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Hoping to Get on the Fast Track, Students Turn to Career Coaches



Alan S. Orling for The New York Times

Career coaches like Christine Cookman, left, and Jen Zobel Bieber, who are based in Westchester County, N.Y., help new graduates sell themselves to an employer.

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After graduating from Middlebury College in January, Robert Borden did what a lot of new graduates do: he traveled for a while and thought about his future.

When he got back home to Boston he was pretty sure he wanted to work in commercial real estate, but he didn't hit the pavement right away. Instead, Mr. Borden conferred with his parents and decided to enlist the help of two career coaches, D. A. Hayden and Michael Wilder, co-founders of Hayden-Wilder, a Boston firm whose clients are almost exclusively college students and newly minted college graduates.

After a series of assessments and coaching sessions, Mr. Borden learned not only how to conduct himself during an interview, but also how to brand and sell himself. "That was vital," he said. "I felt far more confident being able to do that, and when I got an opportunity to interview I really could put my best foot forward."

Mr. Borden said the one-on-one attention over several weeks, and the ability to reach his coaches at any time, was something Middlebury's career services office could not offer. It came at a price — \$2,950 for eight 90-minute sessions — but 98 percent of Hayden-Wilder's clients find jobs within eight weeks of completing their coaching. Mr. Borden is now an operations assistant at the Spaulding & Slye commercial real estate brokerage firm in Boston.

Entry-level job coaching has emerged as an offshoot of traditional career coaching, which is usually reserved for midcareer professionals. In the last two years executive coaching firms have started taking on entry-level clients, and several firms, like Hayden-Wilder, have been created specifically to help new graduates make the transition from classroom to cubicle.

Jen Zobel Bieber and Christine Cookman began their coaching practices in Westchester County, N.Y., in the fall of 2004, and many of their clients are nearing the end of college or are recent graduates. "This is just another advantage boomer parents are giving their kids," Ms. Cookman said.

Those advantages have been a part of life since childhood for many of these young adults, thanks to their highly involved parents, a group that generational experts call "helicopter parents" for a tendency to hover around their children.

"They hire coaches, tutors and counselors for everything — weight loss, sports training, SAT preparation, the college application process," said Lynne Lancaster, co-founder of BridgeWorks, a consulting firm in Sonoma, Calif., focused on generational issues.

In an online survey of 400 college students and alumni conducted in January by the career services company Experience Inc., 65 percent reported seeking counsel from parents on academic or career decisions. First-semester college students now communicate, on average, more than 10 times a week with parents, according to researchers at Middlebury, who conducted a study last summer focused on how technological changes influence the transition to adulthood.

"Kids are much more open today to parental involvement than a generation ago," said Emanuel Contomanolis, director of cooperative education and career services at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York and a board member of the National Association of Colleges and Employers.

Despite the fact that colleges offer support programs for graduating students and that the job market for new graduates is strong — the National Association of Colleges and Employers' Job Outlook Survey for 2006 reported that employers plan to hire 14.5 percent more new graduates this year than last — parents often believe that private coaching gives their child a leg up on the competition, Mr. Contomanolis said.

Generation Y job seekers are also more reluctant, coaches say, to take just any job to "pay their dues" before moving to something more fulfilling. "They don't want to toe the line, which is how previous generations did it," said Alexandra Levit, founder of the career consultancy Inspiration@Work and author of "They Don't Teach Corporate in College: A Twenty-Something's Guide to the Business World" (Career Press, 2004) and the blog GetTheJob.com.

Ms. Levit, 29, said her peers "don't know what they want to do when they get out of college, but they know they want employment to be meaningful right away."

James Gumpfer, a senior at Dartmouth College, is in the midst of a career coaching program at Student Futures Inc. in Stamford, Conn. Mr. Gumpfer, a French major, said the main reason he — and his parents — sought coaching was that he did not want to work for a large corporation.

"I'm confident I could have gone down that path, that's what a lot of students here do, but I wouldn't find that interesting," Mr. Gumpfer said. "I want this first job to be worthwhile for me; it's definitely the most important thing."

Meaningful jobs, of course, still require basic skills, like the ability to communicate well orally and in writing. "We have looked at résumés in which the syntax is at a fourth-grade level," Mr. Wilder said. "People graduating from college now speak in code, e-mail all the time and use hand signals to discuss things, but don't do much face-to-face communicating."

A March survey of human resource professionals by the Society for Human Resource Management cited overall professionalism and written and oral communicating among the skills that new employees lack most frequently. And last summer, Ms. Hayden and Mr. Wilder conducted in-depth interviews with 50 hiring executives at companies across the country and were told by all of them that 80 percent to 85 percent of the job candidates they interviewed were poorly prepared.

Entry-level coaches use a variety of methods to prepare their clients for the job hunt, starting with assessments that vary from traditional Myers-Briggs personality tests to an individual coach's tools. Clients then develop career goals and a plan for achieving those goals that includes learning how to present themselves in a particular light, depending on the job and industry, and the creation of a compelling personal story. "You can teach someone interview skills," Ms. Hayden said, "but what's the point if they have nothing to talk about?"

Yet even though coached candidates often fare well in the job market, in the long run they may miss making some valuable mistakes.

"This is a generation that is literally growing up with others helping them make decisions all the time," Mr. Contomanolis said. "What's going to happen when this young person gets the job? Is anyone going to be there at the office with them to help them in this way?"