

# The Job Advice You Wish You Knew How to Give

## Times have changed so much that parents puzzle over how to guide their sons and daughters toward a career

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Nearly two million students will emerge from U.S. colleges with bachelor's degrees this year.

Many will enter a job market their parents barely recognize.

Competition for entry-level jobs is fierce, despite the tight labor market. Many applicants run a gauntlet of internships and tryouts before getting a toehold on a permanent job. Career ladders of old have been replaced by zigzag job-to-job paths. Entry-level pay gains have fallen short of housing-cost increases in many regions, and grads' average debt has tripled since the early 1990s.

All this can leave parents off-balance and hard-pressed to offer advice.

Chloe Roach worked two part-time jobs during college, and three unpaid internships, before graduating from the State University of New York at Geneseo last summer with a degree in communications. She took another unpaid internship after graduation to get the ad-agency experience employers wanted, before finally landing a six-month hourly position.

"I'm exhausted just watching her," says her mother, Monique Patenaude, a university media-relations director at her daughter's alma mater. "She just turned 21 and she's had more phone interviews, Skype interviews, in-person interviews, first, second and third interviews, than I've ever had."

Still, she encouraged her daughter: "You've got to launch well. The trajectory of your launch is really important."

Ms. Patenaude is right about that, says Lesley Mitler, a New York coach for young adults planning careers. Too many parents rush their sons and daughters into landing a job—any job—after graduation, only to see them bail after less than a year, says Ms. Mitler, co-founder of Early Stage Careers. It's better to wait for the right fit.

That can take time. Taylor Cavazos, a Texas native, says her mother and other family members were thrilled when she seemed to hit the fast track after graduating from Vanderbilt University in 2015. She landed a job for a Chicago management-consulting firm—but she hated the work.

“After two miserable years living in a cold city far from home, I realized something had to change,” says Ms. Cavazos, 26. She quit and bounced from job to job for a while before landing a position she loves, as a lifestyle and real estate publicist in Miami.

Students need to build practical skills much earlier than in the past, Ms. Mitler says. She advises clients to do two to four internships before graduating to acquire the analytical, technical and interpersonal skills they may not learn in class.

That came as a surprise to Regina Gilchrist. Her 23-year-old son, Kyle, graduated from Georgia Southern University last December with a degree in political science. He finished with good grades, debate skills and a strong extracurricular track record, including a six-month internship with a U.S. congressman. But when he tried to find a job for a couple of years before entering law school, he was disappointed by the choices.

The problem: He lacked work experience, says Ms. Gilchrist, a Huntsville, Ala., mother of two. “I should have engaged four or five years ago and said, how is this degree going to correlate with a job?” she says. Kyle has shifted gears and is planning to start work on a master’s degree in public administration and project management, with hopes of working 20 to 40 hours a week in a paid internship.

“When I graduated, I had four job offers, and my school prepared me for that. Now, everybody and his brother has a bachelor’s degree,” Ms. Gilchrist says. And while 93% of grads believe they’ll land a job related to their college major, only 60% who graduated in the past 12 months managed to do so, according to a survey of 2,500 future and recent grads set for release soon by Cengage and Wakefield Research.

Online job boards lure so many job seekers that many get lost in a sea of competing applications. One financial-services company had 14,000 applicants for 100 summer internships, Ms. Mitler says. She usually advises clients to apply for at least 30 jobs.

Besides, about seven in 10 jobs are found not online, but through networking, Ms. Mitler says.

Melissa Sayer’s son, Jon, graduated with honors in videogame design from DePaul University last spring. Although he had designed a promising game with four fellow students and applied plenty of entrepreneurial energy to his job search, it was still a rocky road, says Ms. Sayer, a Ventura, Calif., attorney.

A postgraduation internship fell through because the company’s owner had a medical emergency. Her son worked for a startup for a while but left after it faced funding challenges. He took two months off to work on the videogame with teammates. Recently, he landed a full-time job—at a company that earlier had passed over his online application, Ms. Sayer says.

It was her son’s own contacts, and a few she offered, that made the difference, she says. “There is so much more noise now than there used to be, and you have to break through all that to actually connect with somebody,” she says.

The old career ladders many parents climbed are gone. The number of potential occupations has more than doubled since the early 1990s, Labor Department data show. Many young adults need a longer runway just to explore their options.

When Thomas Plante, a psychology professor at Santa Clara University, told friends he was going to grad school after getting his bachelor's degree years ago, they assumed he was becoming a doctor or lawyer. Today, students seeking advanced degrees have far more career options to choose from. When his son, Zach, laid plans to go straight to grad school after graduating from Dartmouth in earth science and physics, his professors told him instead to work in research for a while so he could make a more thoughtful choice about next steps.

While Zach is working as a research assistant in labs at Stanford University and the U.S. Geological Survey, his hourly pay isn't high enough to afford housing, so he's living with his parents in Menlo Park, Calif. Dr. Plante and his wife, Lori, were able to buy their house years ago with their entry-level salaries and some savings. Today, his daily runs take him past a two-bedroom cottage listed for sale at \$3 million.

He finds it ironic when parents complain that their sons and daughters didn't work their way through college or land a high-paid job before graduation. His advice: "Your reality back in the 1970s or 1980s is just not the world of 2019. You've got to get over it."

### **The New Rules of the Post-College Job Search**

Encourage your child to:

- \* Get workplace experience before graduating.
- \* Start building a network early.
- \* Acquire technical, analytical and interpersonal skills not taught in college classes.
- \* Avoid relying heavily on online job boards.
- \* Build a robust LinkedIn profile.
- \* Seek out other experienced adult mentors for advice.