

So You Want to Work in Forestry?

by Ted Wilson

Plotting a career as a forester or arborist is not easy; whilst the profession is dynamic and has many exciting avenues, identifying the right place to start is a challenge in itself. Here, Professor Ted Wilson gives us his 'Top 10 Tips' for establishing a career in forestry, forest conservation and arboriculture.

Increasingly, there is strong competition for the best jobs so it is vital that your first steps take you down the right path. This article provides my top 10 tips on how to secure your favoured first post and launch your career as a forester or arborist. The list is based on my extensive personal experience as a tutor and feedback from colleagues across the global forestry sector.

1 Demonstrate your knowledge with passion!

Demonstrate a genuine interest in your chosen field. You must be comfortable with the fundamental concepts of forestry and arboriculture and be able to use technical terminology with ease. Keep on top of your formal studies and education but impress prospective employers by attending events, volunteering, writing or giving talks and gaining work experience – all outside the classroom.

The skills/knowledge employers seek can't always be gained from forestry or arboriculture alone, so get involved in sports and hobbies, especially team activities, to develop additional skills that are important in the workplace. No one wants to hire an automaton! Develop your knowledge, passion and distinctiveness – identify and hone your unique selling points (USPs).

2 Know your trees and silviculture

Early-career professionals who know their trees are at an advantage. A good grasp of the major native and non-native species, their silvical characteristics, and associated pests and diseases will impress employers and immediately establish your credibility. Knowledge of trees and other plants is a useful skill for short contract and consultancy work, which will strengthen your CV and help to open doors to more permanent employment.

As more and more tree health issues and ecosystem changes emerge there is increasing demand for basic plant skills. If your university or college does not have dedicated courses in these topics (and you should ask why not!) train yourself with an authoritative guide book, keep field records

or earn a certificate by attending courses or training events, such as those offered by the Field Studies Council.

Similarly, knowledge of silviculture is important for most practicing forestry and arboriculture professionals. Join field visits run by the Royal Forestry Society, Royal Scottish Forestry Society, Arboricultural Association and Woodland Heritage to experience different types of woodland, management approaches and silviculture systems.

3 Network

Network to boost your job opportunities, career progression and longer-term development. Talk to people already doing the jobs you want. This will help you gain real-world information about working life and enable you to meet potential employers ahead of any job postings. Attend or volunteer at professional workshops, symposia and conferences to demonstrate your enthusiasm.

Crucial networking events include the APF Show, the ICF National Conference and the ARB show. Do your research, meet as many practicing professionals as possible and make a positive impression – essential elements of the networking mix!

Recently, a fellow passenger on a flight to Inverness hooked me with his life story. A successful smoked salmon salesman, he was shortlisted for a business award at a ceremony addressed by former CBI Director General Lord Digby Jones. The business guru asked: "How many people have a business card in their pocket?" The only person to respond positively was my smoked salmon salesman who was invited to the podium to speak about his product – free publicity in front of an influential audience!

The moral of the tale? Networking opportunities occur in the most unlikely circumstances so carry a business card and have a twenty-second speech ready to introduce yourself. Be prepared to stand out.

4 Gain practical experience and technical qualifications

Build your CV. Undertake work experience, internships and voluntary work. Learn to drive! A clean driving licence is an absolutely essential qualification for forestry and arboriculture – lack of one is a bigger barrier to employment than not completing your diploma or degree. Gain qualifications and experience along the way with chainsaws, herbicide application, fence construction and tree planting (also sources of income to offset

college or university fees). Industry-standard health and safety training and first aid at work certificates are a huge plus.

However, be prudent in the courses you choose – ‘quality not quantity’ is a good strategy. For work in ecology or conservation develop the necessary plant identification and soil surveying skills. But if your goal is urban forestry or arboriculture then additional tree climbing, project management and safe working qualifications will come to the fore. Employers know you will be working to a tight budget, so additional qualifications are always impressive and demonstrate your resourcefulness.

Time management is crucial so make sure practical work does not have a negative impact on academic performance.

5 Attend talks and give your own

Attend technical presentations, conferences and workshops to enhance your knowledge. Ask questions, mingle and engage; but why not give your own talk?

Start with a small conference; give talks at forestry society meetings or to local community groups. This will boost your confidence, hone presentation skills and prove your passion for communicating outside your peer group. Another option is to volunteer a poster at an academic conference.

Recently, the Continuous Cover Forestry Group held an international event that displayed student research posters (many based on dissertations) and published them in the delegate pack – excellent exposure!

6 Write and travel!

Write/publish an article about forestry/arboriculture to grab potential employers’ attention. Seize the moment – do not be daunted. Openings include student publications, local/regional newspapers, forestry magazines, blogs, online forums and social media. Editors are always on the lookout for fresh new talent.

Travel and learn! Several forestry organisations – including The Royal Forestry Society, Woodland Heritage, Confor and the Institute of Chartered Foresters – support students to travel in pursuit of their education, usually in return for a short report for publication in their professional magazine. Several students with whom I have worked have succeeded in this area. Published articles increase your name recognition and display your writing and communication skills.

7 Be flexible and persevere

An ultimate career goal is important, but when

there is a gap between your ideal job and what is available – do not give up!

Be flexible, persistent and ready to seize new opportunities. The right technical qualifications and skills will get your foot in the door.

Future progress sometimes needs dogged perseverance and a positive attitude.

8 Make social media work for you

Social media can boost your online profile, provide a heads-up about new opportunities and let you network with people all over the world. But you must choose the platform that works for you.

Clearly distinguish between your private and professional life. Employers routinely check Facebook and Twitter postings during their recruitment process. Establish appropriate privacy settings. Create a unique profile on the professional networking site LinkedIn to help you build contacts and join discussion groups on relevant topics. It’s great to see student foresters and arborists getting involved and making contributions.

9 Join a professional society

Join the professional body, the Institute of Chartered Foresters, and if possible other membership organisations such as the Arboricultural Association, ConFor or one of the Royal Forestry societies. Most organise conferences and meetings and publish newsletters and e-News bulletins, which help you find out about jobs, access academic literature and learn about career development opportunities.

10 Embrace life-long learning

Some jobs require additional professional training and qualifications. For example, consultancy work may need dedicated species licences or professional qualifications (i.e. MICFor) whilst a job in research will almost certainly demand an MSc or PhD.

More generally, it is now accepted that life-long learning is a key requirement of professional practice, so take advantage of training courses that develop your expertise. Keep a portfolio containing relevant certificates and qualifications to evidence your commitment to continuing education.

There are excellent advanced training opportunities overseas. Universities in Europe, the United States and Canada offer excellent programmes in professional and scientific disciplines allied to forestry, tree biology, arboriculture and urban forestry. Funding will often follow a strong CV and good academic record (First or Upper Second Honours degree is normally expected). Travelling to learn will give you fresh perspectives and enhance your long-term employment prospects. Travelling to

gain work experience is also an excellent option – but make sure you get the correct visas and work permits organised before you go.

Research and plan early to secure funding for your chosen course.

The following websites offer valuable career advice and information:

- Forestry Commission – www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/INFD-7KGCYT
- Institute of Chartered Foresters – www.charteredforesters.org/educationcareers-and-cpd
- Royal Forestry Society – www.rfs.org.uk/learning
- Arboricultural Association – www.trees.org.uk/training-events/Training
- Woodland Heritage – www.woodlandheritage.org

Final thoughts

My top 10 tips are tried and tested techniques that can be applied to almost any profession. The path to success is best summarised in three points:

1. *Knowledge and technical competency*
2. *Commitment and perseverance*
3. *Passion and engagement with your chosen discipline.*

While my top 10 tips will help you be the ‘stand-out’ candidate in any recruitment process, don’t expect success to be immediate or easy. Everyone endures setbacks! Actively seek constructive feedback, maintain a positive mental attitude in the face of apparent adversity and remember that things usually work out in the end.

Finally, while it is essential to invest time and resources in career planning, it is also important to have fun and enjoy the journey.

Careers in forestry overview

- *Forestry and arboriculture offer a wide spectrum of diverse and exciting career options. At the present time our forests are experiencing unprecedented threats from climate change and introduced pests and diseases. New priorities and opportunities are emerging in forest conservation and the forest products sector. Ensuring that our forests, woods and trees are resilient and sustainable requires professionals who are problem-solvers and adaptable, can embrace and apply new knowledge and are comfortable working across the science-policy-practice continuum.*
- *Roles in forest management and urban forestry require a unique set of ‘hard skills’ and competencies related to delivering the multiple values and benefits from our forests, woods and trees. Well-honed ‘soft skills’ in areas such as teamwork and communication are also vital, especially as foresters often work in multi-disciplinary teams on large-scale and complex projects.*

About the author

Professor Ted Wilson is a silviculturist and forest scientist. He is Director of Silviculture Research International, and Adjunct Professor of Forestry, Faculty of Forestry, University of Toronto, Canada. His varied career in the UK and Canada has included roles in woodland management, forest policy, research and academia. His forestry passions include silviculture, professional education and public engagement with forest conservation issues.

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