

Helping Your Recent Graduate Find a Path to Success and Independence



*A guide for parents of recent college graduate
A 1st Edition by Jim McKean, Partner, Career Investments*

If your recent graduate has found a great job, then congratulations. But if your son or daughter is still looking, or if they have accepted a position that is disappointing, then this information may help you and them.

As parents, we all want to help our children get a good start in life. For many of us, graduation from college has been the final step from dependency to independence. In the last few years that has not worked as well as it has in the past. Many recent graduates have found themselves back home with their parents or under-employed.

There are a lot of reasons for this. The economy has certainly slowed growth. The career search is becoming more complex and sophisticated. Colleges and universities do not have the resources to help everyone. But the biggest problem is that many graduates have never learned how careers work and how to navigate the barriers.

Motivation or Alienation?

As parents, we can help, but we need to establish the right emotional environment or our attempts may be resented or even rejected. First, understand that your recent graduate has watched fellow students get jobs that appear to be desirable and prestigious, and has probably taken a major self-esteem blow. Encouragement is more likely to be more effective than “lighting a fire under them.” But that encouragement can be shaped to keep them moving forward. More about that later. . .

Second, be aware that the student who has returned home is moving from a place of relative freedom to one they associate with childhood constraints. Consider establishing some adult-like expectations, like helping with the responsibilities of the household, while allowing more adult-like freedoms. This is a time when you want to build a sense of personal power and not under cut it.

Here are some specific recommendations:

- **Don't let your graduate operate without a written plan.** It is likely that your graduate may think he or she has a plan to navigate through these career waters but the act of writing it out can solidify any ambiguities and point out any holes that need to be addressed
- **Do recognize that your graduate is likely feeling left behind.** As peers move on to careers after college, it can add to the stress. Putting yourself in their shoes can help you increase your level of empathy for their current emotional state.
- **Don't nag or blame.** Nagging will trigger anger, resentment and reinforce dependency.
- **Do be supportive.**
 - o Review resumes and cover letters for impact
 - o Help your graduate develop and refine his or her marketing message
 - o Offer to use your personal networks to expand his or her own; identify mentors
 - o Ask how else you can help
- **Don't take over.** It might solve today's problem, but you are not helping your child master this difficult but important life skill.
- **Do help your graduate understand that career management is a life skill.** Like other skills, it can be taught and learned. If you find it difficult to help, consider finding a respected mentor or career coach to help.
- **Don't dismiss ideas.** It is critical that your graduate sets his or her own career agenda. Sometime the strangest ideas pay off. But if you really think your graduate is heading down a wrong direction, use questions to lead the career seeker to his or her own conclusions.
- **Do focus on the big picture and priorities.** Should a recent graduate focus on finding a residence or a job, or both. Helping your graduate to take in the big picture and prioritize from there helps improve his or her effort's output.
- **Don't rule out internships, volunteer work or unpaid experiences.** Encourage your graduate to be clear about how he or she is going to leverage these experiences to benefit his or her career goals.
- **Do help your graduate set goals.** And then help him or her monitor progress by establishing a prearranged time and place to talk about what activities have happened and what is planning to be completed next.

Networking

Most jobs are found through a network connection. That is, you know someone who knows someone who knows about a job.

As a parent, you can help your graduate expand job prospects by adding your networks together. You can make the whole networking process simpler and easier by following a few guidelines.

- **Be clear.** Help your son or daughter develop a clear, concise statement of what he or she is looking for. The better your graduate can communicate what he or she is looking for, the greater the likelihood of his or her network responding and the greater the quality of that response.
- **Identify potential champions.** In all of our networks, there are people who know us, like us and want to support us. Your graduate has such people, but most of them will be peers. As a parent, you have people in your network who are predisposed to like your graduate and want to support him or her. Make a list of them and offer to introduce your graduate to them.
- **Identify connectors.** In every network there are people who know a very large number of other people – maybe a thousand or more by name. Social network researchers call these people “connectors.” They are very valuable because they shorten the distance between you and anyone else in the network. They are especially helpful answering questions like “Who do you know who...?” So if your graduate is interested in the advertising industry and you don’t know anyone in that field, there is a good bet that your connectors do. Make a list of connectors and offer to introduce them.
- **Find informants.** Informants are people who know something well and are willing to share it. They are sometimes called “mavens” or “rabbis.” If your graduate is interested in a particular industry, an informant can give them the inside scoop – like who has recently landed big contracts and might need new talent, how the industry picks the best candidates, or where in the country this industry is growing. You (or better, your graduate) can use your connectors to identify and get introduced to informants.
- **Encourage informational interviews.** Teach your graduate to use “informational interviews” to gather data about industries, jobs and network assets. These interviews will refine his or her knowledge and hone interviewing skills.

Career Planning Resources

This will not be the last time your graduate will need to search for a job. But it is more than just a job search; it is part of a larger career plan. We strongly encourage you to help your graduate think about this as the first step in a lifelong journey. Your son or daughter will probably change employers several times, and may actually have as many as three or four careers. So becoming proficient at planning and executing career moves will be more important for this next generation than for any of us who came before. Here are some resources that might help:

- **College career centers.** Some of the smartest, most dedicated career professionals we have ever met are in college and university career centers. If your student has a good working relationship with them, encourage using it. However, college career counselors have a problem. On average, there is one counselor for every 9,000+ college students in the US. No matter how good the counselors are, it is hard for any one student to get a lot of time or attention.
- **Alumni associations.** Encourage your graduate to join and be active as soon as possible. Offer to pay for the first couple of years' member dues if necessary. Alumni associations facilitate career advancement by sponsoring career fairs, facilitating introductions to older alumni, and sometimes by maintaining their own career offices. They also offer volunteer opportunities that will raise your graduates' profile in a group with which they have a natural affiliation.
- **Psychometric Evaluations.** If a graduate feels genuinely lost or as if they are on the wrong path, sometimes career testing can be very helpful. If the problem is the ability to express their desires clearly, then this kind of testing can also be useful.
- **Career Coaches.** Professional career coaches can help by bringing real-life experience from hundreds of clients. Successful coaches have helped hundreds of people at all stages of their careers, and they know what works and what doesn't. A good career coach is both intuitive and strategic. They can engage their clients at whatever stage of life they are at, help them identify their life goals and develop strategies for attaining them.

Conclusion

This is an exciting but challenging time to be starting a career. Never have graduates had as many options-or as much competition-as they have today. As parents, we all want to find the right balance of support and freedom that prepares our children to succeed on their own. By encouraging them, treating them like adults, sharing your personal networks, and helping them articulate their desires, you can go a long way towards supporting them.

For more information on developing career management as a life skill, or to learn about how you can help, Contact us at info@careerinvestments.com to find out how we can help!

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About the Author: Jim McKean is a former consultant, strategist and IT executive turned career guru. For seven years as owner and principal of McKean and Company, he provided executive leadership in strategy, technology and business management to mid-size entrepreneurial businesses throughout Indiana. One of his major clients, Pratt Corporation, hired him to lead an 11-person department with a \$1.3 million budget where he was responsible for building a team that delivered numerous B2B applications. He holds an MBA from Indiana University and served as Manager of Research for Indiana University Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation. He has been a systems analyst, a member of the Boards of two not-for-profits, and a writer. But his real passion is for the science and art of careers. As CI's Thought Leader, Jim leads the development of our unique tools and processes, writes a blog on career-related issues, and presents to corporate and community groups on this important life skill.

About Career Investments: Career Investments LLC is a talent and career management firm with offices in Indianapolis, Bloomington Indiana, and Chicago. During its team's 12 years in the industry, they have helped hundreds of talented individuals to advance their careers through job placement and direct career consulting services.