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What to code if you don't have a job but you want one

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Chris Dunlop

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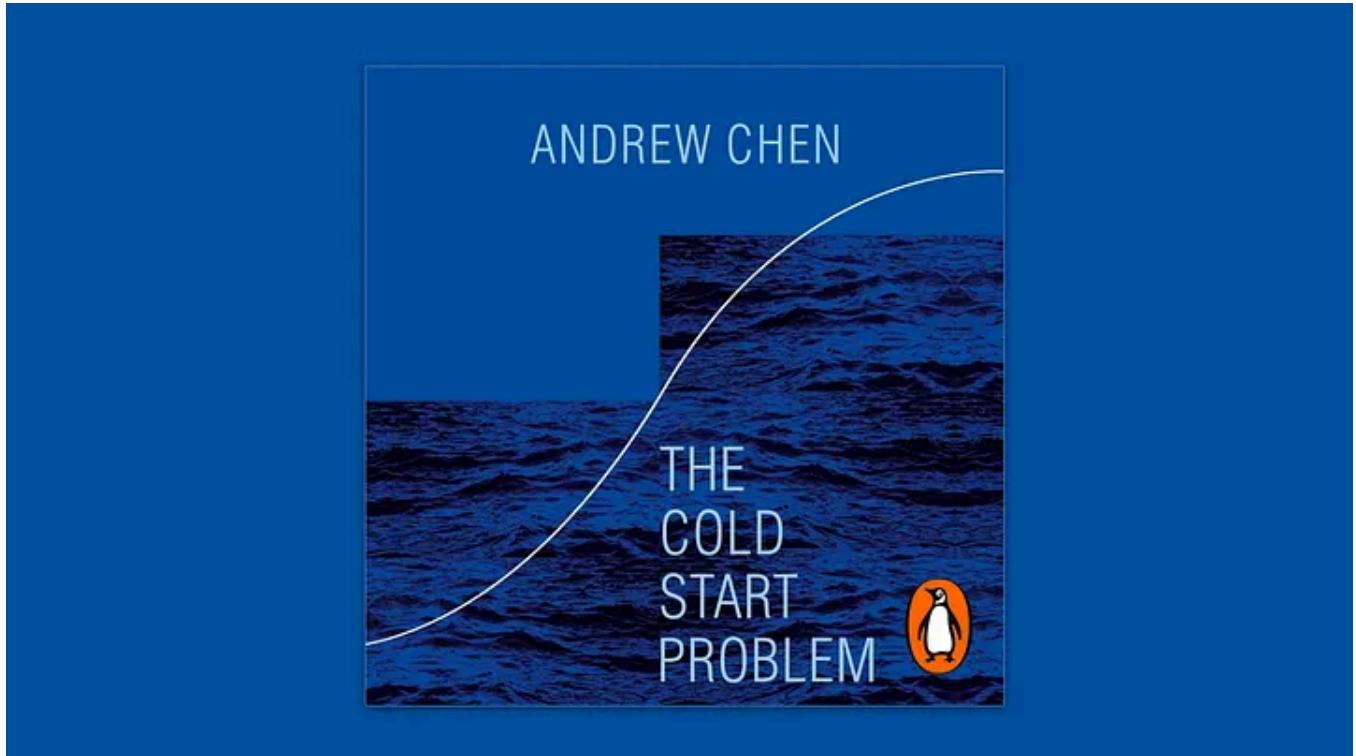
I have a soft spot for people looking for a job.

I feel like it's an under talked about thing but when I finished Uni I struggled for ages to get a job and it was quite upsetting.

I remember feeling extremely lost as to what to do but also feeling like I had a lot of potential, I just needed a way to get in the front door somehow.

Then it's so annoying because everyone wants experience but that's hard to get and so you are in a form of the [Cold Start Problem](#)

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I highly recommend reading this book

Alright so here we go, given what I know now what would I say to myself when I was younger.

For now I'm going to give you advice on what to code as in coding projects to build out your CV.

Realistically you might be working on these for a few weeks/months and I think the idea would be to do as many as you can. This could also be really helpful if you are studying and want to know what 'real' development is like.

So what can you do to help yourself?

Alright let's use AI to help you.

Step 1 — Go to a job board and search for a role. In this case I searched software engineer.

The screenshot shows a job search interface with the following details:

- What:** Software Engineer
- Where:** Enter suburb, town or city
- Work type:** Remote
- Pay:** Pay
- Classification:** Classification
- Listing time:** Listing time
- Skills:** C# +, Java +, Team Lead +, C++ +, Senior +
- Buttons:** SEEK, Filter icon, Help icon

MATTR Job Listing:

- Title:** Software Engineer
- Company:** MATTR
- Location:** Auckland CBD, Auckland (Hybrid)
- Description:** Shape the future of mobile experiences that power digital trust. Work from our vibrant Britomart hub. Join a world-class team driven by curiosity and collaboration.
- Closing Date:** Come join us and shape the future of secure, seamless mobile experiences with a world-class team at MATTR.
- Category:** Featured

givealittle Job Listing:

- Title:** Software Engineer
- Company:** givealittle
- Location:** Auckland (Hybrid)
- Description:** To be discussed
- Details:**
 - Exciting Greenfield project
 - Purpose driven organisation
 - Permanent role
- Call-to-action:** Save this search

Just search the roles that you want

Then go to Claude/ChatGPT

Then Claude is usually great at spitting out several scenarios.

For this company it said you could build this.

You want to repeat this process a few times, and it's good to also include some intermediate roles in there as then you get a better taste of what things are like.

This one came out with a couple of interesting projects.

But then sometimes you get vague descriptions, like this.

In this case, let's get Claude to make things more realistic.

So here is the scenario that it creates.

Scenario 1: University Course Migration

The Problem: Your university **is** switching **from** one student management system **to**

(like moving from Banner to Workday, or some legacy system to a modern one).
What you'd build:

Source data: CSV exports from the old system with courses, enrollments, grades
The mess:

Old system has course codes like "COMPSCI101" but new system wants "CS-101"
Some students have multiple IDs because they re-enrolled
Grade formats are different (old: A+/A/A-, new: 4.0/3.7/3.3)
Some courses don't exist in the new system yet

Your dashboard shows:

"Migrating 45,234 students... 32,100 complete, 156 errors"
List of errors: "Student ID 9876543 appears twice with different birthdates"
Manual fix option: "Which record is correct?" with side-by-side comparison

Reconciliation report: "All 2,347 COMPSCI courses migrated. WARNING: 23 student
Tech: Python script reading CSVs, transforming data, writing to PostgreSQL. Vue

The cool thing about this strategy is that you can get a taste for the type of work you will be doing, before you do it. You can also experiment with different tech stacks as well!

You can then also run heaps of scenarios for the same company.

Like in that above example, I asked it to swap it to an Ecommerce example.

Now you might be thinking that this is too big a task to do these companies will already have the tech stack in place.

But there's no better way to learn how something is built than to build it yourself.

The key thing here is that you are putting in some reps and getting used to things. Building a project from scratch helps me to then understand why things are done in certain ways.

If there is no job board then paste the contents of the website into ChatGPT

Some great companies don't always have jobs posted. So if you think you want to apply at a business, go and get all the main text about their services and what they do.

Then paste that into ChatGPT and ask it to make you some example projects.

If you are stuck on what tech stack to use

Start with NextJS and then use Typescript. That means you will be able to build all sorts of websites.

Hosting your database — Railway or just use SQL Lite.

I think it's also worth you learning AWS, like how to setup a S3 bucket and how to do lambda functions and do them through the CLI tool.

The last thing would be to learn some python as well.

Right now, don't worry too much about what is the best stack, it's better for you to go deep on the above and get really good and practice them as much as you can.

Why is this method effective?

Apart from the fact that I think practising things is so much better than the abstract interview questions that they give, there is another reason that this will help you get a job, particularly if you earnestly commit to this.

The reason for that, is the psychology of someone who is reviewing your CV

First up some honesty

I think it's good for you to read about the reality of how your CV comes across the desk of someone like me.

First of all, I know that for you as the sender of the CV it is a big deal sending it out. You have thought about it a lot. The honest truth is that your chances of it getting read are the first hurdle to overcome.

- If I'm not hiring at the moment and I get a CV, I would read it I would say 20% of the time. I will probably read it for about 10 seconds.
- If I'm hiring, I would read about 90% of the CVs. I will read them for about 30 seconds.

Ultimately I want to be impressed. Do you know the fastest way to impress me? Building things that I am currently doing. That way I can see how you will be an asset to the company immediately. This is why the job board method works so well.

The reason this works is that you don't have much time to make an impression.

It's not you it's me

My other piece of advice is not to take rejection personally. I know that it is hard, trust me. I also take rejection personally, I think it is natural.

When I am reading your CV, I'm not thinking about you, to be honest. I'm thinking about myself, I'm busy, I've got a lot of things on. I have a number of projects to run, I have a family, I have trips coming up, writing, game that I enjoy on the weekend.

As a result, if you get ghosted from someone you sent the CV too, the most likely answer is that they scanned it briefly and then forgot about you 5 second later. They don't think you're useless, they don't hate you, nothing like that, they are simply busy.

Most likely you will be an incredible asset to the company, so keep your chin up and keep focusing on building the practice projects. Don't despair. Submit your CV, then go back to grinding out these project tasks. Your resume of projects will grow and if you keep this up you will be an absolute asset for any business.

Don't be scared of following up

Now this is if you go outside of a traditional recruiter. On that note, go to a recruiter, they are here to help you, I wish someone had told me that. They don't charge you

and they charge the business a commission, but they help you prep and give you nice solid advice.

This point is hard to understand if you are looking for a job, but I get hundreds of emails a day. Heck even emails from my clients go unread.

As a result, don't be scared of following up to ask, hey did you get my CV. That second email is usually a reminder jolt to someone like me and you can literally just write something like that, aka make sure it's a short email.

How long should I spend on each project

Enough to feel like you are learning. This also depends on your personality. For me, I like lots of ideas, so I'd spend maybe a few days, maybe a week on one I love. If you are a deep diver, you might spend longer. But you also want to get a good rotation going as you are trying to increase your surface area.

Should I finish every project completely before moving on? No — get it to a working state where you can demo the core functionality, then move to the next one. You're building a portfolio of practical skills, not shipping production software.

What if I get stuck on something technical? Use Claude or ChatGPT to help you troubleshoot, but actually understand the solution rather than just copying code. Getting unstuck quickly is a real developer skill.

Should I deploy these projects somewhere? Yes, absolutely — use Vercel for Next.js apps or Railway for full-stack projects so employers can actually see your work live. A GitHub repo alone isn't as impressive as something they can click and use.

What if the company already has this solution built? That's exactly the point — you're practicing building real solutions to real problems they understand. They'll see you can hit the ground running.

How many projects do I need before I start applying? Start applying after your first solid project, then keep building while you wait for responses. You don't need ten perfect projects — three good ones that show range is plenty.

Should I put all of these on my CV? Pick your best 3–4 that are most relevant to each job you're applying for. Quality and relevance beat quantity.

Is it okay to use AI to help build these projects? Absolutely. I'd say if the company judges for this then move on, they probably aren't worth your time. AI coding is a whole skillset on its own, so get really good at Claude Code.

What if I'm applying for junior roles — will these projects seem too advanced? No way — showing you can build real solutions to business problems is exactly what gets junior developers hired. You're proving you won't need six months of hand-holding.

Hopefully this is helpful. Let me know if you have any other questions, but I wish you all the best in finding a job. Remember to just keep working hard and you will eventually get a job. It's hard to break out of the cold start problem, so don't lose hope!

If you want me to review your projects, then show me some Vercel links and link them in the comments. I'd be happy to help.

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