

Create Your Own Opportunity Playbook

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Who this is for

This playbook is for job seekers who need experience before anyone will hire them. Instead of waiting for a posting, you design a project, pitch it to a nonprofit or government agency, and earn real experience, a reference and a story to tell in interviews.

The one idea: employers hire people who are already working. A project you create gets you working now, on tasks you choose, alongside the people who make decisions.

Looking for posted job openings instead? Use the full Outreach Playbook at obriencmc.com/resources. This one is for opportunities that don't exist until you create them.

The 7 steps at a glance

1. Choose a project
2. Research the organization
3. Find the decision-maker
4. Reach out
5. Prepare for the call
6. Propose the next step and follow up
7. Turn the project into a STAR story and a reference

Step 1: Choose a project

Start from what you're good at and what you naturally gravitate toward. Not sure yet? Try several things. Every attempt teaches you something.

Where to look

- [Volunteer New York!](#), the volunteer center for Westchester, Rockland and Putnam
- Nonprofits, including disability-service agencies (try your county's directory of agencies)
- Hospitals

- Youth bureaus and recreation departments
- Museums and libraries

Shape it as a project, not a favor. A good project has a clear task, a set length and something the organization keeps when you're done. Examples: a workshop you teach, a system you set up, materials you create.

Know the rule: create projects at nonprofits and government agencies. Unpaid "volunteering" at a for-profit business is generally treated as work under federal law, and work has to be paid.

Step 2: Research the organization

Before you reach out, read their website, programs and recent news. Then answer one of three questions. Answer one well and you're not asking for a favor. You're making an offer.

Question	Examples
What can I do that would save them time ?	Admin help, building them a system
What can I do that would save them money ?	Bringing in a new technology, reducing liability
What can I do that would make them money ?	Sales or marketing tasks, fundraising support

Look for a fit with what they already do. The strongest pitches build on an existing program. Example: if they run a job-skills course, offer a workshop that helps students show off the work they've already done in it.

Step 3: Find the decision-maker

Names are gold. Your goal is the one person who can say yes, such as a program director, volunteer coordinator or outreach coordinator.

- **County directories:** most counties publish a list of agencies serving people with disabilities, with contacts.
- **LinkedIn:** search the organization for directors and coordinators.
- **hunter.io:** find the organization's email format and specific contacts.

- **Job fairs and resource fairs:** every table is a person who can introduce you. Ask, "Who is the best person to talk to about a volunteer project?"
- **Connectors:** someone you've already met can get you the decision-maker's email. Ask them.

Step 4: Reach out

Every message has four parts: who you are, what you're proposing, why you and why them, and three specific times you're free. Keep it short enough to read on a phone. The subject line is the project name.

Template A: Cold email (you've never met)

Subject: [Project name, e.g. Volunteer Workshop Proposal]

Hi [Name]!

My name is [Your Name], and I'm reaching out because I'm interested in volunteering to create [the project: what it is and who it helps], which will [the result for them or the people they serve].

I'm interested in volunteering because I have [background, training or skill]. I'm interested in working with [Organization] because [what you know about them], and I feel my skills in [skill] would bring value to [who they serve].

I'm happy to meet by phone or video. I'm available:

[Day, Date] between [time window] [Day, Date] between [time window] [Day, Date] between [time window]

Let me know if any of these work for you. I can be flexible as well.

Thank you, [Your Name] | [Phone] | [Email]

Template B: Warm email (someone referred you)

Same as Template A, but open with the connection:

My name is [Your Name]. [Organization] had a table at [event] on [date], and they said you'd be the best person to reach out to about a potential volunteer opportunity.

Template C: Ask a connector for the decision-maker

Use this when a call or email to the decision-maker goes unanswered.

Hi [Connector's Name]! This is [Your Name]. I reached out to [Decision-maker] last week and left a voicemail, but I haven't heard back yet. Do you have an email address I could use to reach them about the volunteer workshop?

Template D: Follow-up nudge

Shorter than the first message. Never resend the whole original.

Hi [Name]! Hope you're doing well! I wanted to follow up on my message from last week about a volunteer opportunity I'd love to do with [Organization]. If you have time this week or next, I'd be happy to explain more. I'm available [3 time windows].

Thank you again, [Your Name] | [Phone] | [Email]

Email rules: offer specific times instead of "let me know when you're free." Proofread their name twice. Pair important emails with a phone call, because email is the one channel where you can't tell if they saw it.

Step 5: Prepare for the call

When they say yes to a call, rehearse every question they're likely to ask. Direct, prepared answers build trust. Figuring it out on the spot does the opposite.

Their question	Weak answer	Strong answer
"Tell me about yourself."	A long life story	30 seconds: your background, what you do now, and your personal reason for caring about this work
"What exactly are you proposing?"	Vague: "a fun workshop"	Specific: what participants do, and what they leave with that connects to the organization's own program

Their question	Weak answer	Strong answer
"Who is this for?"	Guessing a group that doesn't match theirs	"You'd know better than me. I'd guess it fits [group]. Who would you pick for a first group?"
"How long is it?"	"Whatever works for you"	A direct answer you decided beforehand, e.g. "Three sessions of about 90 minutes"
"What do participants need?"	Not knowing	A clear list, e.g. "A computer and an email they can log into. I'll bring a printed step-by-step guide."
"Is it accessible?"	"Yes, it's easy"	An honest answer about limits, your plan for anyone who needs support, and a question about the tools they use
"Why for free?"	Only "I want to help"	"I want to give back, and I'm building experience toward [career goal]. If it goes well, I'd appreciate a reference."
"How would we know it worked?"	"It'll get them hired"	A simple, measurable result, e.g. "Everyone leaves with [result]. I can follow up in 60 days."
"What's the next step?"	Waiting for them to decide	You propose it (Step 6)

Also be ready for: "Have you done this before?" (show a sample of your work), "Are you affiliated with an agency?" and "Do you need a background check?" ("I'm happy to do whatever your volunteer process requires.")

Step 6: Propose the next step and follow up

Never leave the next step to them. Propose it yourself, in person if you can:

"Could I come in on [day] or [day] to see the space and meet a couple of your staff? Then I'll send a one-page outline and we can pick a start date."

A visit builds the relationship and shows you're proactive.

Follow-up cadence

When	What
Day 0	Send your first email (Template A or B)
Day 2 to 3	Call. Ask for the decision-maker by name
Day 5 to 7	No response? Send the follow-up nudge (Template D) with 3 new time windows
Still nothing	Ask a connector for a better contact (Template C)
After that	Mark it inactive in your log and pitch the next organization

Rules: do what you said you'd do. If you said you'd call Tuesday at 2, call Tuesday at 2. Two or three follow-ups is professional; daily is pressure. Pitch several organizations at once so one silence never stalls you.

Step 7: Turn the project into a STAR story and a reference

The project isn't the finish line. It's the raw material for your next interview.

Before you finish: ask the decision-maker for a reference and a short written testimonial. Save any results: number of participants, feedback, what was completed.

Tell it as a STAR+ story:

Part	How to do it well
Situation	Set the scene in 1 or 2 sentences
Tasks involved	The challenge you took on
Action taken	The most important part. Say "I," not "we." What you did and why
Result	What you accomplished. Use numbers when you can
+ Connect	Link it to the job: "That's the kind of initiative I'd bring to your team."

Example (illustrative): "A local nonprofit wanted to help its students stand out to employers (S). I proposed and designed a portfolio-website workshop (T). I found the program director, pitched it, and taught three 90-minute sessions (A). Twelve students left with a live link on their resume (R). I'd bring that same initiative to your training team (+)."

Tools

Project outreach log

If it isn't written down, it didn't happen.

Date	Organization	Project pitched	Channel	Spoke with	Decision-maker + contact	Next step + date

Call cheat sheet

Keep this in front of you during the call.

- **My 30-second intro:**
- **The project in one sentence:**
- **Who it's for:**

- **Length and format:**
- **What participants need:**
- **How we'll know it worked:**
- **The next step I'll propose:**

Want the full system for posted job openings? Phone scripts, in-person outreach, interview prep and more are in the Outreach Playbook at obriencmc.com/resources.

Want help putting this into practice?

Pitching a project means calling people you have never met. At O'Brien CMC, participants rehearse the pitch, the 30-second intro and the questions in Step 5 in realistic virtual reality settings with a trainer, before the real call.

VR Vocational Training: one-hour classes, one-on-one or in a small group of up to 3. Practice phone calls, pitches, interviews and workplace conversations. For teens 14 and up and adults.

ACCES-VR Pre-ETS: Pre-Employment Transition Services for eligible students, coming soon.

Book a class

- Online: obriencmc.com/book
- Phone: 201-528-3254
- Email: clientsupport@obriencmc.com
- Visit: 42 Memorial Plaza, Room 124, Pleasantville, NY 10570

Invite C.J. to speak

C.J. speaks free of charge at schools, agencies, parent nights and conferences on virtual reality training, ACCES-VR, Self-Direction and the path to employment. Request a talk at obriencmc.com/speaking-media.