

# Preparing for the Rookie Year: Lessons from Those Who Have Gone Before

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**NOTE:** The reader should note that a full-length version of this paper is more than 80 pages long. About two-thirds of this length is devoted to the stories the graduates told. That information has been distilled from roughly 300 pages of interview transcripts. The reporting of qualitative data is always a challenge because of its voluminous nature. There is obviously far too much story information in the full-length version to be included in this article. This article shares just several highlights of graduates' stories with all of the rest of the story material made available via a link on the author's web page, which can be found in the faculty section of the Gordon College website ([www.gordon.edu](http://www.gordon.edu)). Readers are strongly encouraged to access the full story information online since it is the students' stories that represent the primary contribution of this article. I am grateful for the assistance of Prof. Stephen Bretsen and former students Kyle Quackenbush and Sonya Perez, all from Wheaton College, in analyzing the interview transcripts.

**ABSTRACT:** Christian business faculty prepare students for careers in the marketplace. But do they do enough to help students with their crucial rookie year in business? This paper proposes that faculty could do more and that the place to begin is to learn from the experiences of prior rookies. It provides an overview on the process of organizational entry and the lives of Christians in business as well as data from interviews of recent Christian college graduates who have entered the business world. The essay highlights dozens of stories of their experiences during their rookie years. Consideration is then turned to how faculty can use this information in their teaching and advising to help facilitate students' transition from college to corporation. Finally, implications for future research are discussed.

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## INTRODUCTION

Kurt (not his real name) was brand new to the business world. He had just bought his first briefcase and business suit. Actually, his mom helped him pick out two suits so he wouldn't have to wear the same one every day. Kurt's first day on the job, the senior vice president of his division, a distinguished looking gentleman in his mid-sixties told him, "Don't call me Mr. Zuckerman. We go by first names around here. You need to call me Marv." So for the first time in his life, Kurt called someone in his grandfather's generation by his first name. It felt strange. A couple weeks later, Kurt proudly submitted his first written report to his boss. It was six pages long, double-spaced.

The boss liked the content, but not the length. "Cut this down to two pages, but don't lose any of the content," he instructed Kurt. Another first for Kurt. In college he had always struggled to make papers long enough to meet the professor's requirements. Now he was faced with just the opposite: having plenty to say but not enough space in which to say it.

Kurt also struggled with what it meant to be a Christian in the marketplace. He tried to be ethical, work hard, and look for opportunities to share his faith, but there had to be more to it than that. None of his co-workers were believers. He took some heat from Marv for sharing the belief that abortion was wrong. And try as he might, he couldn't convince a co-worker that he and his

fiancé really weren't going to live together until after they got married. The co-worker had never met anybody like that before. Kurt also struggled to find a church in his new city and adjust to an 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. routine. Taken alone, none of these issues were a big deal. But taken together they, and others like them, made transitioning into business difficult in ways that Kurt hadn't anticipated. He also came to realize that there was a lot more truth to *Dilbert* than he had ever imagined.

Rewind four years to the August before Kurt's first year in college. Kurt and some friends went out for dinner with Kurt's older sister to get the low down on what college would be like. His sister was entering her last year of college. She advised him not to freak out at the beginning of the semester when syllabus was piled upon syllabus. Somehow there would be time to complete the required work. She also noted how many professors didn't expect students to do every reading assignment thoroughly. Part of the trick was learning how to prioritize and how to skim. These little insights helped Kurt during his freshman year. He wished he'd gotten similar guidance before starting his business career. But the college he went to was much more focused on preparing students for graduate and professional school than for the workplace.

People naturally experience many transitions throughout their lives (Gould, 1978; Whitbourne, 2007). One element of healthy human development is a person's ability to successfully navigate these transitions (Erikson, 1985). This paper is about transition: it is about the transition from college to the business world. More specifically, it concerns the challenges that Christians face when moving from a Christian college to a secular corporation. That is a big change. Learning about that change is important for helping believers begin their careers in business successfully.

The transition from college to corporation is not an easy one. It is even more challenging when those making it desire to move from integrating faith and learning to integrating faith and living. This situation presents Christian business faculty with a wonderful opportunity to assist in this transition. This paper is designed to give faculty some tools to do just that. Following an overview of scholarly information on the process of organizational entry and the lives of Christians in business, data will be shared from interviews of recent college graduates. The stories of their experiences during their first year in the marketplace provide the heart of this paper. Consideration will then be given to the implications and pedagogical uses of the stories. Lastly, attention will turn to possible areas for future research.

## LIFE AFTER COLLEGE

It is useful to view the transition from college to the "real world" of business through the theoretical lenses of human development and organizational socialization. Popular culture often touts the chaos and stress of both adolescence (teenage angst) and middle age (the midlife crisis). These are difficult times of life, but research of human development suggests that the two most demanding periods of life are actually old age and young adulthood (Whitbourne, 2007). Most people in their early twenties are very stressed and with good reason. They are faced with losing the familiarity of school, separating from their family of origin and redefining the relationship with their parents, finding full-time employment, assuming real responsibility, feeling lonely and geographically uprooted, forming new relationships (with co-workers, friends, and perhaps a spouse and even children), constructing a lifestyle, choosing an initial career but changing jobs frequently, and shaping an identity as an adult. That is a lot for anyone to cope with.

Recent research even suggests that a new stage of development has emerged for 20-somethings in American culture. This stage has been given various labels, but Christian Smith (2007) prefers to call it emerging adulthood. In the previous century, people moved through adolescence (teens to early 20s) into young adulthood (20s to around 40). But recently a distinct and new stage in life has emerged, situated between the teen years and full-blown adulthood. Covering roughly ages 18 to 30, it involves a period of career and relational exploration coupled with a postponement of commitment and responsibility. Separation from the family of origin has also become delayed with parents of today's youth more willing to extend support, including financial, well into their children's twenties. According to Arnett (2004), this period is characterized by identity exploration, instability, focus on the self, feeling in limbo, and a sense of possibilities and hope. It is also accompanied by significant anxiety, confusion, self-obsession, and disappointment.

To those of us who have been college educators for several years, Arnett's description sounds a lot like typical college students. However, compared to the past when this stage was compressed into four to six years, today it extends to twice that time. What is important to note for the purposes of this paper is that the early twenties have been and continue to be a taxing period of life. This is the context in which students move from campus to corporation. Christian graduates are not all that different from

their secular counterparts, except that those who have a genuine commitment to their faith face the additional challenge of trying to ascertain how that faith relates to all the ensuing challenges.

### CORPORATE INDOCTRINATION

Christian business graduates also face the hazard of moving from the relatively sheltered life of a Christian college campus to the world of the secular marketplace, a world with a very different set of values and culture. It is here that the theoretical lens of organizational socialization becomes useful. When newcomers first enter a new organization they experience some amount of bewilderment. In a classic article, Louis (1980) describes the newcomer's reaction as one of surprise and sense making; being surprised and confused by all the newness and then slowly attempting to sort things out and comprehend them. Organizations are anything but passive during this process. Whether formally or informally, they seek to inculcate newcomers with the values, expected behaviors, and social knowledge required to become a true member of the organization (Fang, 2008). In other words, they work to transform outsiders into insiders. The earliest researchers of this phenomenon considered the ethics and tactics of organizational influence on newcomers (Schein & Ott, 1962; Van Maanen, 1982).

Recent research has found that newcomers experience two stages during their first few months on the job: the encounter stage, during which the process of assimilation into the organization's culture begins, and then metamorphosis, when the newcomer actually becomes shaped into what the organization desires (Andre, 2008). The newcomer gradually emerges as an "IBMer" or "Nordie" (at Nordstrom's), for example. Effective socialization is linked with organizational homogeneity (Cooper-Thomas, van Vianen & Anderson, 2004). Additionally, newcomers' adjustment mediates the effects of socialization tactics on the newcomers' job satisfaction, organizational commitment, initial job performance, and intention to remain with their new organization, all of which are vitally important outcomes from the organization's perspective (Bauer, et al., 2007).

Organizational socialization is functional for individuals in that it reduces their anxiety and uncertainty while clarifying expectations (Ashforth & Saks, 1996). A certain amount of socialization is necessary and good for the newcomer. But socialization also has the potential to promote excessive conformity and rob people of their

individuality. Taken to its extreme it begins to take on elements of a cult (Arnott, 2000; Collins & Porras, 1994). Many firms take serious the admonitions to consider their new-employee orientation programs as a boot camp (Tichy, 2001) or what Johnson (2007) calls a "signature experience." At the very least, companies are encouraged to develop sophisticated orientation programs (Gustafson, 2005). This approach is likely to continue in the future as recent research suggests that organizations that function in fast-paced environments — which today describes virtually all businesses — are most in need of formal structures that promote the socialization of newcomers (Gomez, 2009).

The bottom line: a notable challenge for *believers* beginning in business is how to respond to this type of pressure. A certain amount of conformity is necessary and even healthy. But at what point has the believer gone beyond just "learning the ropes" (Van Maanen, 1982) to becoming entangled, and perhaps even strangled, by them? Elsewhere this author has written about this danger of being "conformed to the corporate world" as well as provided a biblical response for how to avoid over-entanglement (Seibert, 2001). The danger is real. Given the socialization pressures they face, it is not surprising that newcomers are reluctant to express their personal values at work (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Their organization's values have a much stronger affect on them than their values have on their organization, and this is especially true for those who are just starting their careers (Morrison & Hock, 1986). Irrespective of their intentions, it will not be naturally easy for believers beginning in business to express their Christian values in the secular marketplace.

This raises the basic issue of the expression of religious values, and Christian values in particular, in the marketplace. What is already known about this?

### EXPRESSION OF RELIGIOUS VALUES AT WORK

While Christians have long been concerned with expressing their faith in the workplace, it is only recently that non-Christian management scholars and practitioners have begun to take seriously the role of personal values, including religious ones, in the business firm. Recently, more and more employees desire to express and develop their whole selves at work (Briscoe, 1996; Mitroff & Denton, 1999). Whether referred to as generic "spirituality" or religion or both, these topics have finally become legitimate for all researchers to explore (Cash & Gray, 2000; Mitroff & Denton, 1999). Space here precludes describing this entire literature. Instead, focus will be

given to two relatively recent studies of business executives who are evangelical Christians. These represent excellent research of what the integration of business and Christianity among corporate leaders looks like.

In a widely cited study, Nash (1994) described her investigation of eighty-five successful Evangelical CEOs. Her research provides rich descriptions of the experiences of many of the CEOs she studied, most of whom were what Nash labeled seekers. Seeker CEOs acknowledged that there were times when the values of Christianity and the values of business conflicted. Such conflicts, or creative tensions as Nash called them, were actively engaged by believers through prayer and discussion with fellow believers. That engagement often led to novel business solutions and/or personal spiritual growth. The tensions were creative in the sense that they energized the CEOs' faith and business thinking. For the seeker, much of life in the marketplace involved tension between the demands of the world and the prompting of the Holy Spirit. This tension was not denied or rationalized away, but embraced as central to what it meant to be in, but not of, the world. It was not easy — emotionally, intellectually, or spiritually — to embrace tension. But to seeker CEOs, doing so was the essence of being a faithful believer in business.

Nash identified seven specific tensions that the CEOs faced in doing business:

- The love for God and the pursuit of a business career
- Love and competition/self-interest
- Employees' needs and business obligation
- Humility and pride/ego
- Family and work
- Charity and wealth
- Faithful witness in a secular workplace.

There were not obvious resolutions to these tensions. The point was not to resolve the tensions with simplistic solutions, but rather to acknowledge them and consciously confront them, primarily through prayer and discussion with other believers. In the process of engaging the tensions when specific situations arose, CEOs' faith was tested, applied, and refined. This captured the essence of believers' behavior in business.

A more recent study by Lindsay (2007) examined the ways many evangelicals have recently joined the ranks of the American elite in the fields of politics, higher education, the arts and entertainment, and business. In the business sphere, Lindsay's findings were based on interviews with 101 corporate leaders. These leaders were in agreement that business could be conducted in a way that made it a ministry. The marketplace was an "arena," a "plat-

form," or a "mission field" where they could demonstrate their evangelical faith to others. In some areas — like the long hours they worked, their uncritical commitment to capitalism, and their affluent lifestyles — the Christians looked quite similar to non-Christian business leaders. But in other areas — like having a Bible or plaque displayed in their office and "coming out of the closet" as a Christian — they were distinct.

Using Life@Work founder Stephen Graves' analogy of "floors of integration," every executive Lindsay studied mentioned business ethics — the ground floor — when describing how their faith impacted their work. Being ethical was seen as a minimum standard to which evangelical business leaders should be held. Many leaders also spoke of establishing internal programs at their firms that reflected evangelical commitments. Two of the most common were faith-based affinity groups and corporate chaplaincies. These represented a second floor level of integration. However, not all evangelical leaders believed it was appropriate to bring their faith so explicitly into their firm. Concerns ranged from distracting the firm from its primary focus on business matters to potential abuses of executive power by advocating a specific religion.

On the third floor, evangelical business executives sought to express their Christian convictions through their organization's external presentation of itself. Messages consistent with Christianity were an explicit part of public relations or advertising communication. This could be as overt as printing Bible verses on company products or more subtle, as in insisting on modestly dressed models for clothing ads. The highest level of integration that Lindsay found, the fourth floor, involved instances of evangelical Christian values serving as the guideposts for a company's culture. Chick-fil-A, with its policy of not being open on Sunday and its purpose of existing "to glorify God by being a faithful steward of all that is entrusted to us and to have a positive influence on all who come in contact with Chick-fil-A" (Lindsay, 2007, p. 180), was cited as an example. ServiceMaster was also listed at the fourth floor. Lindsay quoted former CEO C. William Pollard: "One of the biggest structural questions that I've tried to influence through my leadership is to have the firm not only make money, not only serve customers, not only provide employment — all of which are important ... but also to be moral communities for the development and shaping of human character" (p. 181). The view that the ultimate purpose of business for Christians is the promotion of the common good and the development of the individual is also consistent with Alford & Naughton's (2001) prescriptive and provocative book, *Managing as if Faith Mattered*.



Some firms at the fourth floor went beyond viewing a business as a means to ministry, to conceiving a business as a ministry in and of itself. Examples included a candle company in Thailand that offers employment to women to deliver them from the sex trade and Pura Vida coffee, which exists to help the poor and prompt conversations about faith. While Lindsay found examples of Christian leaders on all four floors, he did not find consensus on what the ideal form of integration looked like. Indeed, most of the business leaders did not believe that the fourth floor should be the goal of all evangelical business leaders.

The studies by Nash and Lindsay provide illuminating views of the ways evangelical business leaders seek to live lives of faith in the marketplace. The vast majority are deliberate about integrating their faith and their work, and while some are more visible in how they do this than others, virtually all demonstrate that their faith really does make a difference. But as helpful as these studies are, they say nothing about Christian business employees at *lower* levels of corporations, including the rookies of the business world. Executives face unique hurdles in expressing their faith at work, but their status also affords them more opportunities than regular employees. Lindsay (2007) noted that many lower-level employees could not “come out” about their Christianity the way executives did. Expressing one’s personal values at work becomes easier the longer one has worked and the higher up one has risen in a firm. At that point, individuals can actually influence their organization’s values in contrast to younger workers who are more the recipients of their organization’s values (Morrison & Hock, 1986).

The work of Lindsay and Nash is, therefore, of limited usefulness to believers who are new to business. It provides a glimpse of what life might be like for them in 25 or 35 years (although even here it is quite limited since the marketplace will have changed significantly in that time). But it says nothing about what it will be like to *begin* a career in business as a Christian. Information on Christian rookies is sorely lacking, both from a research perspective and from the perspective of the recent college graduate looking for practical guidance. These needs were the impetus for the research presented here.

#### **AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF CHRISTIAN BUSINESS ROOKIES**

At this point I hope the reader will allow for an unconventional change to the first person voice in this paper. The third person voice was used in the beginning

to reflect the scholarly seriousness with which this topic is being approached. At the same time, this paper investigates the experience of starting a business career through stories, beginning with my own. In the interest of story-telling, I hope the reader will agree that it is reasonable to speak in the first person.

For the skeptical reader, I will begin by stating that narratives and stories are increasingly being seen as a legitimate way to study organizational behavior (Andre, 2008). The *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business* also acknowledges their validity (Cafferky, 2004; Johnson, 2005). As Christians, we recognize that one of the principal literary styles of the Bible is the story. And, of course, God-incarnate used the parable as one of His primary methods of communication (e.g., Matthew 13:3). Just as a good business case study helps students learn technical dimensions of business, so a well told story can assist students in learning what their first year on the job might be like. Indeed, stories are one of the most potent forms of both conveying ideas and enhancing retention of those ideas.

Here is my story as it relates to this topic. For about a decade I taught the capstone senior seminar class to business/economics majors at a Christian college. Many of the readings for the class were written by experienced Christian business people. We also read and discussed Laura Nash’s *Believers in Business*. Students enjoyed these readings, but, understandably, they also had trouble relating to the work experiences of such senior people. They frequently wondered what life was like for rookies in business, which is what they would be in just a few short months.

I too wondered about what life would be like for them during their first year after graduation. I could and did share my experience graduating college and entering business, but that happened many years ago. I also differed from my students in not having received a Christian undergraduate education. Finally, it occurred to me that students often take advice better from people closer in age to themselves than I am (which becomes more of an issue with each passing year). The solution to this situation seemed clear: talk to some recent graduates. That I did.

Over the past decade I conducted research interviews with an intentional sample of 16 business/economics graduates of the college where I taught. I used a standard qualitative research methodology similar to one I used in a prior study (Seibert & Daudelin, 1999). A mix of male and female students was chosen to be interviewed based on their spiritual maturity and desire to pursue a business career that also incorporated their faith. I assessed these factors subjectively based on their performance in my senior seminar class. The graduates who were interviewed

grew up throughout the U.S. One was raised abroad. They took jobs after college in the western, eastern, and southern U.S., although most were employed in the Midwest. Their employers ranged from large, well known global corporations to small local businesses. Each graduate was entering his or her first full-time job. The graduates and their jobs are listed here (all names and companies have been disguised).

- Alison — Buyer (manufacturing), Cycline Pharmaceuticals  
 Amy — Area Manager (retail), ValueMax  
 Becky — Quality Assurance Analyst (management consulting), McNeil & Associates  
 Brandon — Sales Representative (payroll and benefits), Interactive Systems Solutions  
 Christy — Business Intern (think tank), The Franklin Institute; Staff Assistant, Office of the U.S. Senator for Ohio  
 Dave — Equity and Bond Operations Associate (investment banking), B.D. Rutherford  
 Erica — Recruiting Associate (corporate recruiting), I.T. Search; Sales Representative (manufacturing), Compton Computers; Account Representative (manufacturing), Zytech; Office Administrator (economics consulting), EEA  
 Josh — Caretaker of his mother-in-law; Business Analyst (human resource consulting), Rockland Corporation  
 Katie — Processing Supervisor and Operations Manager (retail financial services), OneFinancial,  
 Leslie — Territory Sales Manager (computer software), SoftWay  
 Peter — Accounting Assistant (commercial real estate finance), Concord Capital  
 Rich — Installer, Service Representative, Sales Associate (commercial window manufacturing), Panorama Windows  
 Robert — Client Representative (technology manufacturing and services), Global Data Systems  
 Samuel — Project Manager (industrial psychology and human resource management research and consulting), Employee Research Inc.  
 Steve — Credit Analyst (commercial banking), First National Bank  
 Tim — Communications (sales) Representative (commercial insurance), Iverson Insurance Group

Through a structured interview, graduates were asked about the challenges and adjustments they faced during

their first year as well as the role their faith played. They were also asked to share what they enjoyed about the first year and any advice they might have for graduating seniors. Their 60-90-minute interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim, producing about 300 single spaced pages of interview material. This material was content analyzed and organized into similar themes. Two of the interviews were rewritten in their entirety, with the format being changed from an interview transcript to a coherent narrative. A professional colleague and two student research assistants assisted in the analysis.

From a research standpoint, this study can be viewed in several ways. Those are discussed at the end of this paper along with suggestions for future research. The stories that immediately follow provide insights into what graduates can expect as well as lessons for how they can increase the likelihood of having a successful first year. Equally important, the stories give insights into ways rookie Christian business people try to live their faith at work.

#### **RESULTS OF THE INTERVIEWS: STORIES FROM THE FIRST YEAR**

Not surprisingly, the interviews produced stories of graduates' successes, failures, joys, and frustrations navigating the first year. Experiences ranged from winning an award to being fired to losing a job offer because of a police record the graduate did not even know she had! Some of the encounters, like adjusting to a work schedule devoid of semester breaks and long holidays, were something all graduates face. But other experiences were unique to committed Christians. These included things like struggling to figure out just what it means to live as a Christian in the business world, witnessing to non-believers, finding the time and energy for one's spiritual life and church, and facing secular corporate cultures and pressures to participate in uncomfortable social situations.

The most commonly reported experiences included variations of the following:

- Being stretched to the limits of one's ability and sometimes beyond
- Having to start at the bottom and feeling underutilized
- Adjusting to long hours and minimal time off
- Facing pressure to party at bars and clubs
- Feeling different as a Christian in the midst of a very secular environment
- Exploring how to live one's faith at work
- Maintaining an active personal spiritual life in a

secular world

- Building relationships: making new friends, finding Christian community

To give you a feel for what the graduates shared, here is an excerpt from Brandon's story (his entire story appears at the end of this article):

My first day of orientation involved a big pep talk on my new company, Interactive Systems Solutions, on how much money we could make if we met our sales quotas and on what it took to succeed in sales. The first couple days were a much tougher transition than I'd expected. You have to remember that I'd just come from being on a student missionary program in India where there was so much poverty and so much need. I had spent all summer long living on as little as possible and being around a lot of desperate people. I'd never seen so much pain before in my life. Obviously, as soon as I returned home, I was struck by how much Americans have, but then starting corporate sales training just magnified it a hundred fold. Now I was being told — no, sold — that work is all about the money.

One of the first things the sales trainer said was, "You will not succeed here if you do not ask in every situation: 'What's in it for me?'" The trainer kept saying, "*whiff 'em, whiff 'em, whiff 'em* ... What's in it for *me*? What's in it for *me*?" This was supposed to be our mantra. We were told to ask this before doing anything. Even without my experience in India, this would have struck me as odd. It seemed completely backwards. I remember sitting there thinking, all my life I've been taught, don't think that way, put others first, and things aren't centered around money. But the first day on the job all I hear is, money matters, money matters, I matter. *I'm* the most important thing. I need to be in this for *me*. I felt pretty overwhelmed right from the beginning. What the company used to motivate people — money, free entertainment, free alcohol — just didn't motivate me.

The following vignettes share more of what some of the graduates experienced (a complete list of vignettes is available on the author's web page at [www.gordon.edu](http://www.gordon.edu)):

**Job Failure.** Alison learned the hard way that in the business world sometimes it's "one strike and you're out." Alison, very competent as a college student, struggled the first couple of months at her first job after graduation. As a buyer at Cycline Pharmaceuticals there was so much to learn, the hours were long, and the pace was quick. She was responsible for a \$.5 million inventory. She couldn't understand why it took her longer to do her job than it took the other new buyers. Perhaps it was her perfection-

ism. She knew her performance wasn't great, but she had no reason to think it was a problem. Her boss, who was supportive and encouraging, met with her weekly. But then he got transferred and wasn't immediately replaced. She then reported to her boss' boss, whom she rarely saw. One Friday, after having been at the company for three and a half months, this boss asked to see her. He told her things weren't working out so this would be her last day at Cycline. She should pack up her things, stop by Human Resources, and then leave. She was shocked. She knew she wasn't excelling, but being asked to "resign"? Where did that come from? This boss hardly knew her. He offered few details for his decision. She asked to have one more month to prove herself, but he refused. Needless to say, this event led Alison to do a lot of questioning about the company, herself, her faith, and her future. She ended up seeing a psychiatrist and being put on anti-depression medication. Slowly, she healed.

**Little (or maybe not so little) ways of living one's faith at work.** Leslie worked as a territory sales manager for a major software manufacturer. She spent most of her time in the field in stores like Staples and Office Max, which resold her company's software. Like all sales people, Leslie built relationships at stores with the important people — store management — who could help her get what she needed. But unlike other sales folk, she also took time to talk to the lowest-level employees, even part-timers. She realized that focusing just on the higher-ups didn't agree with the way she saw people. "I saw everybody as a person who God saw as important, whether they could help me or not," she shared. "A few times I had this asked about me: 'Why are you so nice when you come in here? You always talk to everybody and you're so friendly.' And a few of them just flat out asked, 'Are you a Christian?' or, 'What's your faith?'" Leslie was excited by the way God could use a simple thing like stopping to acknowledge people to bring attention to himself.

**Integrity in the job search.** Katie had an opportunity to live out her faith during the recruiting process before she even started her first job. She had just accepted a job offer from a company when later that day she received an offer from the firm that was her first choice. She knew that many people would just accept the second offer and tell the first company, tough luck. She also knew that wasn't what a person of integrity would do. So she explained the situation to the recruiter at the first company, told them she would follow through on her commitment to them with enthusiasm if that was their desire, but also asked to

be able to consider this new offer. Although she ended up taking the second offer, the first company was so pleased with the way she handled the situation that they told her the door was open for her to join them in the future if her plans changed.

Katie also lived out her faith in other meaningful ways, which are described in her full story (found on my web page at [www.gordon.edu](http://www.gordon.edu)).

**An experience trying to witness.** Some people Steve worked with at his bank were surprised about how he lived his life, but he hadn't had an opportunity to share his faith with anyone during his first year. "My plan was to get in there and not compromise anything, and then I thought they would want to ask me why I'm the way I am. That's the stereotypical way that people see Christ through you, and then they'll wonder why you're different," explained Steve. But that hadn't happened. He thought it would be easier to share his faith with coworkers.

**A change in plans.** Josh was thrilled to be getting a job offer to be a business analyst for Rockland Corporation. While excitedly anticipating his first day of work in the "real world," he and his new wife received a phone call. Josh's mother-in-law had just suffered a stroke. Josh and his wife no longer would be living where they had planned nor would Josh be starting anytime soon at Rockland. They moved in with his mother-in-law, and since Josh's wife got a good job there before he did, Josh became the primary caregiver for his mother-in-law during her lengthy rehabilitation. God had a clear calling for Josh during his rookie year, it just wasn't close to the one he expected. Nine months later Rockland was still interested in Josh (and quite impressed with how he had spent the previous nine months), but he would have to re-interview. He started at Rockland shortly thereafter.

Like most emerging adults, these graduates felt a wide mixture of emotions. They were excited to be out of school, on their own, and earning a paycheck. They were finally able to apply what they learned in school and begin to feel like a productive adult. But they also felt considerable uncertainty about their competence and their identity. They longed for the support of Christian friends, which they had come to take for granted in college. And to varying degrees they wondered if they were doing what God wanted them to do. It is important to recall that this was not a random sample of graduates. These were graduates who were serious about their faith. Thus the picture that emerges here is one of the *faithful* believer beginning

in business. But that doesn't mean that all the graduates looked like triumphant Daniels or Esthers. While some did, just as many struggled with their faith during their first year. Indeed, whether it was sharing their lack of desire to go to church or express their faith at work or even their willingness to disclose their inadequacies on the job, I was impressed with the graduates' honesty and transparency. I believe that this was due to their desire to provide information that would be helpful to future graduates as well as to the therapeutic and educational value of structured reflection (Seibert & Daudelin, 1999).

The complete results of the interviews are presented on the author's website. The reader is strongly encouraged to review this material as it provides the meat of this paper. The interview results appear in the form of first person accounts of two of the graduates' stories, Katie and Brandon, and also as a series of vignettes, or short stories, arranged roughly by topic. Names were changed to protect graduates' and their companies' identities. I suggest that the material be read in the order presented, although it is certainly acceptable to jump around as the reader feels led. Please note that, in the spirit of this type of qualitative research, I attempted to keep all the story material as close to the words and perspectives of the graduates as possible. The value of this work is hearing directly from graduates, rather than from me or my three research colleagues. Thus the stories and vignettes provide minimal commentary. This is very intentional. The pedagogical value of the stories is in having students and faculty read and then process them for themselves. Different people will be struck by different issues in the stories. That is a good thing, and it is something that will be maximized if the material is discussed with others, not just read alone. In this sense, the material is similar to a business case study that presents information, which the reader is then called upon to analyze and draw conclusions from. The section that follows presents some of the ways the interview material can be used pedagogically.

#### USING THE RESULTS OF THE INTERVIEWS: PREPARING BELIEVERS FOR THEIR ROOKIE YEAR

The stories presented here are especially relevant to a senior seminar or capstone class where students are already contemplating their post-college lives. The stories should stimulate rich discussion of potential issues the students will face during their first year. Before reading the stories students could be asked to reflect briefly in writing. What do they anticipate their biggest challenges will be upon



entering the workforce? How do they see themselves integrating their faith into their work? After reading the material, students could then compare their expectations to the actual experiences of the graduates. Discussing this with other students should prove to be most useful. What other challenges might graduates face that were not mentioned in the stories? A follow-up assignment would have students reassess which challenges they now anticipate and how they plan to respond to them.

An alternative approach would be to focus students' reactions and discussion on specific issues identified in the stories, like witnessing or handling social pressure. What did the graduates who were interviewed do that was or was not effective? Beyond those illustrated in the stories, what other ways are there for newcomers to handle these situations? Recognizing that the stories tell what graduates did during their first year, not necessarily what they should have done, are there other things a believer beginning in business ought to be concerned with? What role should a person's faith play in their first year? Should this change over time as they gain more experience?

If the primary focus is on helping students with the transition from college to corporation, many other resources are available. Some of the better books that I am aware of are Levitt's *Your Career: How to Make it Happen* (2004), Holton's *The New Professional* (1991), and Ball's *At the Entry Level* (2003). These provide concrete and practical suggestions for beginning a career. Practical material with a scholarly foundation is also available (e.g., Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2006). Every year *Business Week* publishes an issue on the best places to launch a career. A resource that should resonate especially well with today's wired generation is Collegiate-Corporate Dynamics, an organization dedicated to helping grads prepare for life in the corporate world ([collegiate-corporatedynamics.com](http://collegiate-corporatedynamics.com)). And, of course, the career services center at students' college or university should offer resources not just for finding a job, but also for beginning life as a professional.

Resources are also available targeted specifically to Christians (although almost none deal directly with the issue of preparing for the rookie year in business, hence this paper). Here are three I have found that meaningfully challenge and inspire students: Hill's *Just Business* (2008) addresses marketplace ethics in a Biblically grounded yet practical way; Alford and Naughton's *Managing as if Faith Mattered* (2001), a theologically sophisticated work, opens students' eyes to new (and some might even say, radical) ways that Christianity can impact the practice of business; and my own article on how to learn the corporate ropes without getting strangled (Seibert, 2001), which provides

strategies for helping newcomers handle organizational socialization pressures. I am admittedly biased in recommending this last one. Providentially, the last decade has seen the emergence of a considerable amount of solid writing by Christian business scholars and practitioners. Connections can be made between most of this work and the stories presented here.

Using the stories provided here to stimulate discussion in a senior-level course is their most obvious application. But it is far from the only possible application. A colleague uses several of the vignettes for devotionals in his business analysis and strategy course. He reads a vignette and offers a brief comment. Sometimes this leads to questions from students. It would also not be difficult to connect vignettes to specific biblical passages and/or to pray for students concerning the issue raised in the story. Another potential use is as lecture illustrations. Students usually appreciate a good story, especially if it is true and relevant to their lives. These stories are just that. Lectures by faculty who teach in various business disciplines often touch on issues like ethics, evangelizing, corporate culture, and the importance of relationships in the business world. Dropping in a story or two and being able to explain that it came from a recent graduate's experience can enliven a lecture.

For those of us faculty who are a couple decades (or more, perhaps) removed from our own transition from college to the workplace, the stories provide an update on what recent graduates are experiencing. This should help us in our student advising. Students, at least the ones I have dealt with, experience considerable ambivalence about their senior year. They are thrilled to finally be a senior, but also filled with uncertainty and fear about what the future holds. Sharing stories of those who have gone before them is a great way to allay fears and provide encouragement for what lies ahead. Of course, one of the blessings of being a professor and not having to teach from a standard curriculum, is being able to tailor material to one's own strengths and interests. I would be surprised if you could not come up with creative ways of your own to incorporate the stories into your own teaching, advising, and even research.

Finally, the stories of these graduates, although most relevant to seniors, could also be used effectively in many other courses. Their use in an introduction to business or principles of management course would give younger students a taste of many aspects of the real business world. Also, since the stories deal with the human aspect of business life, they are very relevant to courses in organizational behavior and human resource management. Indeed, direct connections to issues in these courses like organizational entry and socialization, personal values, corporate culture, and religion and

spirituality in the workplace can readily be made.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

One way to view the research reported here is as an inductive, grounded theory investigation with value in its own right (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As such, follow-up work would involve further analysis of the interview data and the construction of a conceptual model of rookies' experiences. This study can also be considered an exploratory pilot investigation. It would then logically be followed by more comprehensive interview and survey research with a larger sample that is more representative of Christian college graduates. The findings of the present study suggest many questions that could be included in future interviews or surveys. From these two perspectives the study reported here has the potential to contribute to the scholarly literature on the transition experiences of recent graduates.

Additional issues could be explored in similar research. These include examining how rookies' experiences are influenced by the type of business/industry they enter and the type of work they perform (e.g., marketing vs. finance). Also, the experiences of women graduates may differ from that of men. Rookies' experiences are also likely affected by geography. Having worked and taught in the Midwest and the Northeast, I can attest from personal experience that their climates of faith-business integration are quite different. Follow up with rookies a few years down the road would also provide fascinating and relevant data.

The research reported here can also be viewed as action research. It draws on and informs theory, but its primary purpose is to inform praxis. That is the perspective I adopt in this paper. While caution must be taken in drawing generalizations from an intentional sample of 16 graduates, the fascinating stories uncovered in this study provide ample fodder for faculty and students alike as they consider how to ease the move from college to corporation. Further action research could take the stories provided here and experiment with different ways to use them pedagogically. How can the information provided by previous rookies be most effectively used by faculty and current students? I offered several suggestions earlier in this paper. Following up on those and other ideas could be formalized in future action research.

Finally, the secular management academy is now much more open to research of religion and spirituality. Conducting further research with young Christian business people and communicating those findings to a broader audience could prove very fruitful.

### CONCLUSION

If a goal of education is to make a genuine impact on students, stories are a very effective medium. Former students often tell me they remember the stories I told them long after the details of a particular lecture have been forgotten. I began this paper sharing a small portion of Kurt's story of his transition from college to corporation. Kurt, who happens to be the author of this paper, received very little assistance from his college in making that transition. Kurt, like many students, would have benefited from a period of preparation. Leaving college for a career is no easy move, especially with the added responsibility of being light and salt in the marketplace. God was very deliberate about preparing people like Moses, David, Paul, Mary, and even his own Son for their ministries. Don't we want our students to be equally prepared? Perhaps your program of business education already deliberately prepares its graduates for their rookie year through seminars, workshops, commissioning, and the like, or, maybe it does not. Either way, offering grads a realistic job preview of the first year through the experiences of those who have gone before them, seems to be a wise approach to helping graduates successfully leave the college nest.

All believers working in business start as a rookie. Much can be learned from the experiences of prior rookies. This paper has provided resources to assist faculty in better equipping their graduates for that crucial first year in the business world.

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## SAMPLE INTERVIEW SUMMARY

### Brandon's Story: Finding my Place

This is the full story of a graduate of Wheaton College's business/economics department, written essentially in his own words. He shares what his earliest experiences in the business world were like. This story illustrates things like corporate culture, callings, social life, and witnessing. Names have been changed to protect anonymity.

I left college a pretty confident guy. Although I wasn't at the top of my class, I'd been a success in both high school and Wheaton. I'd worked summers and done an internship, so I felt like I had a good handle on the workplace. Senior year, I got a quick start on the job search process and ended up with a job as a sales representative at ISS. After graduation I went to India on SMP (student missionary program), which is a whole other story. I got back to the States, took two weeks off, and then was scheduled to start at ISS the middle of August.

My job with ISS (Interactive Systems Solutions) was in the small business division, which provides payroll, human resources, 401K, and healthcare benefits programs to businesses with less than 100 employees. Going into it, I had mixed feelings about the five-week, 7:30 a.m.-to-5:30 p.m. training program. I was glad to be getting formal training, but 250 hours seemed a bit much, even if I was a little apprehensive about being able to learn enough about payroll, 401K, and health-care programs to be able to sell them to business owners.

The first day of orientation involved big pep talks on ISS, how much money we could make if we met our sales quotas, and what it took to succeed in sales. The first couple days were a much tougher transition than I'd expected. You have to remember that I'd just come from being on SMP in India where there was so much poverty and so much need. I had spent all summer living on as little as possible and being around a lot of desperate people. I'd never seen so much pain before in my life. Obviously, as soon as I returned home I was struck by how much Americans have, but then starting corporate sales training just magnified it a hundred fold. Now I was being told — no, sold — that work is all about the money.

One of the first things the sales trainer said was, "You will not succeed here if you do not ask in every situation: What's in it for me?" The trainer kept saying, "Whiff 'em, whiff 'em, whiff 'em ... what's in it for me? What's in it for me?" This was supposed to be our mantra. We were told to ask this before doing anything. Now even without my experience in India, this would have struck me as odd.

It seemed completely backwards. I remember sitting there thinking, all my life I've been taught, don't think that way, put others first, and things aren't centered around money. But the first day on the job all I hear is, money matters, money matters, I matter. I'm the most important thing. I need to be in this for me. I felt pretty overwhelmed right from the beginning. What the company used to motivate people — money, free entertainment, free alcohol — just didn't motivate me.

After training was over it became clear that parties and alcohol were the company's big motivators. There were monthly and quarterly recognition events to honor the top sales people. Afterwards we'd go to a bar to celebrate. Every Wednesday we'd "phone canvas" and whichever team made the most sales appointments got taken out to a bar to celebrate. In the beginning, I was just trying to figure out, what must I go to? What don't I have to go to? What should I do? It was hard.

In the beginning I went just thinking this was what I needed to do. Usually I'd just get a drink and make that one drink last all night long, just to be able to socialize. But I didn't really want to be sitting around bars and drinking. It's not like I thought the bar scene was evil, but I wasn't very comfortable with it myself.

Selling was hard, too, especially at first. I thought my assigned mentor would help more than he did, but then I guess I forgot what they taught us at the beginning of training. During my first week of actual selling I asked my mentor to go out on a call with me. I wasn't sure how to sell a certain product that I hadn't been trained on yet. When I asked him to go with me on the call, he literally looked at me and said, "What's in it for me?"

After recovering I stammered, "Honestly I don't think anything."

So he said, "No, my time is my money, so why should I help you?" He didn't. I just thought ... wow.

People really did say whiff 'em all the time at ISS. Mentors were supposed to spend half a day once a week training their people and going on calls with them. Mine wouldn't give me any time unless there was something in it for him. Later, when I had a couple big calls where he could split the deal with me, then he went.

I tried really hard not to get down about things like this, and eventually I got pretty good at selling. I even got recognized myself after a few months. That was a big boost to my confidence. It also made me feel like I could start to be more of my own person. Toward the end of my first year, I stopped going to the drinking celebrations after recognition events. I always went to the recognition to show my support for the winner, but once people knew



I worked hard and could do a good job, I felt less pressure to have to go drinking.

I remember one night after phone canvassing, a manager from another area announced that we were all going to a bar to celebrate. I told him, “No, I have other plans,” which was my usual way of declining.

But this time he insisted, saying, “We’re all going together.”

And I said, “No, I’m not going.”

He said, “Well it’s only 4:30, you can’t leave early if you don’t come.”

I said, “That’s fine. I’ve got a lot of paperwork to do, so I’ll stay until 5:30.” But I told him I wasn’t going just because I felt so pressured by him that I didn’t want to give in to him.

Some of the other sales reps told me they couldn’t believe I just said that to him. I replied, “He can’t make us go to that, we are our own people, we have minds of our own, and I’m still going to have my job whether I go or I don’t go.” It felt good to stick up for myself. But I had to work hard and prove myself too. I think if I were to have said that in my first week on the job, I couldn’t have gotten away with it.

One of the best things I’ve been able to do at ISS is share my faith. It’s not like I witnessed directly to a lot of people. It was also talking about things I did over the weekend or the opinions I had on certain things. Often people can tell you’re a Christian just by the things you do and don’t do. By not using foul language in the office and by not drinking with everyone on the weekend — things that everybody assumed everyone did — but people saw that I was different.

I did have a couple really interesting conversations. Once when I was out with Lisa, our senior sales executive, she asked me where I went to school. Most people around here know that my college is a Christian school. After I told her she said, “Can I ask your opinion? What church did you go to and grow up in? What do you think about God?” We had this long conversation. We were in my car stuck in traffic in a snowstorm for almost an hour. It was like the Lord was giving us this time to talk. She was expecting her first child, so she was thinking that she wanted her baby to be raised in a church. She was searching for God herself.

The only other Christian in our office was the secretary. She had already introduced Lisa to the basics of Christianity. Now Lisa wanted me to clarify some things for her and to recommend some books she could read. The next time we were out on sales calls together she again started talking to me about my faith. Here I am with the

senior sales executive, who I thought of as so experienced and all-wise, and yet she’s coming to me on a completely equal level to ask me my thoughts. When I told our secretary about all this she touched my arm and said, “I’ve been praying for Lisa for so long.” That was exciting — to see how God works through different people.

Most prospective clients had also heard of my college. I learned over time that if Wheaton came up, I’d usually get questions about religion, so I eventually started mentioning it on purpose. One guy said, “Oh, that’s that really religious school. Are you really religious like that?”

I got that question a lot, and I’d always said, “What do you mean by religious?”

This guy then said, “I heard some crazy things. You guys can’t do a lot of things.”

I replied, “Yeah, we signed something saying we wouldn’t do this or that.”

And he said, “Man, that’s all my college life consisted of.”

“I usually don’t do those things anyway so it wasn’t much of a loss to me,” I told him. “It’s just part of being at the school and a lifestyle that you want to live.” Then he started asking me questions and telling me he’d been turned off to Christians.

We had probably a good 30-minute conversation, and he asked me about whether I thought someone had to be saved to get to heaven. He said he thought it was about being good and doing certain things. He even gave me all his criteria for why he thought he’d be in heaven.

One of the best conversations was actually with the trainer who taught us whiff ‘em. After the five weeks of training, he spent time with all the trainees out in their sales territories. When he was with me, he asked me what I’d done the past weekend. I’d been to a Billy Graham crusade. And he asked, “Billy Graham, oh, isn’t he a Christian? Are you religious?” There was that question again. He just asked question after question from that point on. I told him about how at the end they give an invitation to accept the Lord, and he asked, “What do you mean, ‘accept the Lord’ and what do you mean by salvation?” I explained salvation to him and he literally said, “What do you have to pray?” Then he asked me if I was saved and what age I got saved.

This conversation probably lasted 30 minutes. We were doing sales stops. So we’d stop by a client, and then we’d continue the conversation in the car. I didn’t bring it up, but he said, “Now go back to this, this salvation stuff.” He told me he was raised Catholic. He asked me if I thought those people who weren’t saved would go to heaven.

I said, “No, I believe they won’t.”

He replied, “Wow, I had a friend once who thought

that same way and he was so set in his beliefs and his ways.” He was surprised I thought that way, too. But we just had a really good conversation.

It’s been interesting to realize that religion is on everyone’s mind, whether they are a Christian or not. They wonder about God and wonder about where they’re going to be after they die. I feel blessed to have had these conversations, and I feel like God just allowed them to happen. That’s why I think it’s part of my job and my purpose at work to bring up on almost every call that I went to Wheaton. People put you in a “religious” category. Every time I always respond, “What do you mean by religious?” Then the conversation just goes from there.

I’ve grown a lot this year. I still don’t know exactly how I fit at ISS, but I really do feel as though I’ve been able to feel God’s presence at work. That’s cool.