Professionals offer job-seeking tips for graduates

By Deborah J. Cook

The caps have been tossed and "Yay for Graduation" has been sung in many a classroom. Now it's time for new graduates to put their education to work. But with unemployment at 9.3 percent, even experienced workers are having trouble finding a job. How is someone with 10 years experience—sells from a shirt-sleeve ice cream cart or guards a fence—going to stand out?

Kim Shinar, director of talent acquisition for Parchment Company in Kalamazoo, recommends that new graduates "provide information in detail about classroom work, project work, internships, summer jobs—things that they might not think are directly relevant to the full-time kind of post-college job they are applying for."

What new graduates may lack in experience, they make up for in their knowledge of new technologies and information systems, she added. Volunteering, job shadowing or interning shows employers your level of interest. It is important to match activities to the desired career. Want a job in IT? Volunteer some data entry time at a nonprofit. Interested in a medical career? Make yourself useful at a nursing home. Document your activities with pictures, sample work and letters of reference. Also worth noting: Involvement in campus organizations and special projects greatly help a resume.

If a student is looking for a first job, they have to be able to talk to employers about what they are looking for.

"Things like enthusiasm and willingness to work hard count as much as having an A or B average, especially if you can prove it," said Sue Macaulay, owner of Games Career and Corporate Consulting LLC. "How you prove it, she said, is by recommendations. She recommends bringing a portfolio with samples of work to interviews and presenting a few recent pieces."

Presentation is important

Recent graduates also need to present themselves in the best possible light.

"The first thing is to smile," Macaulay said. Stand up straight, smile a firm— but not bone-crushing—handshake and look "intelligent" from your vocabulary. A mistake some new interviewees make is not dressing professionally; they use their best attire for class or not at all.

"I can’t say that because I’ve been so busy, so I’ll say it this way: If I were to shoot a fashion show or I don’t need to have my fingernails manicured nicely," she said.

Apply in the manner requested by the employer. Don’t show up in person when the employer has specified an online-only application process.

"Once an interview has been secured, research the business. "We take special notice of candidates that have a solid academic record, internships related to field of study and have taken some time to gain knowledge of Genesee,"" said Doug Kivlehan, human resources manager for Geesecare in Zeeland. "Candidates that turn us off are ones that come unprepared for the interview and are overly eager, with very little understanding of how difficult the manufacturing environment is."

College grad also should make sure to take advantage of the job-search services their alma mater provides— usually for free.

"We do workshops on interview preparation, finding an internship, putting a resume together," said Randi Becklin, assistant director of career services for Grand Valley State University. Many universities also have job sites like Grand Valley’s Laker Jobs Online.

"Right now we have 226 internships and jobs posted in there," she said. "It fluctuates daily."

Becklin suggests checking prior to an interview to see if prospective employers have a Twitter or LinkedIn account and follow updates. Identify the skills and values you have that will fit into what you know about the company culture. Be prepared to be able to tell them why they should hire you.

Once the interview is over, Becklin suggests sending a handwritten thank-you note within 24 hours.

"It’s important," she said. "They’re so rare these days."

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