

First and Worst Jobs

Early Professions, Lessons for Indiana Leaders

If you've ever driven by a large car dealership and witnessed some poor soul overheating in a mascot suit in the middle of summer, you may have seen a future titan of industry. In fact, one current public policy manager once spent part of her summer donning a Planters' "Mr. Peanut" outfit while handing out samples at Kmart.

By Matt L. Ottinger

BizVoice® spoke with representatives from some of the more than 300 companies that have been Indiana Chamber of Commerce members for over 50 years and asked about their first – and worst – jobs. The answers may surprise you.



Jim Hurst – Vice President
N.K. Hurst Company, Indianapolis

FIRST JOB:

I was a gas boy at Griffith's Wawasee Marina. That was a tremendous job. If I could have figured out how to do that professionally – and water ski in the mornings – I would still be doing that.

WORST JOB:

I was once a gopher boy at St. Vincent's Hospital, working as an orthopedic technician and assisting with hand surgeries in the emergency room. I actually loved the job, but some of the most difficult days of my life were spent there. Some of the things I saw, like children who were very ill or dying from car accidents, those are things that are difficult and stick with you. All of my positions have been very frontline, where I've dealt directly with customers. And at St. Vincent's, I was really helping people through an experience. I gained an appreciation that customers really drive your business. I learned that when you're dealing with a frustrated customer, just listening to them for a few minutes and lending an ear can go a long way to satisfying them and eventually helping to retain them.

Jill Ritchie – Manager of Public Policy and Government Affairs, U.S. Steel Gary Works, Gary

FIRST JOB:

I was 16 years old and worked at an Orange Julius. I served drinks, cleaned, stocked and closed down the shop among other things. That was my first experience with customers, and my first experience multi-tasking. All my positions have revolved around customer and client service. I've learned that everyone – even CEOs – has clients, both internally and externally. The key is keeping the needs of those people in mind at all times.

WORST JOB:

I have two to choose from: In college, I was a waitress at a college bar, and I worked on "Nickel Beer Night." So I got to deal with a lot of drunk students who would brag about being good tipplers when they gave me a dime. That taught me about patience. My other worst job would be while working at Kmart one summer, we were doing a promotion for Mr. Peanut, and I had to wear the costume and hand out peanut samples. That taught me about being outgoing – and to be nice to costumed characters.





Stephen Skaggs – President, Perfecto Tool & Engineering Co., Anderson

FIRST JOB:

I've grown up around this business my whole life. My first job was getting my hands dirty sweeping floors. It taught me a lot about work ethic, and learning the business from the bottom up. ... I think what makes the American economy work is a respect for craftsmen. These skills are so important to the manufacturing industry in America, and I've learned it's very important to train others and bring them along. I have two sons in the business, so I'm training them about the work ethic and the industry in order to keep it going.

WORST JOB:

Probably my worst jobs were some of the things I did in my younger years. For example, cleaning out the grinding machine coolant tanks. But you have to do what needs to be done. Now, as president, I never lose sight of the importance of all the jobs in our business.

**Tim Haffner – Partner,
Baker & Daniels, Fort Wayne**

FIRST JOB:

I worked on building houses. I worked construction all the way through college and law school. It taught me to appreciate my education; that is definitely hard work.

WORST JOB:

I was once setting steel and welding after a rainstorm. The electric charge and I met – and I lost. I didn't suffer any permanent injuries, however. But it did teach me to appreciate my education.

**Jeff Belskus – President and CEO,
Indianapolis Motor Speedway Corp., Speedway**

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST JOB?

I was a staff accountant with Coopers & Lybrand. It was one of the Big Eight accounting firms at the time. That was in 1981.

WHAT WAS YOUR WORST JOB?

I haven't really ever had a bad job. I have had an assignment or two I didn't care much for. On one of my first assignments at my first job, I was handed a printed inventory list that was over 200 pages long. They wanted me to count it all and make sure it added up. Before that assignment, I didn't know how to use a 10-Key (adding machine). But after that, I learned how to use it very well.

Jimmy Staton – President, NIPSCO, Merrillville

FIRST JOB:

I was 11 years old and delivered newspapers. We lived in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. I was a military brat living on a base. I delivered the papers at 5:30 a.m. each morning. In the winter, I'd put on a ski suit and put the papers on a toboggan and pull them through the snow. As a kid, I actually kind of thought it was fun. It taught me my first marketing lesson: My dad told me to buy a few extra papers to deliver and then when new people would move in, I'd deliver them free for three days. Then I would not deliver them for three days. Then I'd go back and ask them if they'd like a subscription. We had a huge success rate with that by enticing them.

WORST JOB:

I worked in a cafeteria at (Louisiana State University). Cleaning up in the back after people had eaten and cleaning the kitchen was not that fun. While it wasn't overly challenging mentally, the cafeteria job taught me to appreciate everyone in an organization, as well as what goes on behind the scenes.



**John Forrester – President,
Wabash Electric Supply, Wabash**

FIRST JOB:

My first job was milking cows on a dairy farm. I grew up on a small farm and that was part of it.

WORST JOB:

Milking cows on a dairy farm. It's a seven-day-a-week job, and I did it twice a day. That could be rather restrictive. But the most valuable part of it was that I learned the value of hard work. Milking cows and working on the farm taught me about responsibility and really gave me an appreciation for other opportunities that came along in life. I really felt like anything else I did would be a step up.



**Marlon Bailey – President and CEO,
Stant USA Corp., Connersville**

FIRST JOB:

I was only in the sixth grade, but I worked at my dad's machine shop. He taught me how to work around the equipment – not on the equipment at that point – so I would sweep, keep it clean and drag out chips. By ninth grade, I was able to contribute a little more.

WORST JOB:

I've been blessed, so I haven't really had any terrible jobs. But once I worked for a place that made machine tools. I had an engineering degree and they had me on the drafting board. The job itself wasn't bad, but the head of the department was a little dictator. To even go to the bathroom, you had to sign out. One day I was talking to some people who worked there, and they said 40 people had come and gone within the past four to five years – and there were only nine people on the staff. The dictator was eventually let go. I've learned that everyone has to chip in and do what needs to be done. I've learned that business is about being dedicated to the customer. The other part – and I smile because I take this with me – is that no job is beneath you. If the toilets need cleaned that day and you're the only one there, then that's what you do.

Dr. Bobby Fong – President, Butler University, Indianapolis

FIRST JOB:

Out of high school, I had a job at Goodwill Industries, putting together Ortho lawn spreaders, which spread fertilizer across lawns. It was a very low-tech, hourly job on an assembly line. I worked with someone in a wheelchair, as well as someone who was a recovering alcoholic. Goodwill shows people that grit and industriousness can help them become productive again, and it was really great to be a part of that.

WORST JOB:

I haven't really had a worst job. But through my early jobs, I learned that everyone is important in the success of an enterprise. All too often, we sometimes work in a hierarchy and think those in management are the most important. In many ways, it's the people who take care of the day-to-day tasks of an organization that are keys to its success. If everyone at all levels feel they are taken care of and considered, it really creates a culture of caring.



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**Jim Wagner | (317) 264-6876 | jwagner@indianachamber.com
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