



3 to 5 Years of Experience: The Key to a Successful Career Start in Forestry

BY JESSE BURDETT | PACTIV EVERGREEN

As a member of the millennial generation, I think I can speak for most of us when I say that we dread the “three to five years of applicable experience” requirement on job applications.

There you are, in your senior year of college, wielding a plethora of knowledge about your soon-to-be field, and the time has finally come to apply for the job you have dreamed about for years. But wait... what do you mean I have to have three to five years of applicable experience? Did I somehow manage to completely miss that course in the required curriculum? How could an employer ask for something so seemingly impossible?

Counterpoint: Is it really impossible though?

In my freshman year at Clemson, I remember receiving some of the best advice that I never wanted to hear from my dad: “Son, there is a lot more to learn than what you will glean out of that textbook. You need to start now finding work that relates to your field.”

So, that’s exactly what I set out to do. Towards the end of my fall semester, with nothing but General Education courses under my belt, I approached the head of the Clemson Experimental Forest and asked for part-time work. As I had expected, I was met with a simple dismissal of “Come back after Christmas and we will see what we have available.” My first job with the university would end up requiring extreme persistence and skillful convincing to obtain.

Through my time with the Clemson Experimental Forest, I met several key contacts in the forest industry while building real-life, on-the-ground experience. Ultimately, my efforts paid off with continued employment each school year, followed by summer internships across the state in various sectors of the forest products supply chain.

Always Say Yes

Since graduating and starting my career in the forest products industry, I have found that success comes with the same formula as before: persistence and skillful convincing! However, I have been able to significantly enhance this formula through taking on a “say yes” mentality. Just like Jim Carrey in the 2008 comedy “Yes Man”, I have pushed myself to say yes to all opportunities that have presented themselves in my career. Don’t get me wrong! I am no different than anyone else who experiences the constant plaguing question of, “Where in the world will I ever find the time?” But trust me, through intense time management (and a lot of coffee), the work always seems to get done.

Taking on a “say yes” mentality feels like pure insanity at first, but it aids greatly in learning all the different aspects of your industry. I specifically recall that the first several years of my career were spent learning the ins and outs of the “hands-on dirty work”. However, that investment of time and willingness to learn is what ultimately afforded me the opportunity to become a fiber procurement manager at a paper mill at the age of 25. By gaining a deep understanding of both the up- and downstream flows of our industry’s supply chain, I am now capable of making decisions that can positively impact the company while not negatively impacting my colleagues or those who execute daily on the ground.

Climbing any company ladder takes time, dedication, and a willingness to learn. If you look hard enough, your daily


life presents you with opportunities to showcase your capabilities. (Most of the time, these opportunities come in the form of work that none of your colleagues care to take on!) These opportunities are also your chance to expand on those capabilities and build upon your experiences. Staying agile and accepting of these opportunities will ultimately lead to personal and professional growth.

Haven't yet taken on the "say yes" mentality? No problem! The good news is that you can start today. Whether you are still in school, starting your career, or several years into the industry, it is never too late to capitalize on what the day has to offer.

As a member of FRA's Emerging Leaders program, I believe it is our time to pick up the rope and carry on the legacy of those who built this industry. It may start with three to five years of experience, but it will grow with our willingness to seize the opportunities of today. ■

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 Jesse Burdett at the Board of Directors meeting at Forest History Society in Durham June 2022



Calling Young Leaders in Forestry

The FRA's Emerging Leaders group is a place for young leaders in the forest products industry to come together and help refine their potential. To learn more, visit forestresources.org/emerging-leadership.



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