Know a New College Graduate? Great Career Tips to Pass On

By KERRY HANNON

The cap and gown are ready to go. How about the career plan?

I've had well over a dozen e-mails from parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles the last few days asking me what advice I would give a new graduate facing the job world today.

They have someone in their life graduating college in the next week from such and such university with a degree in, you name it, say, business. Should they be applying for a job at Google? Facebook? Goldman Sachs? Or is it best to aim for a small company, a nonprofit, start their own?

They preface their request with the kind comment, “I’m giving your book as a graduation gift.”

Flattered, of course, I write them back. While my book is geared to older workers in career transition. Much of the advice holds true for both groups of workers.

Here is my general advice for new college graduates (Older workers keep reading. There’s help here for you, too. Just skip No.1):

Be confident. You have a lot going for you. You’re nimble with the latest technology and adapt to new twists in a snap. Second nature. You’re more open to change than many older workers–employers love that kind of attitude. Plus, you can get your foot in the door at lower incomes– most of you aren’t burdened by financial obligations like a house and family. And you’re young and talented enough that your first job is just that—a building block. It doesn’t have to be perfect, but a launch pad.

Be patient. The job market isn’t a day at the beach. Finding a job is, well, work. Use your alumni career center. These service teams have plenty to offer job seekers, and you don’t need to be on-campus for the help. They sponsor networking events, critique and fine-tune your resume writing, and host online mock interviews and career counseling gratis by phone. And there’s more, you can access online podcasts, or mini-video workshops lasting anywhere from five to 17-minutes on how to make the most of a job fair, techniques to help prepare for an interview, or instruction on writing an effective cover letter.

Focus on fertile job fields. Social and viral marketing firms, the expanding health care arena and green jobs of all varieties are great places to look for jobs. The Occupational Outlook Handbook, published by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, makes fine bedtime reading to help you get a sense of what’s hot and getting hotter.
Think like a small-business owner. Your career is your company. You’re the boss. Your employer—the biggest client. It’s scary to be dependent on one source of income and a single employer in this tenuous economy. As we’ve learned in recent years, loyalty no longer counts for all that much. If possible, consider building out another potential income stream on the side. It can give you a little bit of financial security over time—and a possible new career to tap one day.

Ask questions. Be willing to learn from more experienced workers. Soak up knowledge. Ask advice. Never stop being curious.

Focus forward. Seek out mentors and continually add skills, moonlight, or take classes in areas that interest you. That way, when you change jobs—and you will—you’ll be prepared.

Build your network. The core group of people I worked with in my 20’s are still close contacts today. We help each other out with job leads, recommendations, and more. We even employ one another from time-to-time. Read your alumni magazine. When a college pal takes a new job, send a quick e-mail of congratulations, same with ex-colleagues. This good habit will pay great dividends later, both personally and professionally.

Join a professional organization. Not only is this great for career development and networking, but if you’re out of work, or your employer doesn’t offer health benefits, you may be able sign up for a health plan at reduced group rates.

Save for retirement. Start at once. And don’t raid it. I screwed this one up. Cashed out my first 401 (k) after five years, when I switched jobs. Imagining what that might be worth today, 21 years later, makes my heart sink.

Check out incubator programs. If you have an entrepreneurial bent, search for incubator programs in universities and community colleges. They help with everything from writing a business plan. Your alma mater can be a big help here too. You might even find advisors among your school’s alumni, or even angel investors.

Run with a positive crowd. Keep away from people who try to belittle your ambitions, in the words of Mark Twain.

Find your passion and pursue it with all your heart. That’s your key to happiness...along with remembering to laugh a little every day.

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