. While job seekers have increased chances of gaining work when they meet all the job criteria, their chances reduce to zero if they do not apply.

Increasing your perceived value

As a student or job seeker, your responsibility is to give yourself as many chances as possible to be the best applicant. Below are 10 strategies that may help increase your perceived value to an employer.

1. Qualification

These days, more employers are looking for a minimum of a bachelor's degree in counselling or a related discipline. Given that bachelor's degrees are more common now than previous years, a bachelor's degree or higher will usually provide an edge over a holder of a certificate or diploma.

2. Experience

Accredited counselling degrees nearly all have a placement component in them. However, if you and two of your fellow graduates are going for the same position, it is better to have additional experience. I recommend volunteering at Lifeline, Drug Arm, or a similar service that provides ongoing experience and close supervision.

Quality volunteer experience plus a degree often gives an edge over a degree alone. In addition, there may be pathways in the volunteer organisations for becoming a volunteer supervisor, allowing additional skills and experience to be accrued.

3. Demonstrate commitment to the profession

When I would look at a counsellor or counselling educator applicant curriculum vitae (CV), I always look for mention of membership in a counselling association. When I see a CV that shows membership in a counselling association, it gives me an impression that this person may be committed to their professional identity and growth.

When I see CVs without mention of membership or claiming the 'eligible for membership' phrase, it raises questions in my mind. Why is this person not a member? Is the depth of this person's interest in counselling only limited to the possibility of gaining employment?

Membership maintenance requires commitment to an ethical code, maintaining professional development, maintaining clinical supervision, and contributing financially to the profession. When I'm involved in hiring, I'm looking for evidence of commitment beyond the pay packet and promises made in the interview itself.

4. Get known

Counsellors are often more introverted than extraverted. We are often reluctant to put ourselves forward but prefer more intimate relating with our clients behind closed doors. However, ours is a relational profession. I recommend people aim to become known.

When people become familiar with who you are and the value you represent as a person, this may influence them if they are on your interview panel. Counselling is a small profession, so it is fairly easy to get known by other counsellors. Attend professional development events and get to know other counsellors. Contribute to the association newsletter and journal. Join an association subcommittee. Seek opportunities to provide professional development in an area in which you have knowledge and expertise. Set up a LinkedIn account to place your CV for the world to see. When meeting people, give them your business card and later invite connection with LinkedIn. You might also consider setting up your

own special business Facebook page or website as another 'shopfront' for your brand. The more people who become familiar with who you are and learn to trust you, the more likelihood that someone on your interview panel may know you and your 'brand' and may trust you over other candidates whom they do not know.

5. Develop a positive reputation

Your interactions with others in person and online, and your online footprint, will contribute to developing your reputation. Likewise, if you are studying, will your interaction with fellow students and behaviour in classes send signals of someone committed to the journey of becoming a counsellor? What type of person do they see? Do they see someone to whom they would want to refer clients, or hire?

Your reputation begins in university and people are unlikely to forget the behavioural impressions you leave with them. If people Google or Bing you, will the results send a signal of professionalism and other qualities associated with counselling? Determine what type of counsellor you want to be viewed as and ensure that is what you communicate in person and online.

Employers and clients will look you up online or may ask questions of people who know you. A good reputation takes years to build and can be lost quickly. Aim to build it and protect it.

6. Ensure your CV is professional

Your CV is often one of the first evidence for panels of what type of professional you are. It should be error free. Errors, particularly basic or repeated errors, send signals of lack of attention, diligence, or writing ability. It should be targeted at the job you are applying for. Customise it to the potential readers. What will you include? What will you exclude (that doesn't add value to the application)? How will you express it? You might gain help from a professional in resume writing. Your CV gives the potential employer a window into who you are, what skills and potential you have, and your communication abilities.

7. Ask for critical feedback

Sometimes our blind spots can undermine how others perceive us or weaken our applications. When I prepare articles, I send drafts to people I trust will tell me where the mistakes are and give me hints on how to improve. I will have done this

with this article, and doing so will usually spare me the embarrassment of putting my name publicly to a document with errors I missed.

Ask someone to critically review your CV and cover letter to help enhance it. Ask someone to take you through a practice interview and then give you critical, supportive feedback to help you learn how to do better. Supportive feedback makes us feel good and critical feedback is the path to enhanced awareness and improvement. Intentionally ask for feedback, particularly from someone you think has strengths in the area you are seeking feedback in.

8. Prepare for the position

Study the company website, research about the target client group or issue and recommended therapy approaches, and research anything else that will help you gain a sense of what might be required in the role. While you may not be an expert and should not pretend to be if you are not, it shows the interview panel that you are committed to preparing for the position. If you don't get the job, you still will have benefited from learning new information about a referral source and information about a target group or issue that you may not have understood much about previously. Conversely, if you under-prepare, it signals to the interview panel a lack of care about the role and/or lack of willingness to show diligence that might be required for the role. In interviews, the level of preparation for the role is often fairly evident to the panel.

9. Be open to, and familiar with technology

People tend not to study counselling to become fluent with technology, however technology has been increasingly important for counsellors to know. Delivering counselling remotely is still an area the counselling field is catching up with, helped along by Covid lockdowns.

Familiarity with technology for record keeping and client consultations used to be seen as an optional extra skill set. With Covid, technology advancement, and some clients and services preferring remote or computer-based practice, counsellors who are open to, and experienced with technology, may have an edge when it comes gaining employment.

10. Cultivate professional character

The earlier tips are useful to enhance your chances of gaining employment. However, there are some more fundamental areas that form the substance of your professionalism that will be noticed over time and contribute to the formation of your reputation. Cultivate the substance of a reputable professional. Seek to learn and grow as a counsellor. Aim to practice ethical decision-making. Seek to excel in your studies and counselling practice. Work on and seek help in the areas of your life which might be problematic. Continue learning. Read counselling books and articles regularly even after you finish university. Actively seek to learn rather than merely meeting minimum PD requirements. Practice what you preach.

These qualities may not be noticeable in first impressions, but over time, people will recognise them and regard you accordingly. This is where your broader reputation will come from and will provide inspiration to younger members of the profession to follow the virtues you operate by. Your qualities will become a gift to others.

I hope these ideas will be helpful for both the younger members of the profession and to those currently seeking work. In my experience, I have gained one job because a previous colleague of mine recommended me to an employer friend of his seeking staff. My reputation with my colleague must have been sufficient that he had the confidence to commend me years later.

I've gained jobs for which I applied, knowing I didn't meet all the criteria. From what I have learned in two decades in the field, from both sides of the hiring table, is that gaining work as a counsellor often requires strategic planning and development at multiple levels to give oneself the edge in a competitive process. Those who prepare best throughout their counselling journey, and for specific positions, are likely to show greater value and attractiveness to future employers than those who haven't paid attention to strategic preparation.

Nathan Beel is the Brisbane and Online Counselling Discipline Lead at ACAP and maintains a part-time private practice in counselling and counselling supervision.