



**BRANDING YOU:  
HOW TO MARKET YOURSELF  
TO POTENTIAL EMPLOYERS**



HARVARD | BUSINESS | SCHOOL  
Career & Professional Development

# CONTENTS

Your most enduring case study: you .....	3
Meet our contributors .....	4
Branding yourself .....	6
The prodigal professional .....	9
Communicating your core value .....	11
Spreading your word .....	14
It's not really about you .....	17

# YOUR MOST ENDURING CASE STUDY: YOU

Whether you're pursuing your first post-graduate role, switching careers, or returning to the workforce after a period of absence, your job search begins by making a case for...yourself.

As a jobseeker, you're simultaneously the protagonist of your search, the author of your case, and the publisher who promotes your story to your audience – potential employers and the network of contacts who can help you reach them.

*Branding You* draws upon collective experience of a team of career coaches (see *Meet our Contributors*) who share their decades of counseling experience in three critical categories:



## **PERSONAL BRANDING**

What it is and how to make it work for you



## **CORE MESSAGING**

How to build the foundation for your story



## **NETWORKING**

Building awareness by getting your word out

We hope the following insights make your job search more effective and rewarding. For more general information and tactical know-how, [explore the resources available online through HBS Career & Professional Development.](#)

# MEET OUR CONTRIBUTORS

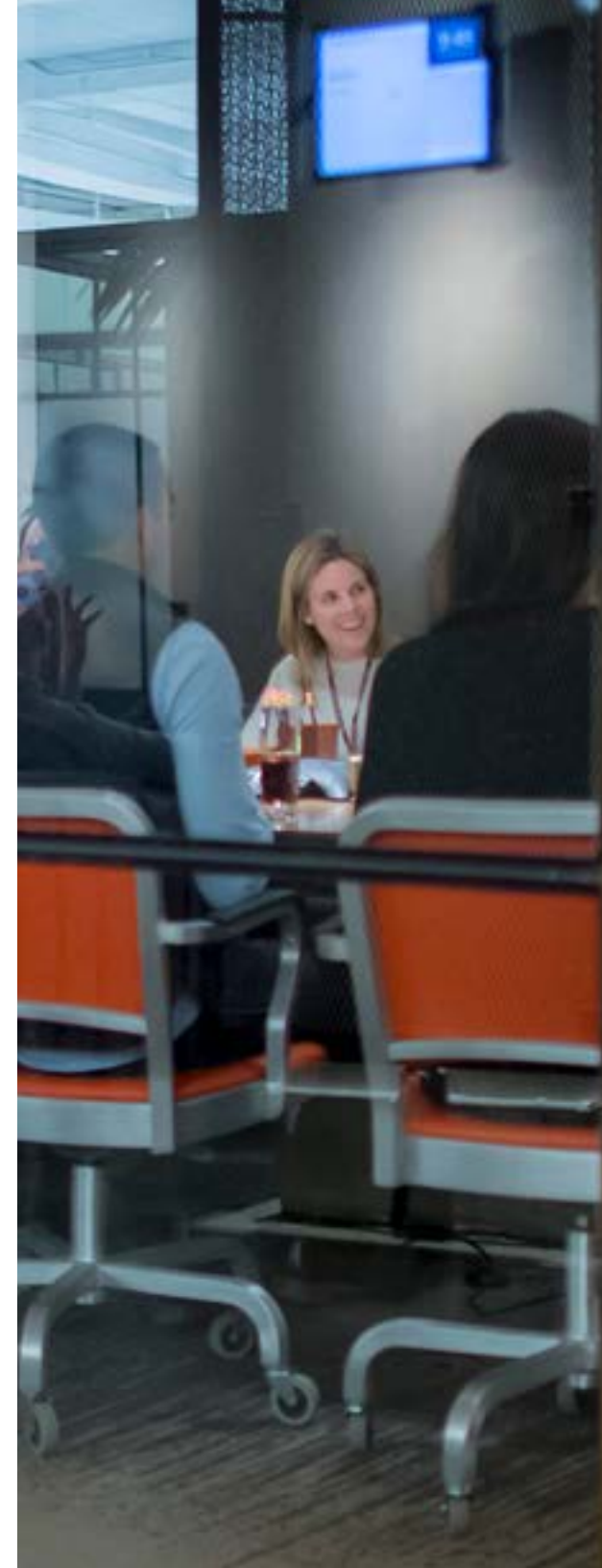
*Branding You* has been made possible through the generous contributions of experience and expertise from the following:

**Phillip Andrews** is a Corporate Relations Director in HBS Career & Professional Development responsible for employer relations in Africa, Canada, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East. As a career coach, he provides guidance to students and alumni on every step of their job search process, from self-assessment and visioning to research and networking.

**Jill Huggett** is an HBS Career Coach and founder and principal of Bridgepath Career Advisors, LLC, a consultancy that works with mid- to C-level executives to determine where they would truly like to be and create a path to get there. In addition to her services to alumni and career-switchers, she helps MBA students prepare for their next roles coming out of business school with interview and resume preparation.

**Laurie Matthews** is Corporate Relations Director for HBS' Career & Professional Development office, where she is responsible for 300+ recruiting relationships spanning sectors including retail, entrepreneurship, and hospitality. As a senior career coach, she works with clients to listen for the truth and push for the insights that open possibilities with creativity, energy, and support.

**Jane Veron** is the founder and CEO of The Acceleration Project, a 501(c)3 nonprofit that provides structured, results-oriented, pro bono consulting to local small businesses in need, and empowers women to make a meaningful impact in their community while advancing their professional skills.







# BRANDING YOURSELF

Meredith  
McPherson

MARSH  
McPherson

# PERSONAL BRANDING

First things first. Before you even think about searches, resumes and interviews, start with the fundamentals – who you are and what you bring to the employment table. Your foundational self may be considered in two dimensions:



## INTERNAL

What are your ambitions, goals, desires, hopes, and dreams? These are the constituent pieces of your motivations, the things that determine what kind of roles, functions, industries, titles, and projects you're looking for. Understanding your motivations gives shape and direction to your job search, allowing you to focus on the opportunities you really want.



## EXTERNAL

How is this same “you” represented to the world? This is the realm of “personal branding,” the construct you use to assert who you are, and what distinguishes you from competing jobseekers.

## WHAT IS A “PERSONAL BRAND”?

Career coach Jill Huggett puts it bluntly: “In the working world, *you* are the product and the hiring manager is the buyer. Every product has a brand, which helps consumers determine what will help solve their problem or opportunity and then choose between competing products. An important note about brand...everyone has a personal brand whether they realize it or not. How are you being perceived? *That's your personal brand.*” Therefore, you need to be aware of both the brand you would like to portray and the brand perceived by the marketplace.”

**“Everyone has a personal brand whether they realize it or not. How are you being perceived? That's your personal brand.”**

Jill Huggett

Although brands are a matter of perception, these perceptions can – and should – be manipulated to project your identity. You create the brand; you display it before the world. Jobseekers can be deliberate about their brands by following a basic, **three-step process**:

### **1 Identify the problems you solve**

Ironically, the first step toward building a successful personal brand begins, not with an assessment of what you value, but of what potential employers value. Dive deeply into their needs. What challenges do they face that you can address? What ROI can the company expect by hiring you? What opportunities could they embrace – if they had your support?

### **2 Articulate the skills you use to solve problems or seize opportunities**

Next step: Why should anyone trust that you can solve their problems? What skills do you use to deliver your value? Support your first claim by illustrating a second one – the sets of skills, experiences, and aptitudes that encourage confidence in your ability to get the job done. These are the familiar elements of the traditional resume. But in the context of personal branding, you deliberately tie your skills and experiences to your potential employers' challenges and opportunities. Keep in mind that the skills you choose to highlight should be relevant to the role you are going for, not just all of your skills in your tool box.

### **3 Highlight your distinctions**

“You want to be differentiated and relevant,” says CPD Corporate Relations Director Laurie Matthews. Don't give equal weight to each element of your work history. Instead, highlight and emphasize those skills, experiences, and areas of your expertise that simultaneously distinguish you from other candidates, and are deeply important to the employer. Examples:

- For the national brand seeking new markets, play up your international experience
- For the manufacturer reconfiguring its operations, emphasize your expertise in supply chains
- For the non-profit expanding its donor base, highlight your work in digital and/or social media







## PERSONAL BRANDING FOR CAREER SWITCHERS

The logic of personal branding might intimidate job seekers who are deliberately changing their roles or industries. If your brand is rooted in experience that is not transparently relevant to your new interests, how do you create a convincing brand story?

Phillip Andrews, CPD Corporate Relations Director and Career Coach, often hears the anxiety of career switchers. “They say, ‘I don’t have any experience in the industry I am targeting. How do I make myself attractive?’ The answer is to focus on transferable skills.” **You can do this in two ways:**

### 1 Identify your transferrable skills

Review your inventory of skills and experiences. Strip away the industry-specific skills, then emphasize the skills you can carry into your new role or industry. Examples include the ability to:

- Analyze complex data sets
- Ability to learn new skills/knowledge quickly
- Model multiple strategic options
- Communicate to diverse stakeholders
- Manage/coordinate action across multiple functional areas

### 2 Speak to underlying employer needs

Many job descriptions will include demands, such as “X years of experience in Y,” that switchers may find impossible to fulfill. But there’s no need for despair. Instead, examine the underlying skills and experiences that may be buried within their requests, and demonstrate how you can meet those.

*Example:* A potential employer seeks “consulting experience” you do not have. By digging deeper, you realize there are specific business skills you have that can be applied to the role: perhaps in analytics, forecasting and/or presentation or reporting talents. Speak to these skills; show concrete examples of your previous experience applying them; then talk about how they can be applied within the context of the employer’s needs.



RE  
A  
B  
L  
E  
D  
S

# THE PRODIGAL PROFESSIONAL: RETURNING TO THE WORKFORCE WITH CONFIDENCE

As the founder and director of The Acceleration Project, Jane Veron works closely with professional women who are returning to the workforce after a significant period of absence. From her perspective, “The biggest gap is not lack of skills, but confidence.” She recommends the following:

- Present results: Don’t neglect your “non-professional” accomplishments in the home or in the community. Be prepared to talk about your achievements, what they reveal about your abilities, and how they can be valuable to potential employers.
- Eliminate equivocation: No “buts” about it! Do not denigrate yourself or your accomplishments with caveat words such as “but,” “just,” “only.” Nor should you use the phrase, “I think,” when describing your skills: e.g., instead of, “I think I am good at analyzing large data sets,” say or write, “I have extensive big data analytical skills.” No apologies, no diminishment.
- Fake it ‘til you make it: Confidence is a habit that’s reinforced every time you exercise it. If you cannot summon the confidence you want, fake the confidence you need. Over time, you’ll create a virtuous circle in which your “fake” efforts will become real, genuine confidence.

A close-up photograph of a desk lamp with a glowing lightbulb. The lamp is positioned in the foreground, and the background shows a blurred bookshelf filled with books. The text "COMMUNICATING YOUR CORE VALUES" is overlaid on the image in a teal banner.

# COMMUNICATING YOUR CORE VALUES

# CORE MESSAGING

Your personal brand serves as the foundation for all the contacts and communications involved in your job search. But the usual point of entry, for any work-related conversation, is some kind of summary statement, a brief distillation of your personal brand that can be consumed quickly – and whet the appetite for additional engagement with you. These core messages are often expressed as:

- “Elevator pitches” for face-to-face encounters, such as networking events
- The introductory text to your resume or CV
- The “about you” portion of your web page
- Your summary statement within the LinkedIn banner above your profile

The content of your core message will be dictated by the substance of your personal brand. There are, however, some common pointers that can help you stand out from the pack:

## **Lead with *their* pain points**

It seems contradictory, but the most effective “about you” statements are really about them – about the employer’s pain points and how you address them. Place these pains (and your cures) at the center of your core message.

## **Frame your story**

Don’t expect your skills and experiences to speak for themselves. Speak for them. Articulate what they mean and what value they bring to the employer. Articulate the “so what” of the skills you have. Example: expand, “I have international experience,” to “I am able to assimilate to cultures quickly because of the numerous cultures I’ve experienced with my international assignments.”

## **Link to supporting content**

Have you demonstrated thought leadership in areas of concern to your potential employers: blog posts, articles, videos, webinars, slide decks, etc.? Link to them from your summaries and profiles to give contacts a deeper sense of your abilities – and your commitments.







## **FACE-TO-FACE MESSAGING: THE INTERVIEW**

When your summary messages are successful, they will lead to a more direct form of communication, the interview, an opportunity to simultaneously tailor your message to an audience of one, and to communicate virtues that cannot be adequately captured on paper. There are a few things to keep in mind:

### **Prepare ahead**

Do research before the interview, including networking conversations, to uncover your employer's priorities.

### **Connect the dots**

The interview is the opportune place to connect the things you are good at with the needs your employer has. This is no time for subtlety; be explicit, e.g., "I understand you're complementing your traditional retail strategy with new e-commerce initiatives. During my tenure with BlingCo, I led a company-wide digitization effort that yielded a 23 percent increase in online sales while cutting inventory expenses in half."

### **Listen carefully**

Your interlocutor will tell you what it is they need to hear from you – if you're prepared to listen for it. Use the interview to learn; ask questions to find their strike zone. Then you can tailor your side of the conversation to their exact needs and concerns.

### **Project personality**

CPD Director Laurie Matthews notes that the interview is not just a means of saying what you're all about, but demonstrating it. "It's not just about competence," she says, "but character. Employers want to know what it will be like to work with you. Go way beyond skills and experience to telegraph your personality, your ability to work effectively with others." In the ideal conversation, you project confidence and humility.

### **Pay attention to body language**

You're not a disembodied voice. Be sure to use your vocal tone, facial expressions, and body language to reinforce your messages. At the same time, watch your interviewer carefully and pick up the cues. If they are fidgeting or showing other expressions of declining interest, pause. Ask them if they would like you to go deeper, or if there are other areas of concern they would like you to cover. Your goal is not to talk at your interviewers, but with them.



**SPREADING  
YOUR WORD**

# NETWORKING

Once you have your brand and story in place, you need to articulate it in multiple venues to build awareness among potential employers. Think of your outreach network as having two fundamental categories:



## THE EMPLOYERS THEMSELVES

Targeting employers is obvious. But remember, it is up to you to define your target based on your objectives, their needs, and the potential intersections that suggest mutual interest. Research, through CPD and other resources, is essential.



## POTENTIAL INFLUENCERS

Do not neglect the much larger set of potential contacts who may not be in a position to hire you, but can help you by:

- Offering deeper insight into the industries/roles that interest you
- Providing feedback on your brand and message
- Making introductions to potential employers and/or influencers







## **PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR MORE EFFECTIVE NETWORKING**

The basics of networking should be familiar to most HBS students and alum. There are nuances, however, that can help you expand your network and engage it more effectively.

### **Be smarter about LinkedIn**

LinkedIn is not merely a place where you can find others, but where others can find you. With that in mind, be sure your LinkedIn summary, as suggested earlier in this paper, expresses an “audience-centric” perspective by articulating the pain points you solve, and/or the opportunities you help organizations seize.

As a social media platform, LinkedIn also offers multi-dimensional options for posting content: articles, quotes, videos, event invitations, and more. Take advantage of the exposure, but be sure every activity, everything you link to, is consistent with your personal brand. Your LinkedIn profile should be a complement to your resume, not a cut and paste.

### **Be smarter about outreach**

The single biggest mistake jobseekers make in their communications? Not doing sufficient research, then consequently not speaking to relevant issues or concerns. Know who you are talking to, and speak to the things that matter to *them*. Assert your skills/experience within the context of *their needs*. When possible, ask questions first, then listen. They will reveal their priorities and you will know, on the spot, how to present yourself. This is why networking and informational interviews are so important. This is where people are willing to share this information. When you are in a formal interview process, you are no longer in command of the conversation so it will be harder for you to determine their priorities.

### Be smarter about outreach

One of the most valuable aspects of an HBS education is access to a network of ~45,000 MBAs and another ~36,000 Executive Education participants. Use this privilege wisely. When you reach out to them via the [Alumni Directory](#), keep in mind that subject lines dictate open rates; use the subject line to directly state who you are and what you want.

In the body of your message, be sure to explain why you're contacting them, referencing some aspect of their own experience/history (that you've learned through research). Example: "I see that you started your career as a consultant then moved into project management. I'd like to make a similar shift – how did you make the transition?"

### Be smarter about engagement

Every day, we are barraged with emails, tweets, voice messages, and other communications that demand something from us: money, time, support. As a matter of self-defense, most of these will be ignored or deleted – your requests among them.

Instead of asking for something from someone, find ways to build connections by offering your contacts something they themselves may find valuable. It could be as simple as a link to an article they might find interesting. But you can make a bigger impression by giving them something more ambitious, such as:

- "I surveyed 10 COOs regarding workflow automation technology. May I share their opinions with you?"
- "I recently published an article about consumer behavior in a country your company would like to expand into, Germany. Here's the link..."
- "You might enjoy this video interview I conducted with Jessica Bigwig, who is pursuing a digitization initiative similar to your own..."



# IT'S NOT REALLY ABOUT YOU

A successful job marketing campaign contains an important paradox...



## **PERSONAL BRANDING**

A strong personal brand communicates what's important to potential employers, not to you personally.



## **CORE MESSAGING**

Effective communications speak to the recipient's needs, not necessarily yours.



## **NETWORKING**

The best way to build brand awareness is to network in such a way that the people you're contacting feel that they are getting as much value from the relationship as you are.

We hope that the suggestions presented in this paper help you in your search, and we encourage you to continuously research employer needs to ensure that your brand, messages and networking remain relevant to the people who count: them.