

CAREER JOURNAL

Graduating With a Major in Go-Getting

BY TODDI GUTNER

Darvika Sarin had been working toward finding her first post-college job since she arrived at school her freshman year.

A business and psychology major at Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, Pa., Ms. Sarin consistently kept in touch with professionals she met working as a summer intern, including stints with an investment bank in India and at National Economic Research Associates in New York City. Her networking, follow-through and focus paid off: The latter firm offered her a full-time position after she graduates. "I was fortunate," says Ms. Sarin.

Many college students graduating this spring haven't been as lucky. That's no surprise given that the number of U.S. job openings sank to below three million in January, according to the Labor Department, the lowest level since 2000. Worse, employers recruiting on college campuses expect to hire about 22% fewer graduates from this year's class than last year's, according to a new report from the National Association of Colleges and Employers. But with the right strategy, you may be able to turn the odds of success in your favor, as Ms. Sarin did.

"It's probably never been harder for a degree holder to find a job," says Rabia de Lande Long, a human-resources consultant with Chartwell Advisors in New York.

Still, career experts say graduates have some advantages over senior professionals. "There are definitely benefits to hiring graduating students," says Kerri Day Keller, who directs career services at Kansas State University.

Youth Has Advantages

First off, newbie grads are less expensive than job seekers with a few years of work experience under their belts. In this belt-tightening economy, getting more for less is an attractive option for many firms. While new graduates might not have the breadth of experience, they usually are willing to



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work hard and do what's required to get ahead, says Ms. Keller.

What's more, recent graduates tend to be more flexible than more-established workers. Without the burden of a mortgage, a spouse and children, many graduates are willing to take a less-than-perfect job that is located in a less-desirable city or may require significant travel or has a lower salary than an experienced hire would accept. For Allison Lakey, a graduating senior from Milliken University in Decatur, Ill., her first post-college year will be spent visiting each one of the 134 chapters nationwide of the Tri Delta Sorority as a regional consultant for the organization. "I'll be on an airplane every three to five days, but it's a great first job," says Ms. Lakey, a communications major and a Tri Delta member herself.

Being open-minded and creative when you think about what you want to do—and where you might be able to do it—is important too, say career experts. "If you listen to common wisdom, finance is dead," says Frank Tortorello, executive director of career services at Franklin & Marshall and a former manager of college recruiting for Merrill Lynch. "Maybe finance on Wall Street is dead, but lots of companies still need help in this area," says Mr. Tortorello.

Young people tend to be more open to alternatives than profes-

sionals already on a well-worn career path, he says, and would be smart to look at finance jobs outside of banking, like at a hospital or transportation company.

Don't rule out internships even though they're temporary and pay little or nothing. They're something few experienced workers can afford to pursue. "It's a great way to get your foot in the door of a company," says Brad Karsh, president of Job-Bound, a career-coaching company in Chicago and co-author of "How to Say it on Your Résumé." Internships can give graduating students new skills, a broader network and a way to set themselves apart from others. And if the job market improves, an intern who was well-regarded is in a good position to be hired.

Be Creative

Of course, to get the most out of this edge, college grads need to be more creative than their experienced counterparts. In your résumé, "focus on and give specifics of the things you have done or accomplished," says Mr. Karsh. "Don't just describe the position," he says. You'll also want to broaden your definition of experience and highlight it. Mention your internships, sports and volunteer activities. Describe actions and accomplishments that show leadership skills and initiative. If you were the treasurer for your college stu-

dent government, highlight the size of the budget you managed and any results you delivered.

More critical is a strong network of mentors and contacts, like the sort that Ms. Sarin fostered. "It's practically impossible to land a job today without some kind of professional connection," says Michael A. Sciola, director of the Career Resource Center at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn.

Young people have had less time to build contacts, which means reaching out in unconventional ways. "Ask the friends of your parents for advice and information, but not a job," says Gail Rooney, the director of the University of Illinois Career Center. Tap your alumni databases to find people at companies you'd like to work with. And join networking sites like LinkedIn.com to foster relationships with professionals who can get your résumé in front of decision makers.

Reach Out to the Industry

You also should attend industry conferences; introduce yourself to more experienced attendees and request their business cards. Email new contacts with your résumé, says Ms. de Lande Long. Ask for 20 minutes of their time to get feedback and suggestions on how to move forward with your job search.

Edward Stautberg, a master's degree student in the Energy and Earth Resources program at the University of Texas in Austin, has employed these tactics. "I am pursuing every opportunity I can find to promote the program and myself," he says.

He recently attended the North American Prospect Expo, the major annual oil and gas industry conference in Houston, and introduced himself to the marketing people manning the booths to find out if any company recruiters were in attendance. His approach: "I'm here today trying to sell myself," Mr. Stautberg says he told people. As for his success, he says he "got lots of laughs [and] a number of business cards." Even better, Mr. Stautberg is still in contact with some about potential positions.