

Baby boomer parents pushing as much as pulling for the grad

by Eleanor Yang Su

Rowena Paz's parents did everything they could to help her land a good job after college.

They edited her resume, suggesting experience she should play up or cut out. Her mother called regularly to remind Paz, 21, to get enough sleep before interviews. Her father coached her with interview questions and drove her to three job interviews in Los Angeles, because "driving in Los Angeles is tension-filled."

KEEPING CLOSE - Cathy Huett helps her daughter Dawn Cowles, a college graduate, pick out a business suit for her first job interview. CNS Photo by Nelvin C. Cepeda. It came naturally for Paz's parents, who for years shuttled her to music and karate lessons, and baseball games.

This level of involvement is not uncommon, and might be considered hands-off in an era described by college officials, company recruiters and career experts as the clash of the uber-involved, baby boomer parents with corporate America.

For years, college officials have tried to cope with "helicopter parents," so named because of their tendency to swoop onto college campuses to fix their child's roommate problems or dispute a grade with a professor.

As the Millennial Generation - generally those born between 1982 and 2002 - graduate college and search for jobs, their parents continue to hover.

A 2007 survey by the Collegiate Employment Research Institute found that a quarter of employers say parents are actively engaged in their children's job search.

About 31 percent of 725 companies surveyed said parents had submitted a resume on behalf of their child, and 15 percent said parents complained if their son or daughter was not hired. Four percent reported parents accompanying their children to job interviews.

"It's wreaking havoc on the work force," said Anna Ivey, a career consultant who coaches students and employers on how to help millennials transition from college to work.

"If you're the employer," she said, "how do you groom someone for a management or leadership role when they're still tied by an umbilical cord to their parent?"

Some see benefits. College career advisers say they've noticed a significant increase in the number of parents showing up at their offices.

"Five to 10 years ago, students would have been mortified to have their parents show up," said Craig Schmidt, assistant director of University of California San Diego's Career Services Center. "Now, students see it as a collaboration."

Many are split on whether the well-intentioned actions of over-involved parents help or hurt a student's job search.

"From a student's perspective, it's excellent," said San Diego State University's James Tarbox, director of career services. "They trust the judgment of their parent, and if this person's been a part of the decision-making process from day one, why cut them out? The downside is if the student doesn't develop their own decision-making skills, but I don't see that kind of paralysis people are talking about."

Andrew Ceperley, director of UCSD's career center, said it can be a challenge getting parents to listen to their children during appointments.

"Parents ask many questions, often out of love and support," Ceperley said. "The goal of the conversation is to get the student to do the talking."

And then there are parents who expect college advisers to find jobs for their children.

Charlie Howard, career services director at Point Loma Nazarene University, Calif., said parents call to ask him to help their children "find direction."

The bottom line, several officials said, is parental advice can be helpful. But students need to take the initiative to search for their own jobs.

"We can't force students to go to job fairs and use our office," Ceperley said he tells parents. "There has to be that desire in them to do that."

JOB MARKET FUELING TREND

Many parents are well-intentioned, and simply interested in getting a return on their college investment.

"As college tuition has risen, these parents are very concerned that the money they've paid is going to lead to something," said Phil Gardner, director of the Collegiate Employment Research Institute at Michigan State University.

What accentuates the trend, university officials said, is this year's robust job market.

About 81 percent of college seniors who applied for jobs this spring had at least one offer by graduation, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers.

Local colleges reported more recruiters visiting campus this year, and many companies say the competition for new hires has intensified.

The strong job market has prompted some employers to give students mere days to decide about a job offer, said Linda Scales, career services director at the University of San Diego.

"When the market is pretty good, like it is now, parents do get more involved because students get more offers," Scales said. "When they have a couple choices, they're trying to leverage for better salaries, and there's a tremendous amount of anxiety."

Paz, who graduated from UCSD last month, described choosing between offers from Google and Cisco Systems as "one of the biggest decisions" of her life.

Her father outlined the advantages and disadvantages of each, but didn't reveal his choice until after she

decided.

"She didn't choose the one I was in favor of," Paul Paz said of his daughter's decision to work for Google. "But I told her it's very OK."

Dawn Cowles, who also graduated from UCSD last month, is just starting her job search but has already received suggestions and contacts from her parents. Her mother, a consulting partner at a management training firm, queried co-workers about good workplaces in the area. She's sent Dawn e-mails with practice interview questions and offered to edit her resume.

"My parents were like, 'Hey, you're on your own,'" said Cathy Huett, Cowles' mom. "I'm trying to strike a balance between pushing too much and not pushing enough."

In a tight spot.

All these issues have left employers in a bind.

"They don't want to alienate students whose parents are very influential. But on the other hand, they don't want to hire students who can't negotiate for themselves," said Mary Scott, president of the Scott Resource Group, which consults with employers about recruiting practices.

Some employers have accepted the parent dynamic, and are trying to use it to their advantage in recruiting students.

At Stockamp & Associates, an Oregon health care consulting firm, recruiters send letters informing parents about their child's employment offer, and encourage them to learn more about the company.

"The reality is we know they're involved in their children's lives and we want them to know more about their child's offer, and we want them to feel comfortable with that decision," said Kate Carson, a recruiting manager at the firm.

Merrill Lynch, the financial management corporation, began hosting some summer interns and their parents last year for lunch and a tour of their New York City trading floor.

"Our goal is to recruit and retain the best and the brightest talent," spokeswoman Selena Morris said. "If parents are increasingly becoming involved, sometimes that involves recruiting the parent a little as well."

Some recruiters say they're trying to gently educate parents about how their involvement could backfire.

Adam Ward, Qualcomm's campus recruiting manager, said about a dozen parents have called him this year on behalf of students seeking jobs and internships.

"That's a dozen more than I got a year ago," Ward said. "It would be more impressive to me if the student were taking the initiative to call. I'm not interested in hiring the parent. I'm interested in hiring the student."

The question in everyone's mind is what's next? Will parents call employers when their children receive

unsatisfactory raises? When they're passed up for a promotion?

"Where does it stop?" said Scott, the recruiting consultant. "Why would you think it would stop now? The whole thing is just mind-boggling."

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