



- Home
- News ▶
- Technology ▶
- Markets ▶
- Personal Journal ▶
- Opinion ▶
- Leisure/Weekend ▶

The Print Edition

Today's Edition

Past Editions

Features

Portfolio

Columnists

In-Depth Reports

Discussions

Company Research

Markets Data Center

Video Center

Site Map

Corrections

My Online Journal

Personalize My News

E-Mail Setup

My Account/Billing

RSS Feeds

Customer Service

The Online Journal

The Print Edition

Contact Us

Help

BARRON'S Online

MANAGING YOUR CAREER

Job-Hunt Workshops Can Boost Confidence Of Grads Seeking Work

By JOANN S. LUBLIN

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February 1, 2005; Page B1

My daughter, a college senior, hopes to land a job that combines social research with political activism. But she hasn't figured out how to translate her vision into reality. In this volatile employment market, I worry that she'll graduate jobless.

Countless parents share my anxieties about their young-adult progeny. **All About Careers**, a Chicago start-up, has concocted a potentially wise solution: the Dream Job Boot Camp. Its two-day workshop teaches college seniors and recent graduates to polish their job-hunting skills and market themselves as unique hires. The \$899 fee also covers a resume rewrite and some personal counseling afterward.

"Our target really is parents, not the kids," because many affluent parents "have had coaches for these kids from Day One," says Laurie Kahn, a media-staffing concern president who co-founded the company with Rob Sullivan, a corporate trainer and career coach. They intend to hold their workshop 10 times in at least three cities this year.

It's a risky undertaking. Recently, human-resources consultants DBM had to scuttle a heavily promoted career-services program that offered students lifetime access to online resources and assessment for \$399. Fewer than 100 enrolled over three years. But next month, the New York concern will launch "College to Career," a revamped version initially aimed at M.B.A. candidates whose universities will cover their tab.

To see whether the boot camp is a good investment for parents still shell shocked by college costs, I attended its inaugural session at a posh Chicago health club last month. My conclusion? Group sessions with experts and peers boost youthful job seekers' confidence. But the greatest beneficiaries will probably be those already motivated to help themselves.

Plenty of the largely female participants came prepared to work hard. "I want to know how to distinguish myself from people who look similar to me on paper," Northwestern University senior Margaret Haston told her 21 fellow campers. Lisa Huxhold, a University of Illinois senior, said she hoped to gain direction because "I'm not really sure what I want to do" following graduation.

Through exercises and lectures, campers acquired a wide range of job-hunting gambits. The most important: how to compile a thorough list of assets and accomplishments. "Everything else falls into place once you realize what you have to sell," Mr. Sullivan explained. He suggested including challenging self-taught skills and even mundane experiences such as grooming friends' horses as long as they're quantifiable activities that demonstrate passion, initiative or leadership.

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Taking a broad inventory made Jennifer Pilat realize what assets she had that could be applied to job situations. The Northwestern senior, who graduates next month, decided to highlight her language skills by sending cover letters in Spanish to Latin American think tanks based in the U.S.

The assessment exercise persuaded Meghan Sheehan to narrow her disjointed New York job search. Since last fall, the 2004 Georgetown University graduate has applied to be everything from a paralegal assistant to an investment banker. She now aims for a marketing post with a cosmetic maker. "I've always been passionate about makeup and beauty products," she says. "I just didn't think you could do something in that field" without extensive preparation.

Among the other clever tips that were provided during the workshop:

- Send introductory "cover letters" via Federal Express. Save your resume for later.
- Find "connectors," such as hairstylists, dentists and accountants, who know many people because their professions cut across industries.
- During networking events, wear a name tag on your chest's right side so someone shaking hands can easily discern who you are. Tuck spare business cards behind the tag.
- Identify an industry's key players through trade publications that quote them. Cite the articles when you solicit their advice.
- Craft an "elevator pitch" about yourself that sounds like a dramatic movie trailer because it captures your passion.
- Prepare a script before phoning a hiring manager. Call while standing. Leave voicemail slowly, using an upward inflection to demonstrate your energy and enthusiasm.
- Send personalized, handwritten notes thanking every individual who interviews you.

But workshop leaders volunteered painfully obvious tactics, too. Mr. Sullivan encouraged campers to ask their alma maters for names of alumni in professions they want to pursue. That's standard advice at most campus career centers. So is Ms. Kahn's emphasis on being prepared and punctual for interviews.

I also challenged her suggestion that applicants ask a hiring manager, "Who's your No. 1 competitor?" If the target employer is Sears Roebuck, you should know the name of its biggest rival, she conceded. But she insisted the answer is less apparent when a prospect seeks to join a small business.

Ms. Kahn promises better boot camps lie ahead. One likely change: Participants will spend more time role playing to prep for job interviews.

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