

For MBA job seekers, the family matters

Anne VanderMey

With recruiting channels drying up, many B-school students are tapping personal networks in search of work—and finding it.

When Dan Pulver started business school, he thought his job leads would come through career fairs, campus recruiting, or maybe alumni networking events. One place he didn't think would yield employment—the family reunion.

But when he started business school last year at the University of California at Los Angeles Anderson School of Business (Anderson Full-Time MBA Profile), he found that the traditional channels of MBA employment had largely run dry. As soon as he got there, he says, the school stressed that sure-fire jobs for MBAs had vanished with Lehman Brothers and the housing bubble. He had a few job leads through professional contacts, but decided that "it definitely couldn't hurt to put the feelers out there to see what was going on with my personal networks."

So Pulver called his aunt, a senior level staffer at Booz Allen Hamilton in Virginia, a company he admired and thought was a good fit. His aunt, whom he sees usually once a year at a family dinner in Maryland, then made a few calls to some key players in the company. A few days later Pulver was on the phone with a recruiter. He's now an intern at Booz's office in Atlanta, and one of the lucky few students to land an internship in the toughest recruiting season in recent memory.

Chatting up strangers

Pulver's story is a perfect example of what more and more schools are hoping their students will be able to do as on-campus recruiting dries up and job opportunities grow ever scarcer. Although he had to demonstrate his qualifications for the job just like every other applicant—he sat through several interviews and submitted the standard application—Pulver succeeded by tapping into the power of a nonprofessional network of friends and family, where many grads never think to look.

It was just a few years ago that the typical job seeker separated personal and professional contacts—when business school graduates had their pick of five or six job offers, schmoozing was the stuff of job fairs, and the hunt for employment extended only as far as the recruiting table. But those days are long gone. Now, as professional networks weaken, schools are encouraging students to extend the search into virtually every aspect of their lives—even if that means borrowing a brother-in-law's Rolodex or chatting up strangers in an elevator.

At Indiana University's Kelley School of Business (Kelley Full-Time MBA Profile), Director of Graduate Career Services Erik Medina estimates that roughly a quarter of students this year will have found internships through personal contacts, a "significant uptick," he says, from past years.

At UCLA, the number of students who found jobs through personal and family contacts has been creeping upward since 2006, when 6.7% of grads found work through those means. In 2007 it was 8%, and in 2008 it was 8.6%. The data for 2009 have not yet been compiled. But there's a pretty good chance—says Jessica Christopher, an associate director at Anderson's career center—that it will continue to rise.

Some schools, such as Elon University (Elon Undergraduate Business Profile), have even formalized the process of reaching out to students' families, and the career center actively seeks out parents as it develops networks.

"I don't think it's unrealistic to say we're in unprecedented times," Medina says. "On some level, we're writing the playbook as we go."

Low-hanging fruit

The new rules of the game, career services directors say, require students to venture into uncharted territory as they hunt down job leads and make contacts. Spring break? Forget the Jell-O shots, and think networking. "Any of the breaks should be career-focused, to be honest, if they're going home," Christopher says. "Especially if they're looking for opportunities in their hometown."

For students without well-connected family and friends, the willingness of others to tap into those networks can make the job hunt more difficult than it already is. Consider the University of Washington's Foster School of Business (Foster Full-Time MBA Profile). Paula Klempay, director of MBA Career Services, says one company has stopped hiring interns at Foster because "every single one of their internships went to the son or daughter of a client."

Luckily for job hunters, it's not necessary to be the offspring of a major client or CEO in order to utilize family ties. Medina recalls one student, from a working-class background, who had laid out a list of potential contacts in the area she wanted to work. "O.K., that's good," he remembers telling her. "Those are good starts, but have you talked to your family about it?"

Not thinking they would be able to help, she hadn't. But when she did, it turned out her grandmother was on her church's women's steering committee with the wife of the CEO at a company she wanted to work for. Although the student eventually followed her husband to a job in a different state, she did manage to connect with the CEO. "We shouldn't underestimate our family and our friends," Medina says.

Of course, it's easier if your family has obvious corporate clout—if, for example, you're the heir apparent to one of the corporate dynasties that seem to litter the news. There's Bill Ford at Ford Motor (F), Steve Forbes at Forbes Inc., Arthur Sulzberger at The New York Times (NYT), and the contentious passing of power to Shari Redstone at Viacom (VIA). But those types of successions, whatever their merit, are relatively rare.

For one thing, many companies require employees to go through a standardized hiring process—streaming every employee through a single system and thereby preventing favoritism on the part of employees in separate sections. Associate Professor Margaret Padgett at the Butler University's College of Management (Butler Undergraduate Business Profile), who has done research on the negative consequences of perceived nepotism, notes that while very little empirical research has been done on the subject, several studies from the 1980s estimate that anywhere from 10% to 40% of companies have written anti-nepotism policies. As many as 60% have some kind of informal policy. And even at the companies without strict written protocol, leaning solely on family connections is a risky bet.

"Everybody wants to get their kid a job," says Robert Murray, a vice-president at Hamilton Sundstrand, a Windsor Locks (Conn.) industrial company. Murray says he has seen a marked increase in people trying to leverage networks—more requests for mentorship, LinkedIn friendships, and getting back in touch—but as for a recession-era uptick in family-specific networking, he's doubtful. Says Murray: "I'm not sure [parents] weren't always trying as hard as they could."

Still, some programs say they've seen encouraging results from family and personal connections—even if the relative's clout isn't what lands a student the job. Primarily, schools say, connections will serve to draw attention to an already qualified applicant, and lend their

application some credibility via a reference—standard practice at most companies looking to parse out the best from the rest in a pile of electronic résumés.

That kind of referral can come from distant connections as well as close ones, says Annetta Culver, senior director of MBA Career Services and Student Affairs at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's College of Business (Illinois Full-Time MBA Profile). "My sense is that because there are not a lot of opportunities coming through campus recruitment that we are seeing students who look more diligently in other places," Culver says. Classmates, family, and personal contacts have a built-in advantage because they already want to help. "That's low-hanging fruit," she says.

Degrees of separation

It's hard to find a school that has more seamlessly capitalized on friends and family networks than Elon University in North Carolina. Since arriving two years ago, Mary Gowan, dean of Elon's Martha & Spencer Love School of Business, has endeavored to build a strong career net for her students. Much of her success, she says, has come from Elon's strong parent-outreach programs.

So far, Elon has forged alliances with major finance powerhouses and boutiques alike. The school's executive director of career services, Tom Vecchione, says he often advises students not to shy away from tangential family contacts. "Hey, maybe you know Billy," he tells them. "But do you know what Billy's dad does?"

Gowan started pursuing the strategy when she arrived, but says it has become especially pivotal as all other sources of recruiting started to fade at B-schools across the country. The contacts primarily benefit undergraduate students, but some parents have reached out to the school's MBAs as well. "I can't brag enough about the willingness of the parents to open doors for us," Gowan says.

One of those parents is David Turner, CFO of the markets division at Thomson Reuters (TRI), who met Gowan at a football game. Turner, who has a daughter at the university, but not the business program, was intrigued by Gowan's ideas about expanding the reach of the business school and partnering with companies. Today, two business students from Elon are interning at Reuters, and a few others would have but for logistical hang-ups.

Turner is also in talks about contracting some student consulting from the school. He found the program through his daughter, but says the partnership will be beneficial for both the company and the school, regardless of how it came about. "I am one of these people: I like to engage. I like to help where I think I can. Obviously if you meet people through something like your daughter being at college," Turner says, "well, that's just how you meet them."

Few career services centers have heard of that type of program being used, and fewer have considered trying it themselves, but it's becoming increasingly clear that the old methods will only take graduates so far. Contacts of all sorts are fast becoming the centerpiece of an increasingly difficult job search.

As for Gowan, she's happy that Elon's fledgling network—the 25-year-old school has relatively few alumni—is starting to take off. "You hear about helicopter parents at a lot of schools, but here we have what I would call engaged parents. They're here to help," she says. "One of the things they can do is help open the door."

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