

Why Thousands of College Grads Start Their Careers at a Rental-Car Company

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By Beckie Supiano March 10, 2019

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Eve Edelheit for The Chronicle

Vanessa Vidal-Ramharrack works at an Enterprise branch in Melbourne, Fla. The company's interest in hiring college graduates shows what a B.A. can signal to employers.

Before he graduated from college, in the summer of 2017, Matthew Sheck landed an interview for a supply-chain management job at an aerospace-technology company. He was the front-runner, he remembers the recruiter saying. As long as Sheck didn't "croak" in the interview, it was his.

But then a problem emerged: his grades. Sheck had attended several colleges, and although he finished strong at the University of Central Florida, his cumulative GPA of about 2.8 fell below the company's cutoff.

He didn't get the job.

Later that year, Sheck applied for a management-training program at Enterprise Rent-A-Car, the flagship brand of Enterprise Holdings. It is a frequent destination for college graduates. In fact, Enterprise consistently appears at the top of CollegeGrad.com's annual list of employers' self-reported numbers of entry-level job openings, far above the runners-up. It hired 8,500 management trainees last year.

Enterprise is one of the biggest employers of college graduates. It sees soft skills as critical.

Many accounts of where graduates land focus on the extremes: The art-history graduate working as a barista and living in his parents' basement. The polished Ivy League alumna scoring a six-figure job on Wall Street. The iconoclast who developed an app and dropped out to start a lucrative company in Silicon Valley. College, according to those tropes, is, respectively, a waste of money, an amplifier of privilege, or simply irrelevant.

The more common postcollege destination, though, looks a lot more like working at Enterprise. And according to Enterprise, college does matter, a lot.

To the company, a college degree matters mostly because it suggests that a candidate has acquired the right mix of skills to succeed in an entry-level job — and to move up the ladder from there. Its hiring philosophy and practices — which have been in place for decades — can tell us something important about what a B.A. truly signals.

But the company doesn't see higher education the way higher education sees itself. Enterprise doesn't pay much attention to where prospective trainees went to college, what they studied, or their grades. The company does care, though, that they finished college: Trainees are required to have a bachelor's degree.

Why? The big benefit of a bachelor's degree is soft skills, says Marie Artim, Enterprise's vice president for talent acquisition. She ticks off some of the ones that employers often mention: critical thinking, communication, problem-solving. By earning a degree, she says, college graduates have shown that they can juggle different responsibilities by, say, holding down a job or playing a sport while keeping up with their classes.

Graduates have also demonstrated "cognitive ability," Artim adds: "the ability to learn, and to take on more responsibility, and to lead or manage others."

To a critic, the idea that a bachelor's degree is needed to work the front desk of a car-rental office may sound like credential creep. But Enterprise overwhelmingly promotes from within. Its managers and even executives almost always get their start as trainees. Hiring happens at the entry level, and getting it right is really important.



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Matthew Sheck "wasn't the best student," says the recruiter at Enterprise Rent-A-Car who interviewed the U. of Central Florida graduate for an entry-level job. "But he was a leader."

So when Sheck sat down with Naomi Lampkin, a regional recruiter for Enterprise, his grades were not her central concern. "He wasn't the best student," says Lampkin, a talent-acquisition specialist. "But he was a leader." Sheck, she recalls, shared an example of leading a group project in class. He got the job.

More than a year later, the story of the aerospace firm turning Sheck down has stuck with Lampkin. "That company," she says, "missed out."

While a bachelor's degree is often the baseline credential for an entry-level job, employers don't traditionally recruit from the broad category "college graduates." They recruit a subset of them. The big bank has a preference for business majors. Plenty of employers use hard GPA cutoffs to narrow their pools. And elite destinations — think investment banks and management-consulting firms — focus on a handful of feeder schools.

This approach takes advantage of the fact that higher education has already sorted students. But it also assumes that the sorting has been done effectively.

Such an assumption risks doubling down on the inequities that play into where students go to college and what they study. And it risks missing a candidate like Sheck, who brings more to the table than his résumé might suggest.

Enterprise is a bachelor's-degree true believer. But it doesn't buy into higher ed's hierarchy. Nor does it expect new hires to have majored in something that sounds like the job they'll end up with.

"We recognize that great talent can come from all types of institutions," Artim says, "all types of majors and backgrounds."

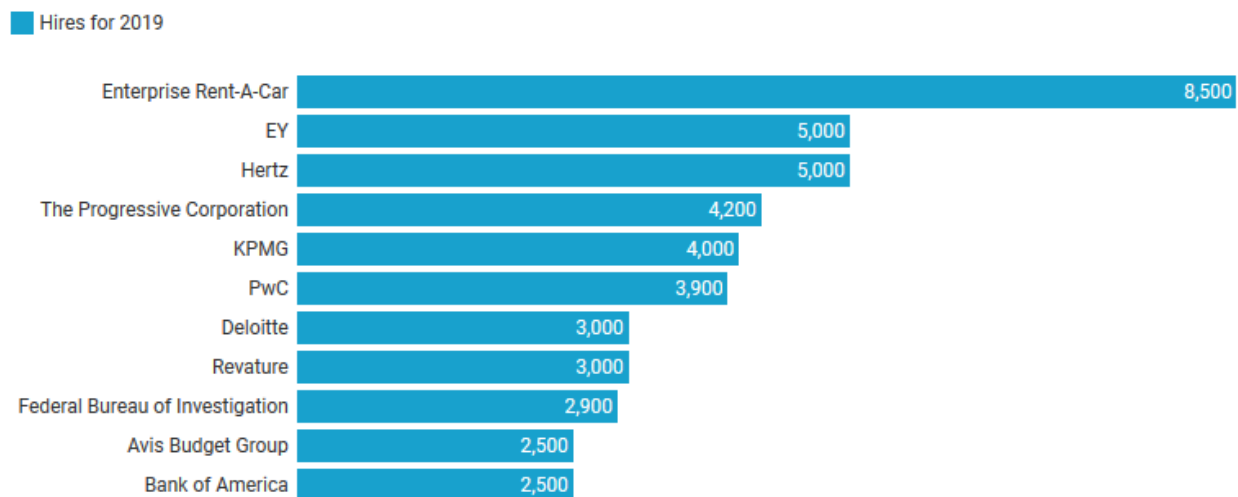
Casting a wider net makes particular sense for Enterprise. Its entry-level workers, who earn \$40,000 to \$50,000, are generalists, which makes the specialized knowledge conferred by a college major less crucial. And, in a model many employers have abandoned, the company invests in training its new hires.

"We almost kind of give you a master's degree in rental," Lampkin says. Every higher-up at Enterprise has the same foundation: Employees work their way up from the management-training program. After a couple of promotions, they can keep rising through the rental-management ranks or specialize in a different direction, as Lampkin herself did.

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The Top Hirers

Enterprise Rent-A-Car regularly ranks among the top companies in hiring for entry-level positions, which are defined as permanent, salaried jobs that require college degrees. The number of positions that Enterprise anticipates filling this year, according to data that companies report to the online entry-level-jobs site CollegeGrad.com, is in keeping with figures reported in previous years.



When she started at Enterprise nearly a decade ago, Lampkin had the education of someone poised to do something completely different. She graduated from Central Florida with a bachelor's degree in micro- and molecular biology, then briefly attended medical school before deciding it wasn't for her. She figured her time at Enterprise would be brief, but it was a better fit than she had expected. At that point, she planned to move up the rental-management ranks,

considering human resources only at the suggestion of a mentor. Lampkin, in other words, has firsthand experience in the unexpected ways a career can take shape.

Enterprise had around 150,000 applicants for its 8,500 trainee positions last year. To evaluate candidates, it considers six competencies: sales orientation or persuasiveness, customer service, flexibility or adaptability, work ethic, leadership, and communication. To assess them, recruiters like Lampkin ask a series of behavioral questions, like "Tell me about a time that you had a completely dissatisfied customer," and what steps you took to resolve the situation.

Recruiters also have ways of looking for evidence of those skills in applicants without direct work experience. Interactions in a classroom or a club, for example, count if applicants can make a good case that they could persuade their peers.

Later in the hiring process — after they've made it past an interview with an area manager, but before Lampkin extends an offer — the tables turn. Candidates observe part of a workday at an Enterprise branch, to get a better sense of what that day-to-day work entails.

That step, Lampkin says, is telling. Because on top of everything else it's looking for, Enterprise wants employees to know what they're getting into.

The Enterprise branch on Harbor City Boulevard here in Melbourne, Fla., is right off U.S. Highway 1. The view from the front counter is not half bad: Just across the street is the Indian River, a salt-water lagoon off the Atlantic. There's water as far as the eye can see.

Leave the branch and head in any other direction, and you'll soon hit a car dealership.

That's by design. Enterprise's niche is what's known in the business as "collision" — providing cars to people whose vehicles have been damaged in an accident. Collision customers might not yet know how long they'll have to go without their own cars. They might still be sorting out what their insurance will cover. By the time they set foot in an Enterprise branch, there's a good chance they're already having a bad day.

Knowing what kind of day a customer is having is the first step in providing good customer service, seeing things from their perspective, and modulating interactions accordingly.

The management-training program teaches employees the basics of everything they'd need to know in order to run a small business: finance, operations, sales, and more. But perhaps nothing trainees do is more important than customer service.

One day this fall, Sheck's colleague Vanessa Vidal-Ramharrack was helping a man and a woman navigate that situation.



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Vanessa Vidal-Ramharrack and Matthew Sheck work on a rental at an Enterprise branch in Melbourne, Fla.

These customers, like plenty of others throughout the day, planned to pay with a debit card, which meant that they had to fill out an authorization form. Much of the car-rental process is now conducted pretty painlessly on a tablet, but paying by debit card requires looking up information and filling out a form by hand. It can feel like an onerous process.

Vidal-Ramharrack stood behind the front counter, typing at a computer, while the woman filled out the form.

"Am I in there?" the man asked Vidal-Ramharrack, gesturing at the computer.

Even if he was already in the system, she explained, "I still need you to fill it out for me, since you're using a debit card."

The man muttered that he remembered the process being faster last time. He seemed impatient — and unhappy.

Sheck appeared to have his antennae up for those feelings. He walked around Vidal-Ramharrack behind the counter. Noticing the man's Philadelphia Eagles T-shirt, he said, "It was a tough loss last week, huh?"

It was only small talk, sure. But it seemed to puncture a difficult moment.

With Vidal-Ramharrack's help, the couple eventually got their paperwork completed, and she walked them outside to get their car. As they left, Sheck called after them: "Go Birds!"

Any time Sheck interacts with a customer, he says, "my goal is just to get them to smile." He's clearly good at this part of his job. What made him that way?

Some of it is probably innate. Sheck describes himself as a "people person," and it doesn't take much time around him to agree with that assessment.

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TAKEAWAY: From College to Rental Counter

- Enterprise is the biggest employer of entry-level workers, according to a survey. It hired 8,500 "management trainees" in 2018.
- Management trainees are required to have a bachelor's degree. But the company doesn't rely on what college the applicants attended, what they majored in, or what grades they earned. Instead it looks for evidence of six "competencies," like leadership and communication.
- A degree is just the first step. Enterprise provides its own training and expects entry-level hires to advance quickly. It promotes almost exclusively from within, so its managers and executives typically come up through the program.

When a man walked in with two small girls that same day, for example, Sheck knew exactly which car he was there to return: the Mini Cooper. Sheck, who is tall and athletic, strode across the office, intercepting the man before he reached the front counter. But instead of addressing the customer, Sheck turned to one of the children and bent down. "Did Daddy put the top down?" he asked.

Of course there's more to customer service, Lampkin says, than being nice. It's about anticipating needs in advance and solving unexpected problems on the fly. Those are the kinds of skills that students often develop in college.

Sheck's college major, integrated business, was designed to improve those skills. The students spend a lot of time in teams, says Christopher Leo, an associate lecturer in the department at UCF. They work on real problems. Going through the major forces students to have "difficult conversations" with group members, Leo says, preparing them for tough moments with customers, suppliers, or whomever they must deal with at work.

The major, which is relatively new, is set up, he explains, to work like an "undergraduate M.B.A." Rather than train undergraduates to specialize, as they would in marketing or finance, this degree seeks to mint generalists with the qualities that employers always say they're looking for. To that end, it incorporates active learning, group projects, and giving lots of presentations.

In integrated business, Sheck learned "how to utilize resources effectively, how to communicate, and how to delegate," he says. "How to prioritize."

As graduation neared, Sheck embarked on an intensive job search. He estimates he interviewed for 25 positions. He says he declined several offers and opted out of other search processes because they turned out not to be what he was looking for. Several operated on commission, which his father had worked in and warned him against. It's much better, he advised, to have a steady paycheck.

Stability appealed to Sheck. His parents, he says, split when he was young. He wanted the "white picket fence."

The opportunity at Enterprise felt solid, he says. And it offered something else appealing: a career path.

College's payoff, its advocates often say, isn't that first job. It's being able to move up to — and succeed in — the more-demanding jobs that come later.

Part of the reason Enterprise requires a bachelor's at the entry level is that the company expects some trainees to rise through the ranks, whether they stay in rental-car management or eventually move into different company functions, as Lampkin did.



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"We almost kind of give you a master's degree in rental," says Naomi Lampkin, a regional recruiter for Enterprise Rent-A-Car, ^[11]_[SEP] which looks for evidence of skills in sales and customer service in the people it hires.

And no one is supposed to stay a management trainee for long. Most trainees advance within about a year, Lampkin says. Almost two-thirds of trainees are still with the company at the one-year mark.

In August, Sheck took the "management qualification interview," a test in which trainees are grilled by a series of managers in one-on-one meetings. Once he passed, Sheck was able to apply for open assistant-manager positions. He applied for one at a nearby branch but didn't get it. He seemed to take it in stride. This was not the first setback he had faced.

Sheck's path through college had been a winding one. It took him three years at two colleges to finish his associate degree, in sports management. Then he didn't meet the requirements for the University of Florida, where he had hoped to transfer.

Instead, Sheck transferred to UCF. Even then things didn't quite go according to plan. He wanted to major in management, but his grades weren't high enough. An adviser steered him instead to integrated business.

The Future of Work

That's when college really clicked for Sheck. And his major, as it happened, had much in common with the approach of Enterprise's training. The company and the major collaborate: One of Enterprise's higher-level managers has a seat on its advisory board, Lampkin has visited classes to talk with students, and the company has sponsored a competition it runs, which Sheck has also helped judge. "I think it's a huge honor and acknowledgment to be asked to come back," he says.

Recently the same assistant-manager position that Sheck hadn't gotten came open again. This time he was hired. He and his fiancée are under contract on a house. Every dead end he faced, Sheck now believes, was there for a reason.

Did college change Sheck's life? Maybe not in the precise way that higher education's champions envision. But he got what he needed to get started.