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The 10 Worst Mistakes of First-Time Job Hunters

By Kelly Eggers

If you're in your final year of college, be warned: the rumors about landing a job in this economy are true. You should be taking steps today, not next semester, to prepare yourself.

An April 2011 survey conducted by Braun Research on behalf of Adecco Staffing U.S. found that 71% of 500 recent four-year college graduates would have done something differently to prepare for the job market. While companies will hire 9.5% more graduates from the class of 2012 than they did from the 2011 graduating class, according to another poll, employers are still looking for the pick of the litter.

"When you're not familiar with the job market or job seeking, you really don't know how much effort it will take," said Kathy Kane, senior vice president of talent management for Adecco NA,

To find out what students can do to better prepare for the current job market, we spoke with career coaches, recruiters and recent graduates.

"I would have started looking for jobs earlier."

Putting off your job hunt isn't a wise move. Among the Adecco survey's respondents, 26% said they would have started looking for potential positions earlier.

"It's easy to fall into 'my weekend starts on Thursday' mode, rather than 'I've got to put my job search into full gear today' mode," said Kane, "but procrastinators will have fewer choices."

Most students don't start thinking about their careers until they have to, said Lindsey Pollak, a career expert who focuses on Generation Y in the workplace. "There's so much you can do that's not a lot of work and not overly time consuming."

"I would have actually networked."

For students and older professionals alike, networking can feel like the most dreaded part of a job hunt. Twenty-nine percent of respondents to the Adecco survey said they would have spent more time building a solid professional network.

"Networking can be scary," said Pollak, "but about 70% of jobs are found through networking." Students who spend their time trolling job boards should instead spend that time making solid connections with people who are respected and involved in the workforce, industry experts and alumni, and spend only 30% of their time looking at job listings.

For the most part, Pollak said, people love to help students. As long as you are gracious and thankful and not trying to hard-sell yourself right off the bat, potential connections are likely to be receptive.

"I would have taken on a job or an internship in addition to my courseload."

Bottom line: There's no substitute for experience.

Having some professional experience under your belt before entering the workforce has become a necessity for many employers.

"I don't know a company that doesn't want people with internship experience," said Pollak. "My advice is to get yourself through the recession any way you can, and come out with whatever experience you can."

Look for internships that provide college credit or are paid. Otherwise, gain work experience in a setting such as waiting tables – and talk with people at each and every table. "There are CEOs who started networking while they were waiting tables," Pollak said.

If you can't find a full- or part-time position on- or off-campus, try going to the Internet for virtual work. "There are jobs you can get without even leaving your dorm room," Pollak said, including maintaining someone's social media outlets, working as a copyeditor or building a website for a small business. Many of these types of jobs have flexible hours, an added benefit for busy students.

"I would have gotten more involved in career-relevant extracurricular activities."

On-campus groups, clubs, events and activities are a great place to get experience that translates to the working world. Skills are skills. You can show you have gained relevant

experience by planning concerts on campus or working as a freshman orientation assistant, for example.

"Everybody wants to hire people who understand how to manage projects, work alongside difficult people, and have built their communication skills," said Kane. If you were on the dance team, and choreographed a group performance, for example, you've developed creative, leadership and training abilities, all of which translate to the workplace.

Experts say it's a matter of framing the extracurricular experience you've had in a professional way. Try thinking of your biggest accomplishments as a member or leader of an extracurricular group, and using them to brainstorm resume bullet points.

"I would have applied to more jobs."

Many recent graduates regret not putting out more feelers. According to the Adecco survey, 26% of recent graduates would have applied to more jobs prior to finishing school.

Putting your hat in the ring is the only way to be considered for most opportunities. The trick is to keep track of the applications you send out. "Sending in your application for hundreds of jobs on Monster.com will work against you," said Dan Schawbel, a personal branding expert and author of *Me 2.0*. Not only is it difficult to remember what you applied for and when, but you're also likely to send out generic resumes.

Write your resume so it highlights your experience with each position's requirements. Not sure what your relatable skill-set is? Try creating a Venn diagram that illustrates all of the skills and experience you've developed. The overlap can indicate your primary strengths, and the remainder can help you see where you have specific skills related to your prospective industry.

"I would have focused more on becoming 'professional.'"

Save the sweatpants and fratty T-shirts for the weekend. Replace them with clothes that are fitted, pressed and at the very least casual-Friday appropriate even when you're going to class. You may think dressing well every day doesn't matter, but the professors you ask for recommendations will remember your style.

Another way to show your professionalism is to pick up the tab for networking coffees, and send thank-you notes for even a little bit of help. "If someone gives you advice, all you have to do is say thank you after the fact," Pollak said.

And, of course, monitor your online appearance. Clean up and privacy-protect your Facebook accounts, start Tweeting interesting news (instead of which class you're skipping), be careful where you "check-in" on your smartphone, and set up a solid LinkedIn profile, Pollak said. Add a signature line to your e-mail account and set up a professional voicemail message.

"I would have done more to figure out what my career goals were."

Your first job out of college is unlikely to be your dream position, if you even know what that is. Indecision can hold you back, so set up some informational interviews to try to narrow your focus.

"It's a rare gift at any age to know what your passion is," said Bruce Tulgan, CEO of Rainmaker Thinking, a New Haven, Conn.-based management consultancy that focuses on integrating generations in the workplace. "In 99 out of 100 cases, people start to learn about a career path, gain experience in something, and over time they become passionate about it."

Don't be afraid to try something that you're initially lukewarm about, said Pollak. "I don't believe in dead-end jobs when you're early in your career," she said, "because everything is experience."

"I would have gone to the career center."

This is what they call a "no-brainer." You might not think you need your university's services, but there's no reason to find out the hard way you did something wrong that could have been avoided.

"College students have an advantage other job seekers don't -- an on-campus career center staffed with people who have one purpose: to help students find jobs," said Kane of Adecco. "Most career centers aren't taken advantage of to their full extent."

Once you get to know the counselors and they know what you're looking for, they can tell you about new opportunities, Kane said. It's also a good place to practice your elevator pitch, draft introductory e-mails or cover letters, perfect your resume, or any other measures you don't want to run by friends or family members.

"I would have kept better track of my achievements."

Experts say that even on-campus accolades belong on your resume.

"Start creating tangible results with your name on them so you have evidence of your ability to add value," said Tulgan. "Save the tangible results, date them, and be prepared to present them."

Tracking how many donations you collected from calling alumni or that you created a new filing system for the admissions office are achievements that translate to everyday work activities. Don't forget to highlight your academic awards, such as making the dean's list or honor society.

"Any accomplishment matters," said Schawbel. "Track them in a public setting, like your LinkedIn profile." If it's not out there for people to find, those achievements won't be doing anything to help you, he said.

"I would have focused more on developing relevant skills."

Having an awareness of industry-specific skills as well as broad, transferable ones is a way to really stand out.

"Companies aren't investing as much in training, so companies are more likely to look for someone who can hit the ground running," said Kane. That isn't just familiarity with industry terminology, it's also having professional "street smarts."

"Show your understanding of chain-of-command issues, working with older, more experienced colleagues and working with people in parallel roles in other departments, or with vendors and customers," said Tulgan.

You should also have excellent customer service knowledge – not only to use as a professional, but also to use as a job seeker. That includes making yourself available, being fully prepared for interviews, and knowing how to problem-solve, Tulgan said. "Above all, develop self-management skills and the ability to work effectively with a manager," he said.