Helping Your Kids' Careers Take Flight

Friday, June 16, 2006

If you're reading this, chances are you have a newly minted college graduate in the household. This column, the second part of a Leadership by Example Graduation Special, aims to arm you with practical advice for helping your child's career bloom.

As a parent, you can help launch your child's career by:

1. Helping them figure out the right thing to do, and
2. Supporting their search for a good job.

When these two missions are accomplished, then you can confidently direct your college grad to the previous Leadership by Example column, which provided tips on how they can get off to a great start in that important first job.

Figuring Out the Right Thing to Do

As the saying goes, it's all well and good to climb the career ladder, but first it's important to make sure that it's leaning against the right wall. Here are five guidelines that can help your child figure out the right wall -- or direction -- for their career:

» Think Expansively

There's a vast number of possible career paths to pursue. Options shouldn't be defined by or limited to the companies or organizations that come to campus to recruit.

Graduates should consider macro trends to identify where the greatest opportunities are likely to be in the years ahead. Longer life expectancies will open up entire industries catering to increasingly healthy, active older people.

Digital technologies are, in the words of New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman, "flattening the world," allowing individuals and companies large and small to tap into the global economy from almost anyplace on the planet. School reform and the explosive for-profit education industry mean a variety of new jobs from teachers to curriculum developers to software programmers.

A large percentage of federal workers in the U.S. government will reach retirement age over the next three years, creating a massive shortfall. These are just a few of the trends that will be changing our world and workforce in the years to come.

» Play to Strengths and Passions

One of the distinguishing factors that separate individuals with the most successful careers from everyone else is the extent to which a person's working role plays to their strengths, and they're in an area that they're genuinely passionate about. A graduate should be thoughtful and objective about what they're best at and the areas where they stand out among their peers. Then they should focus on areas in which they're deeply interested rather than jobs or industries that they think they should pursue.

Point out that there are many highly compensated bankers, lawyers, doctors, or business people who are unhappy and feel trapped in their jobs. Remember that there's a high correlation between career success and the inherent interest in the work that one does.

» Create an Industry "Map"
Challenge your child to think creatively and dig deeply to figure out the many different kinds of career paths connected to any area of interest. They can create a map showing all the different types of organizations that make up that industry's ecosystem.

Since it's World Cup soccer season, let's take a look at sports to illustrate the point. Say your child has always been interested in sports and wants to pursue a career in that field. Here are just a few alternative paths that exist: One could work for a major professional league such as the National Football League or Major League Baseball, a midsize organization such as the U.S. Tennis Association, or a newer league such as Major League Lacrosse. Or one could attempt to join a professional sports franchise, all of which have organizations to manage their teams, stadiums, and marketing efforts.

They could try to get into sports media and seek an entry-level position at ESPN, Fox Sports, Sports Illustrated, Yahoo Sports, or the local newspaper's sports department. Or they could move to the corporate side in sports marketing, working for one of the major corporate sponsors of sporting events, such as Gatorade or MasterCard.

How about following a not-for-profit course, such as joining a university's athletic department or sports information office, or working for the governing body of a sport like the U.S. Water Polo Association? Alternatively, they could try to work their way into a sports or talent agency representing athletes, such as IMG or Octagon Sports.

The different avenues into a career in sports are limited only by one's imagination. If you consider larger fields such as health care, technology, education, or government service, the number of potential paths expands exponentially.

» Become a Member of the "Community"
For every industry, specialty, and sub-specialty, there are organizations and information sources that, taken together, create a community of interest. Beyond the companies that make up an industry, most fields have manifold Web sites, online interest groups, trade magazines, conferences, industry associations, and service providers -- such as consulting, advertising, or banking -- that surround it.

Once your child identifies a field of interest, he or she should work to become a member of the community, getting up to date on its key issues and developments, figuring out who's who, and starting to develop relationships with key players. They should read the specialized press, attend the conferences, work the phones, and garner insight into what's really going on.

» Pursue Quality
The priority for new graduates in launching their careers should be to become affiliated with the most well-known and well-regarded organization possible in their field of interest (see "How to Get Your Career Off to a Blazing Start"). This organization's reputation, in turn, becomes part of your child's career profile or personal brand, which will be of great value over the course of their careers.

Job seekers should build a prioritized target list of organizations to pursue, based on the quality of the company's reputation, market position, and talent. Remind your child to try to "go blue-chip early" -- to associate themselves with the quality of organization that will expose them to the best people and training and which will expand their career options down the road.

Supporting Your College Grad's Job Search
If there's one thing more challenging and anxiety-producing than mounting a job search for yourself, it's helping your child to find a good job. Here's a four-step Job Search Survival Guide that will help both of you.

Step 1: Develop a Résumé and Cover Letter
Create a compelling résumé to convey experience and accomplishments at a glance. It should always be written in simple, direct language, with specific facts and figures to describe responsibilities and accomplishments. Most college grads should limit their résumé to one page and stick with a chronological format, which is how most employers prefer to think about candidates' experiences.

It's important to be complete and specific with regard to the dates -- time gaps will raise questions. Most important is to never embellish. Obvious as it seems, academic and other credentials must never be misrepresented. They're easy to check, and careers have been destroyed even decades later from the most seemingly innocent distortions.

The cover letter should communicate why the organization is of interest and how the sender can be a solution to a
No one will be moved to action reading about why an opportunity would be great for the job hunter. The reader wants to know how the applicant would be a boon for them.

When e-mailing materials, it's important to include a descriptive subject line, such as: "Notre Dame biology major seeks research internship" or better yet, "Linda Wilcox suggested I contact you." Finding someone the recipient will recognize to suggest your child contact them will boost the likelihood that the e-mail will receive a response. Complete contact information should be included in the message and the résumé attachment.

The e-mail should begin with a brief introduction that includes the position or response that's being sought. It's best to ask the recipient to take a specific action: "Can you direct my résumé to the appropriate person in your organization?" or, "Can you spend 15 minutes with me for a brief informational interview?" The e-mail should be brief. The person reading it may have received hundreds of résumés that week. Pictures, fancy HTML, or other distractions should not be sent in the e-mail.

**Step 2: Activate the Network**

Now that these materials are ready, the next step is to share them with as many well-placed people as possible. This is one of the most important things a college student can do -- and an area where a parent can be most helpful. Don't be shy about asking your own friends and colleagues to take a look.

Encourage your child to speak to as many experienced people as possible in informational or advisory settings. When senior executives have positive interactions with energetic, upbeat young people, they find it invigorating and are frequently spurred to want to help.

An "elevator pitch" -- a 30-second answer to the question "so what do you want to do?" -- should be developed and practiced until it's second nature. Remind your child of the traits that most hiring managers are seeking in new employees: Intellect, resourcefulness, problem-solving abilities, flexibility in applying talents to new areas, leadership, and interpersonal qualities. Specific industry experience or functional knowledge won't be relevant and of greatest value until years later.

**Step 3: Prepare for the Interview**

Interviewing well is an art. High-performing artists rehearse exhaustively. Someone pursuing a coveted job should do so, too. Crisp answers to both predictable and surprising questions should be prepared, practiced, and practiced some more. Here are some questions provided by [Quintessential Careers](http://www.quintcareers.com) that college graduates can expect in an interview:

- How would you describe yourself?
- What do you see yourself doing five years from now? Ten years from now?
- What do you really want to do in life?
- What do you consider to be your greatest strengths and weaknesses?
- How would you evaluate your ability to deal with conflict?
- What motivates you to go the extra mile on a project or job?
- Why should I hire you?
- In what ways do you think you can make a contribution to our company?
- What do you consider the attributes of a good leader, and how do you measure up?
- What three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction? Why?
- Do you have plans for continued study? An advanced degree?
- What's one of the hardest decisions you've ever had to make?
- What two or three things are most important to you in your job?
- What have you learned from your mistakes?

Finally, the worst thing a job hunter can do is to go into an interview knowing absolutely nothing about the place.
Organizations love to be loved. When someone walks into an interview and doesn't know a thing about the organization, it shows that he or she doesn't love or even really respect it.

**Step 4: Write a Thank-You Note**

Hopefully, 20 years of parenting will have made it second nature for your child to write a thank-you note after an interview or informational meeting. Chances are, however, that you'll need to remind your college grad.

It's simply common courtesy to send a thank-you e-mail or letter to anyone who took time to meet with them. While a prompt thank-you note rarely will win the job, a potential employer will notice if this courtesy is skipped. A brief, well-written note reinforces interest and an image of professionalism.

**A Final Piece of Advice**

Despite all of your efforts and best intentions, you may find that your child just doesn't want to listen to your sage and practical advice about launching his or her job search. Rather than despair or throw the computer against the wall, here's a recommendation to consider. Have one of your friends with a good relationship with your child be the one to give this advice to them. A child often will embrace the exact same message from anyone other than you!

Good luck in helping your college grad's career go places!