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Recent graduates find they have a lot to learn as they enter the workforce

When Brandon Strom first started looking for a job, he filled out 35 applications. He didn't get a single interview.

At age 18, Strom already has weathered today's tough job market. It's a market challenging everyone from teens to college grads to those re-entering it or looking to make career changes.

Some say recent college grads might be the most unemployed.

Succeeding takes persistence, as well as the skills to best present yourself, say area experts who offered advice and tips on how to land a job.

"One of the main things is that it's so vastly different than just a few years ago. Employers are looking for the cream of the crop," said Bruce Bennett, a volunteer who does mock interviews at the McHenry County Workforce Network, which offers numerous services to job seekers.

As Strom put it when he first started job hunting, "It's really hard."

A soon-to-be McHenry County College student, he plans to eventually transfer to the University of Illinois and become a P.E. teacher.

In the meantime, the Cary teen needs to earn some money.

He sought help through a Workforce Prep Program offered to youth through the county's Workforce Network. He's since worked for an architectural firm and other businesses.

The program helps match youth with jobs and explore careers. It's more popular than ever, said Barbara Billimack, lead youth workforce specialist.

Those without any work experience aren't getting interviews, she said. Through the program, youth are taken to job sites, matched with companies based on their strengths and interests and taught how to make the best impression.

They're given entry-level or "intern" jobs to gain work experience.

Stepping stones

That's the key to today's marketing, being willing to start somewhere, taking "survival jobs" if need be, experts say.

"They need to stay positive. I know that's much easier said than done," said Kathy Meisinger, coordinator of McHenry County College's Career services.

Say to yourself: "I'm going to do this and learn as much as possible," she suggested.

Then move on when you can.

Create a job strategy, Meisinger recommended, including "stepping stones" that eventually will get you where you want to go. Don't just look in one particular area. And make sure to do some self-examination and understand your skills, she said.

"The employers at this moment, they've got a lot of people to choose from. They want education and experience. ... The number one goal is to be gaining experience. By having a good understanding of themselves, they are able to create a career path," she said.

"Companies do not create career paths for people any longer. We create our own."

Take advantage of programs that offer career services, Meisinger said, because the advice from family and friends might not fit today's economy.

"Most people coming out of school think Internet is the way to go," she said. "It is not."

Only a percentage – perhaps 30 to 35 percent in some cases – of the jobs available are online, she said. Small

companies don't have the funding to put ads on job sites. Some might be putting signs in windows, telling friends and neighbors.

Or perhaps they're hiring when the right person comes along, Meisinger said.

She suggested job seekers network as much as possible, target places they'd like to work for, find out what kind of people they hire and talk to current employees.

Applying online, you can be one of more than 1,000 applicants, she said. Networking on the inside, you can be one of perhaps 10.

Be prepared to give those you encounter your "little elevator speech," Meisinger said. In 30 seconds, tell what you do and why you'd be a good hire.

"What we want to avoid saying is, 'I need a job,' " she said. "You're going to turn off employers. Employers don't want to hire someone who needs a job. They want to hire someone who wants their job."

A safer thing to say when networking: "If you were me, who would you be talking to?"

"We want to avoid desperation. We might be desperate, but we don't want to show it," Meisinger said.

Existing online

Use internet sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, but use them wisely, experts say.

These days, some employers are even asking for Facebook account passwords during the interview process, said April M. Williams of CyberLife Tutors, which offers career coaching and social media programs for business in McHenry County.

Some might not want to even work for a company that makes that request, she said, but be prepared.

"You want professional things out there. You want to look professional," she said. "In this day and age, if you don't have a presence out there, people say 'What's wrong with them? They don't exist online.'"

If you've done a project as an Eagle Scout, promote it online, publicize it, she said. Ensure that when people search your name online, they're finding positive references. Test it out by searching your own name on Google and Bing.

"You don't want to find pictures of you drinking at a frat party," Williams said.

One way is to create a free Wordpress blog and write short articles daily directed toward your target audience, she said. This returns positive search engine results and credibility quickly, she said.

"Don't wait to get started. The longer you are out of school, the bigger the gap on your résumé gets," she said. "While you are job hunting, volunteer for a charitable organization of your choice so you have something positive to respond to the, 'What have you been doing this summer?' question. 'Hitting the beach,' is not a desirable answer."

As for the actual résumé and interview process, remove errors, of course, dress like current employees and hand-write thank you notes, Williams said.

Most of all, know yourself, your skills and your strengths, Bennett said.

Make lists of your skills, such as Microsoft Office, budget analysis, as well as your characteristics, such as punctuality, tenacity. Then come up with a short story that illustrates or demonstrates those skills, Bennett said.

"Tell me about yourself," might seem like a simple request, but most do not know how to respond, he said.

"It's easy to come back and say, 'What do you want to know?'" he said. "They don't want to know about your tennis game, golf game, if you're married, how many kids. They want to know what you bring to the table. ... what it is that really makes you different and unique."

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