

Unpopular advice for fresh grads rejected for jobs: What if it's not them, but you?

Many factors affect the entry-level job market. Taking responsibility for our shortcomings will improve our chances of success in the future.

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There's no sugarcoating it – rejection hurts.

I have been in the workforce for just over three years. In the past decade, I've had my fair share of rejections in applying for internships, scholarships and full-time jobs.

Six years ago, a university acquaintance clinched an internship that I also applied for. Perhaps my acquaintance had more experience or scored better on relevant courses; perhaps they had done a relevant prior project; or perhaps they simply fared better on the interview task.

Whatever the specific reasons, most aren't actionable. I can't go back in time to do better in relevant courses or start accumulating relevant experience earlier, for example.

All this could have created a sense of defeatism and gloom. However, as I had worked together with this individual previously, I gained insight into what the hiring managers might have been looking for. In our interactions, I recalled good work and communication habits that most likely made them stand out during the selection process.

I realised that seeing what I could learn from more successful peers and taking responsibility for my relative shortcomings can only improve my chances in future.

So when a fresh grad today gets turned down for a job and the high salary they felt they deserved, and when they say with exasperation, "why not me?", it's worth asking a different set of questions in shifting from indignation to agency.

There will be many factors beyond our control, doubly so given accelerating forces such as

artificial intelligence and economic disruption. But there were also things which were in our control, and things which remain in our control.

"The truth is that we make repeated choices in life that become habits, those habits determine our paths, and those paths determine our outcomes. When we explain away those unwanted outcomes, we absolve ourselves of any responsibility for producing them," Shane Parrish writes in *Clear Thinking: The Art And Science Of Making Better Decisions*.

It is in figuring out our responsibility and what we need to do differently that we can have hope of different future outcomes.

TEMPERING YOUR EXPECTATIONS

This question of reframing the "Why not me?" question is

relevant for those applying for their first job. A first job is the first time the economy assigns us a monetary value.

The experience of being valued this way can be jarring. After all, entering university was itself a coveted goal that we crossed. All graduates were once freshmen – the world was their oyster, and everything seemed possible. So it is unsurprising that some fresh graduates might hold higher expectations of their earning power.

In a 2025 School-to-Work Transition Study conducted by the Ministry of Manpower, most of the 2,500 recent graduates surveyed had expected a higher starting salary than the actual median pay in their respective disciplines. Furthermore, nearly a third had declined a job offer because they felt the pay was too low.

Some fresh graduates facing this gap may believe, understandably,

that they do deserve top salaries, especially if they took pains to accumulate internship experience and build portfolios while juggling their studies.

Yet they find themselves bluntly priced out on entering the "real world" and explicitly compared with their stronger peers. Whatever illusions about their potential value are tested when they receive their first offer letters. Hence the question, asked with some incredulity: "Why not me?"

To be sure, salaries may be pegged to existing job grade norms in an organisation or affected by budget constraints. But it is undeniable that stronger candidates generally have more options to choose from than weaker ones.

In recent months, much discussion has surrounded how fresh graduates may need to temper their expectations.

"If your expected salary is anchored to the top end of what the market offers, you will feel underpaid by most offers you receive – even reasonable ones," Institute for Human Resource Professionals chief executive Aslam Sardar, and Singapore University of Social Sciences' Kang Soon Hock and Sheryl Chua wrote in *The Straits Times* in May.

However, it can remain challenging for fresh grads to shake off the sense that tempering expectations means reluctantly settling for less.

The resentment associated with "why not me?" may not go away, and could even negatively colour their mindsets at work. Preventing this requires taking responsibility for first, their present predicament; second, their job choice; and third, their shortcomings.

OWNING YOUR CHOICES

First, taking responsibility for their current predicament means assessing where personal shortcomings may have led to their rejections. That could mean asking: "How can I improve going forward?"

Recalling my interactions with my acquaintance who clinched the internship, I realised that to strengthen my application, I needed to get better at juggling competing priorities in my remaining university semesters. I also needed to keep an eye on the forest of building a coherent portfolio, even as I planted the trees of individual achievements.

When responsibility for past shortcomings is more readily accepted, it also reduces the lingering resentment of "why not me?" creeping into the making of present-day choices.

Making this choice is the second area where agency can be restored if fresh grads take responsibility.

To borrow a question from Parrish in *Clear Thinking*, consider: "Will this action make the future easier or harder?" This question reminds the fresh graduate that they retain some agency even with less than desirable options, as they are actively choosing what is best for their future self. In turn, that could increase their openness to considering the "non-wage benefits" such as growth opportunities and good management that Sardar, Kang and Chua highlighted in their opinion piece.

A BETTER FUTURE

Finally, the third area of responsibility involves working on their shortcomings as they embark on their first job.

The reality is that existing shortcomings do not disappear just because one leaves school. The first job should be seen as a chance to make different choices, thus improving one's prospects in the next application.

For example, if one was not proactive enough in seeking opportunities in school, one should take responsibility for being more proactive at work.

Recalling again the case of my acquaintance, her strong communication skills when conveying her views pointed me to a possible blind spot during my interviews, where some of my responses were not concise enough.

I began to be more conscious of getting to the point. While I cannot conclude how far this impacted any interview, I am certain that working on this blind spot can only have helped. It is something I continue to be conscious of at work.

Similarly, I urge fresh grads to use their first job to work on what limited their potential, so that they can reduce its continued impacts. Ask: "What choices can I now make to work on my shortcomings?"

To be sure, none of the above is a guarantee of securing our desired job, be it first or second. But it is precisely in uncertainty that opportunity awaits.

We cannot change the past, but we can still influence the future. That begins by taking responsibility for how we arrived at today, if only to try for a better tomorrow.

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Fresh graduates should use their first jobs to work on what limits their potential, and ask themselves what choices they can make to work on their shortcomings, says the writer. ST PHOTO: BRIAN TEO