

TEACHING YOUNG WOMEN AND STUDENTS OF COLOR HOW TO BEST MARKET THEMSELVES IN THE JOB SEARCH PROCESS

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Abstract - Properly executing a job search is a frightening idea to inexperienced students. Often we find ourselves fulfilling the role of advising students in this regard, but for most of us this is not our major responsibility and we are not professionals in this arena. As a result, our information may be incomplete. Because young women and students of color may especially feel handicapped in the interviewing experience, we will cover concepts that professionals can use to help students through this experience. In this highly interactive session, we will take the participants through several steps to share with young women and students of color to properly prepare them with effective job search techniques. We will cover the basic essentials of any job search: a strong resume, the necessity of planning, self assessment including strengths and how to sell them, weaknesses and how to sell around them, setting goals, networking, interviewing attire, socialized norms of interview communication, self-esteem, and recognizing and responding to illegal interview questions.

INTRODUCTION

Many of the students with whom we as uninitiated employment advisors find ourselves working are first generation college students. They may often need to be reminded that they have not gotten to this point without having developed some strong skills and they can compete in the market. They need to be reminded that it is often not the person who can best do the job who gets the job but the one who can convince the interviewers that they can and will do the job!

We have a responsibility to identify people who we can suggest as role models for them. These role models are often not readily apparent in media so we will have to look hard. It is necessary to come up with only one or two who to whom to refer.

Armed with only one or two, we will still come off as the expert because in all likelihood, these role models will be unknown to our students!

FIRST STEP

The resume and cover letter are a company's first exposure to the student so both must be a strong advertisement of the student. There are the basics which must be covered:

- Two-address format
- If gpa is <3.0, do not include it on resume unless specifically requested
- Must learn to edit; limit resume to one page

- Resume should be scannable
- Objective should be interesting
- Eliminate high school info after college sophomore year
- All highlights should focus on student; this is, after all, her resume or 'advertisement'
- Related courses should not be a course list
- Cover letters must be addressed to a name
- Use names of common acquaintances in cover letter
- Make sure email addresses are professional
- Use numbers in resume bullets; quantify whenever possible: numbers talk

THE NECESSITY OF PLANNING

The single most common failure of young minority professionals, and indeed most first generation college attendees, is failing to plan, or what one Hispanic businessman calls, "potluck planning." Quoted in the Minority Career Guide he stresses that students from non-professional households have not been trained to plan. He says, "As minorities, we are so used to not having a full range of favorable choices that we tend to seize either the first or the wrong opportunity. Whatever turns up too often decides the direction of our professional lives."

But how does one plan for the task of job searching, let alone the job of searching for the 'right job?' My professional opinion is that there are two methods which must be undertaken by all serious job hunters: skills assessment tools and preparing answers to typical interview questions.

Students must understand that they must know their product in order to sell it to the right buyer. I suggest that students write ½ page responses to any 7 or 8 questions which are often asked in interviews. Even if the interviewers do not ask those specific questions, the student's preparation and new knowledge of her 'product' will enable her to more comfortably answer the questions that the interviewer does ask. To prepare for the ubiquitous question, "Tell me about yourself", the student should write out two or three things she wants to make sure that the interviewer knows about her before the interview is over. In answering that question, the student should understand that this is the time to indicate how well she would fit into the company's culture and perform in designated tasks. This is a golden opportunity to sell the interviewer on what she has accomplished and what she can bring to the table.

The student should also be advised to look over the list of suggested questions that a student can ask. The student should decide which of those questions she needs to

have answered to help her make the best decision. The student should be advised NEVER to go into an interview without some questions that need to be answered. The best way to develop questions is to see one's self in the role. One of the best questions your student can ask is: how can I best make a contribution in my first three months here?

SELF-ASSESSMENT

An important part of planning is self-assessment. Too often female and minority students, even those who seem to have it all together, see themselves as lacking. In completing the self-assessment, the student will be able to see more clearly, what skills she actually has! In the next ten minutes, we will quickly go through the process of self-assessment so that you can get an idea of what you, in this advising role, will be suggesting to your students.

As professionals we already know and should help our students understand that getting the right job is not a passive event. It requires great effort. It requires one to draw on one's inner resources; to tap into knowledge that one may heretofore been unaware of. The process of self-assessment may seem unnecessary and like too much hard work, but going through it places interviewers head and shoulders above their competition.

STRENGTHS – SELLING THEM

As a continuation of the self-assessment process, suggest that your student write out 2 or 3 characteristics that are personal assets. Then have her write out an example of when she has successfully used this skill in a group environment or as a team member. She should create an opportune time to make sure that these assets are presented in the interview.

WEAKNESSES – SELLING AROUND THEM

Everyone has weaknesses. In an October, 1999 C-Span presentation, Jodi Foster talked about the human ugliness that is in all of us and how we should not be ashamed of it, but should instead reconcile with it. In the same way, we all have weaknesses. This is not a bad thing; it is a human thing. Therefore, it is best for a job applicant to be honest about what her weaknesses are and what she dislikes doing than to wind up accepting a job where the dreaded task would be the main responsibility of the job!

Of course there are also weaknesses that the interviewee should be striving to correct. It is a good idea to give an example of a weakness that did exist and which the student strove to overcome and did. This can be something as simple and common as having poor study skills upon entering college. Your student should indicate what steps she took to overcome the weakness and how progress is being maintained.

If the weakness is a low gpa, the student should acknowledge it, perhaps offer a reason, not an excuse, of why it is so low, then move on to a positive topic. Here would be a good time to iterate one of the two or three things the student wants to make sure the interviewer knows about her before the end of the interview. Remind the student that she is much more than just a gpa.

GOAL SETTING

The goal of any job interview is to sell one's self well enough to get the offer. Actually, no decision is even necessary until then. That is why it is important to listen to what is being said during the interview. Therefore, the first goal should be to listen well because listening well can help her make an informed decision about whether this is the right opportunity.

'Building rapport' is usually a stated goal of the interviewer at the outset of the interview. This is generally the interviewer's goal during the first 2 to 3 minutes of the interview. This time is meant to put the interviewee at ease. However, it is a process that is ongoing throughout the interview! And the student should assume responsibility for it if the interviewer does not. While the student may not be the right person for the job for which the interviewer is interviewing, she may be a perfect match for another job of which the interviewer is aware! The student should make sure they are building bridges throughout the process!

NETWORKING

Many people need to redefine and reframe networking. It is often viewed as a tool to manipulate and cajole. Our office has adopted a significantly different interpretation of the concept of networking which has helped our students to feel much more comfortable with "networking". It is important to teach students how to follow through on the concept of reciprocity which is inherent in networking. Our definition of networking is "developing a relationship with someone whose opinions and advice you value and respect." I believe this definition takes "the sting" out of networking and removes from it the darkness with which it might have been viewed.

Women and students of color particularly need to make a conscientious effort to expand their circles of contacts. Often they are not on the golf course or otherwise involved with activities where job issues are casually discussed. They should not limit the names on their list of potential network contacts – doing so will hinder their efforts. Let us discuss some of the people who could be but might not readily be included on a list of network contacts.

INTERVIEWING ATTIRE

Interviewing attire is trickier than in the past. When I graduated from college, we were *required* to wear the traditional interviewing uniform: a navy blue suit, white blouse, etc. However, if one were to go to Microsoft, for example, in a traditional interview suit, she might be viewed as not having done her homework because the corporate culture and dress code there is very informal. Therefore, suggest to your student that she contact a human resources representative or the department manager at the company before going for an on-site interview. Have her ask what would be the preferred interview attire. The best way to find out what the company prefers in an on-campus interview is to check with the career services office staff. Our monthly posting indicates the suggested attire for each company conducting on-campus interviews. (See example)

While interviewing no longer requires adhering to the basic navy suit rule there are still some proven “rules” for appearing professional and making that all-important first impression in interviewing. Job Choices 2002 offers several tips. These include:

- Neat and well-maintained shoes
- Neat hairstyles
- Ironed clothes
- Men only: Button blazer or jacket when you stand;
- Men only: Wear socks that cover your calves;
- Men only: Wear an undershirt underneath your business shirt;
- Both: Watch the # of accessories! Men: No earrings;
Women: Only one earring per ear
- Women: Watch skirt length
- Prefer skirts over pants for women

Remind your student that she is dressing for the position she *wants*, not the position she has!

SOCIALIZED NORMS OF INTERVIEWING COMMUNICATION

According to Talking From 9: to 5: “there are ways of speaking that are expected of males and females. In studying the expected communication styles of boys, they’re expected to put themselves forward, to emphasize the qualities that make them look good and de-emphasize those that would show them in a less favorable light.

“Girls are expected to be humble and not to try to take the spotlight, emphasize the ways they’re *like* everyone else, de-emphasize ways they’re special. A woman who does this really well will come off lacking confidence. Those who learn these lessons best are most in danger of falling into the traps laid by conversational convention.”

In Talking From 9: to 5:, anthropologist Marjorie Harness Goodwin is quoted as saying that “talking in ways that display self confidence is a negative for girls: ‘She

thinks she’s cute!’ ‘She thinks she’s something!’ Though girls may appear confident at young ages, by the time a girl gets through junior high school and puberty, she will have experienced a transformation – and a tremendous loss of self-confidence that white middle class girls, particularly, experience at that stage of their lives.”

However, in an interview, it is imperative that students articulate their accomplishments and skills. There’s no other way for an employer to know that she is the right person for the job!

SELF ESTEEM

Definition: Esteem = regard; set a high value on; respect; revere; admire

In the 1970’s, several feminist psychologists theorized that relationships become so important to women that in order to avoid conflict and maintain relationships, they silence themselves. In *When Girls Talk*, Brumberg points out that such silencing goes hand in hand with falling self esteem. Goes back to preparing and self-assessment; given what the student has learned about herself and a frequent look back at what she has written, she will begin to develop a stronger sense of self: a stronger belief in her capabilities and a stronger self-confidence. Frequent re-reading of skills, strengths, weaknesses and contributions cements those into the mindset of the student. Clear thinking about her capabilities and contributions will help the student figure out what she wants as opposed to just accepting *anything*.

ILLEGAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

It is important to define “illegal interview questions”. Not every offensive or insensitive question can be categorized as illegal and not every illegal question is criminally liable. Should those questions arise during an interview, however, and the candidate recognizes it, she has to be prepared to handle it – or not. Candidates must be able to think quickly and make spur of the moment decisions in this case. Some of the questions could be construed as rather harmless to the applicant and therefore okay to answer whereas the answers to others could unfairly lock her out of consideration for the position.

EXITING THE INTERVIEW

The reason students should be so mindful of exiting the interview is because it provides one last chance to make a good impression on the interviewer. This is not the time to wind down and leave the interview to the whim of the interviewer. The student has one last opportunity to remind the interviewer that she should be seriously considered for the position at hand. The student should make sure that she:

- Asks the interviewer for a card (contact info) to follow up with a thank you note within 24 hours of the interview
- Offers a firm handshake, a look in the eye and a smile
- Reiterates her interest in the job
- Asks when a hiring decision is expected
- Asks what is the next step
- Wishes the interviewer good luck in the interviewing process

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