

FORTUNE

ASK ANNIE

About To Graduate? Don't Have a Job?

Whether you're a new college grad about to enter this dismal job market, or a more experienced executive, these five expert tips can help you succeed.

FORTUNE

Monday, May 5, 2003

By Anne Fisher

Q. I'll be graduating next month from a good college, with very high grades, and I am pretty disappointed with the job offers I've gotten so far. There are only two (after about 50 interviews), and I'm wondering which one to take, or whether I should keep looking. One of the offers is in an industry that doesn't really interest me long-term; the other is in a company I'd love to work for, but at a level that is just half a step above secretarial work. If I take the latter, won't I get pigeonholed and be unable to move up?

A. I've gotten such a flood of mail from discouraged seniors that I'm putting aside, for now, our series on tough interview questions. (To those who sent questions that haven't been featured yet: Stay tuned!) The only thing unusual about your dilemma is that you actually have two job offers: I've heard from hundreds of panicky soon-to-be-grads who have none. Writes one beleaguered senior, signed Derek: "Help! If I don't get a job soon, I'll have to move back in with my parents--and they already turned my old room into a spa!"

Yet the situation is far from hopeless. "While some employers are not even taking applications, others are hungry for talented people to come and work with them," says Roger Herman, the author of a new book, *Impending Crisis: Too Many Jobs, Too Few People* (Oakhill Press, \$30.00). He, along with many other demographers (including the Bureau of Labor Statistics), is predicting that the labor market will change dramatically--in job seekers' favor, amazing as that may seem right now--over the next few years. So your task at the moment is to get your foot in the door somewhere and position yourself for bigger and better opportunities ahead.

How do you do that? Rather than take the job you mention in an industry that doesn't interest you, go for the one in the company that does. The odds are good that you will be able to rise from your lowly beginnings when the economy emerges from its present funk. "A couple of generations ago, most employees started at the bottom and worked their way up. They gained valuable insights and perspectives that helped them to build solid careers," Herman says. "Many of those people now hold influential management positions, and they will appreciate your willingness to 'pay your dues.' Besides, the knowledge you can gain in a job that you see as beneath your abilities will still serve you well in the future."

To help you on your way, Herman offers these five tips:

- 1) Interview the interviewer. "Ask a new or prospective employer what you can learn, what kind of experience you can acquire, that will be useful later on," he suggests. "This approach tells the employer that you're expecting more from the job than just a paycheck, and that you want to grow. It also indicates that you're likely to put in more than just the minimum amount of effort on the job."
- 2) Take a broad view of your chosen career field. If you can't find a good "fit" in the industry you eventually hope to work in, Herman says, "look for positions with companies that are customers of or suppliers to your field of interest. The experience you'll gain will be valuable when you do go after the career opportunity you really want." One person who wrote me recently wants to get into book publishing, which is in the doldrums at the moment. His question: Should he accept a job offer at a literary agency, for now? By Herman's lights, the answer is: Absolutely! There is more than one way to learn the book biz--or any other biz, for that matter.
- 3) Don't stop learning. "Education is a lifelong process. Take for-credit or non-credit courses. Read, research, and ask questions," Herman advises. "In today's fast-moving world, you'll stagnate if you stop learning"--and some great opportunities will pass you by.
- 4) Seek mentors. "In this relationship, you are the initiator. Look for people in your chosen field whom you respect, and request time with them. Share what you're thinking and doing and encourage their opinions and guidance," Herman says. "Mentors help you grow, and can often open career doors for you."
- 5) Volunteer. Whether it's with a church group, a charity that interests you, or a community organization, get involved. "Working in a soup kitchen, building houses for Habitat for Humanity, or helping with a community project or celebration will give you experience working with a team," Herman notes--and, not incidentally, may expose you to people who can be helpful in your career as well.

Come to think of it, any or all of these suggestions could be just as useful to us "old" folks as to new college grads! Good luck and good courage to all--and here's hoping Derek doesn't end up having to sleep in a Jacuzzi.

Send questions to askannie@fortunemail.com.