



Spectrum Podcasts

Dr. Jane Bluestein
Instructional Support Services, Inc.

Real-World Job Readiness: Helping Kids Prepare for the World of Work

Guest: Carol Smith

Recorded: Mar. 27, 2012

Background and Bio: Carol Smith is a job and career transition coach and the president of Employment Readiness Solutions in Waukesha, WI. She has worked with displaced adults, career changers, youth looking for first job, and youth and adults exploring education options in both the workforce development system and in her private practice. Carol particularly likes helping people who feel stuck in a job or stuck in an endless job search loop.

Program Description: Career coach Carol Smith talks about helping students prepare to enter the work world. A primary concern for high school students who often feel unprepared for the requirements of getting a job, Smith offers practical tips and strategies to help young people identify and market their skills and attributes. Topics include expectations (employers and applicants), keeping track of successes, getting references, successful interviewing, completing a job application, writing thank you notes, managing social media, the importance of dependability, and where to leave your phone during a job interview.

Intro comment by Dr. Bluestein:

In a recent essay content sponsored by Energize Students (who also sponsor this program), one of the most common themes mentioned by high school participants was the lack of what they called “real world” courses related to financial issues. Specific topics included balancing checkbooks, credit cards and credit scores, how to write resumes and cover letters, interview skills, budgeting, buying a home, and what employers look for from graduating high school students (including things like extra-curricular activities and volunteering in the community).

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A few weeks before recording this podcast, I was fortunate to meet Carol at a conference at which I was speaking, and delighted when she agreed to talk with me about these important issues.

Highlights of Podcast:

Carol introduced the topic by referring to her experience with her own three children, and how surprised she was when, during their junior year, “they brought home their skinny little portfolio that they were supposed to use for writing essays to get into college and... for going to work,” taking that information “to talk about their skills.” She was “astounded” that “after all these years in school, this is all the material they’re bringing home.”

This led to her passion for working with students to help them understand what kinds of information they need to put into a college essay, what kind of information they need to put on a resume, and how they need to sell themselves.

Regarding competitiveness of job market and college acceptance: Smith noted that “standing out” is about helping kids understand how their skills will help an employer reach some kind of results.

In working with young people (or adults), one of the first things she tries to identify is “what is it that you like to do,” because of the likelihood that people are good at the things they like to do. Starts with a skills inventory, looking at hobbies, favorite classes, etc. Then looks at an employer who would be a good match, somebody who can use those skills and attributes.

Then it’s a matter of marketing those skills and attributes, perhaps in a marketing letter, resume or cover letter, or writing an email. It’s not about beating out someone else vying for the same position. “It’s really about, ‘How do I get an employer to be attracted to me and my skill set?’”

A first job can be an awkward situation with a kid suddenly thrust into an adult world.

Parents and families are kids’ first network. Kids need parents’ help: Not enough to just tell them they need a job. Help the way we help when they’re learning to read or tie their shoes.

When kids earn their own money, their attitude about spending and saving tends to change. Carol found that they are less willing to part with their own money than they are with Mom and Dad’s money.

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"A kid's working life does start before prior to age 16 or whenever they decide to get their first job." Smith mentions doing chores around the house, babysitting, or helping in a family business, so they probably have developed skills beyond what they've done in school or extracurricular activities.

Recommends that students take any opportunity they can to participate in volunteer work. It doesn't have to be a formal, weekly activity through an agency; it can just involve helping a neighbor or doing something on a regular basis.

Focuses on helping students realize what their assets and strengths are. Also addresses weaknesses, even though kids get uncomfortable thinking about that. Assures that the emphasis is on the employer's knowing how the student is going to overcome a challenge, reframing that interview question by stating, "Well, let me tell you about one of my challenges..."

Important for students (and adults) to have the right language to use.

Readiness Stage:

Smith suggests that before students approaches an employer, they should ask themselves if they are ready to go to work: Have I identified those skills? Do I feel confident about those skills? Can I give good examples in an interview? Will I have transportation? Will I have enough time after the school day ends to get there? If I don't have the best time-management skills, how will I keep myself organized? Am I ready to go to work? What is available in my neighborhood? Will my parents be OK with the hours I'll have to work?

Follow-up calls can be helped with a script (from a teacher or parent) so that the student isn't quite so nervous about making the call.

Some kids have expectations when they get out of high school that their job is going to be easier than it is and pay more than it does.

Smith also helps kids develop a budget and an understanding of what it will cost to rent an apartment or live on their own.

Interview:

Smith recommends that kids do not take telephones into interviews: "Leave the phone in the car." (No texting or answering calls.)

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Talks about how to dress, the importance of being clean, making good eye contact, and the value of a smile in terms of connecting with the interviewer and establishing a rapport.

Suggests: Take a dry run, driving to where you'll have your interview to see how long it takes to get there so you can be on time, and see where you'll have to park.

Stresses the importance of *dependability* to employers. Even though entry-level jobs only pay minimum wage, and the expectation of the employer may not be extremely high (in terms of skill set), but they still want to know that the student will be pleasant, will treat the customers well, will get along with other co-workers, will show up on time and work according to their schedule.

Employers note that sometime students expect the job to work around their schedule (as parents may have done for years), but if the student has a shift that starts at 5:00, the employer expects the student to honor that commitment and be there for that shift—not show up at 6:30 after a practice.

Smith describes a “virtual store” in her community where kids are assigned a role (job, family, income), and they have to go around the gymnasium or wherever the event is set up, where they have taxes taken out of their paycheck, they visit a car dealership to buy or rent a car, they have to rent an apartment, buy groceries, pay for day care, make change, etc.

How to become employment-ready:

Put some time into deciding what they want to do, who do they want to approach. (Not just going up to a counter asking for an application.)

Be prepared (dressed, ready) to be interviewed on the spot, if an employer is available, or at least to fill out an application on the spot.

Practice filling out job applications and *have them checked*. (Check beginning and ending dates, previous jobs, school activities in which they're involved, spelling.) This includes paper applications and online applications.

Put together a resume. Not every employer requires a resume and certainly not for students who are applying for their first job (entry-level). Not a lot of pressure for beginners to have a resume (which represents a history of working over time). Same for cover letter.

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Learn how to construct them even though they may not be necessary for a first job.

Learn how to write a Thank You note (often done by email these days).

Be ready for that phone call (responding to an application submitted or interview)

Biggest part of job readiness is the frame of mind that recognizes that "now you have responsibilities to be somewhere at a certain time, to perform some duties, to help that employer get results." If students "get results" for an employer, they increase their chances of advancement (doing "something else" for that employer).

Identifying references. (Can include people you babysat for, worked for elsewhere, a teacher, a neighbor, a coach.) Understanding why references are important: "Employers want some proof. Who knows you and what are they going to tell me about you?"

Coach your references. Always ask for permission. Let them know that you're applying for the job you want and maybe send them a copy of your resume if you have one, so that they can be prepared if someone calls them for a reference.

Also: Understand why a background check is necessary. (What will an employer find in a background check?) Depends on the job. Most employers won't go to great lengths to explore an applicant's background, but it's easy enough to do so.

Bluestein: "Somebody who doesn't have a lot of experience needs a lot of character." If someone can vouch for an applicant's character (responsibility, integrity, dependability, flexibility, good nature, etc.), that can go a long way in the absence of a long work history.

Social media: Employers will check. Whatever a student posts there, an employer can see and read. Advises students to "be careful what you put up [on social media sites] because it doesn't go away."

Understanding how to network is not quite as important for people looking for entry-level jobs. Understand the power of LinkedIn and professional networking site. (Human Resource specialists will check to see that you're on there.) Twitter is much less necessary.

How to email: How to write a good email, how to attach a document to an email. Skills relating to communicating with an employer.

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Ideally, all kids would be able to take a class to learn these skills. Absent such a resource, adults can help by *helping kids keep track of their successes*. Save papers with particularly strong, positive teacher comments; an email praising your achievement or effort. (Put in a plastic sleeve or punch holes to put these resources in a 3-ring binder.)

Smith has developed a personal resource guide to help kids (and adults) identify six or eight attributes that describe them. Then she helps applicants construct a story that illustrates when they exhibited that attribute.

Create binder with evidence of success, divided with tabs by attribute, to provide evidence of skills. (Note what kind of results you achieved.) You may not take that binder with you on an interview, but Smith recommends going over it the night before an interview to help focus on skills and successes that will be relevant to discuss during that interview.

Adults: Help kids “put together some concrete evidence of who they are.” Those resource guides will grow with the students and help them when they are faced with a blank application or tough interview question. Helps to build confidence to get jobs, and also to leave jobs that no longer satisfy.

Also recommends being up on technology and knowing basic programs like Excel.

Special Blog Entry from Carol Smith:

Employment is Not an Entitlement

Hello job seekers and career changers and anyone who has an interest in the world of job searching and career exploration!

I’m rarely at a loss for words – whether writing or speaking, but I find myself staring at a blank page today trying to figure out something clever to say / write! And I’m tongue-tied with writer’s block! But not for long I suspect, so here goes with my very first blog entry!

What can one say that hasn’t already been said about the tough job that the unemployed, underemployed and disenfranchised workers have - about getting selected by an employer who seemingly has just the right opportunity for them? Well, a lot has been said, but I haven’t heard or read the following anyplace, to date:

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EMPLOYMENT IS NOT AN ENTITLEMENT!

In the American culture we raise our children to believe that if you work hard, keep your nose clean, do something extra, learn well, can read, write and “do” math, remain as honest as the day you were born, respect your elders, and have the desire to work - someone WILL hire you! Why? Just because you want and are able to work!

So what.

During any time it’s important to realize, and especially during this economic climate – that an employer will hire an individual who they perceive will help them make money, with as little hassle as possible. Simple as that. Many go about their job seeking activities from one extreme to the other from being a couch potato to performing cartwheels or somersaults for anyone who will pay attention. We have over the top BEAUTIFUL resumes, a near perfect wardrobe, a leather portfolio and all the right answers to those “tricky” interview questions.

Still no job offer. Not even a call back after the first interview that went SWELL. Why not?

Because the employer (their representative) in their wisdom at that moment in time did not perceive that you had the “right stuff” to solve their problem and help them make money by maintaining their customer base or improving their product or service.

And you “go home” defeated. And use the same strategies / techniques all over again the next day, the next week, the next month. Not always, but often. And sometimes you just drop out.

There’s good news. You can change your frustrating job search strategies ways, of which one is often times applying online for 25 “new” positions each week. Work on practicing your personal presentation and gauge your likability factor. Until the business owner is convinced that YOU have more of the right stuff than the person who came in before you or after you, you are just another “wanna be.” So, how do you go from a “wanna be” to “why not me?”

It’s your responsibility to do the sales job. Sure, your wardrobe is important, as is grooming, along with your skill sets, training and work experience – at whatever level that is important to the employer. BUT have you convinced them that you are the ONE? Do they like you? I’m reminded of the line from the movie Shenendoah when Jimmy Stewart

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asks his soon-to-be son in law, (actor, Doug McClure) when the younger is asking the elder for his daughter's hand in marriage. As Doug McClure's character is reassuring the old farmer that he does indeed love his daughter, Jimmy Stewart croaks out, "But do ya like her?" And the young man looks puzzled indeed.

Have you effortlessly convinced the hiring manager, HR person, company president to like you? Have you sold them on your ability to perform better than anyone else who has come through the door? Are you pleasant to be around? Will you fit in with the existing team and get the job done? Do you seem comfortable in your own skin? Are you familiar enough with your own skill set that you can tell a story about your past performances and make a direct correlation to why you are the best choice – at that moment in time? If you are not confident in your ability to sell yourself to an employer and convince them that you will solve their problem, you will continue to come in second or tenth place. After first, it doesn't really matter. You aren't the ONE. Perhaps your attitude needs to be adjusted from "why hasn't someone hired me" to "how can I make them want me?"

It is not an employer's job to hire YOU. It's their job to hire SOMEONE who will solve their problem, who they like and feel will fit in with the existing team and help them make money by keeping their customers happy and coming back for more. When the employer is convinced of that, they will hire YOU!

Perform well for them. Help them grow their company and make more money. In time they will LOVE you!

Are you job search ready? Go to the Home Page of <http://www.employready.com> to download a free Job Readiness Check List.
Author: Carol J. Smith / February, 2010

Note: You can find this blog on Carol's Web site: <http://www.employready.com/Blog/Entry/welcome>

Additional Resources:

Employment Readiness Solutions. Carol Smith's Web site: Customized strategies for career success, providing job search and career transition coaching, pre-employment assistance and outplacement services. Offers job search

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tools, resources, and a variety of services for job searchers, employers, and non-profits: <http://www.employready.com>

Teens Financial Network, with everything from budgeting to help with finding a job. Lots of good stuff for teens. You will need to identify your state and select a Credit Union, even if you don't belong to one. (Mine wasn't listed so I randomly selected another and it linked to a variety of valuable resources.) <http://www.cusucceed.net/index.php?member=1>

About.com: Job Searching, with information on finding that first job tips, writing first resume, starting a job search, and more, <http://jobsearch.about.com/od/teenstudentgrad/a/firstjob.htm>

WorkGo: Job Readiness Skills Outline. A PDF outline listing successful workplace attitudes and behaviors, plus successful service skills. <http://www.workgo.net/readiness/JobReadinessSkillsOutline.pdf>

Mountain State Centers for Independent Living: Job Readiness Links. Includes employability skills (goals and interests), job search techniques, interviewing and resume writing, and a "Good Employee Checklist." <http://www.mtstcil.org/skills/job-intro.html>

YouthSuccessNYC. A resource for youth in care and after care. This page includes links to help find a job, find an internship, write a resume, fill out an application, respond to common interview questions, etc. Some resources are local (to New York City), but generic information is helpful. <http://www.youthsuccessnyc.org/jobs/resources.html>

Work Readiness Tool. An evaluation rubric with skills and behaviors sought by employers. Includes descriptions of the skills (such as attendance, punctuality, workplace appearance, taking initiative, quality of work, response to supervision, teamwork, etc.) as well as descriptions of the various levels of performance in each area (from "performance improvement plan needed" to "exemplary.") A good way to introduce kids to employers' expectations. <http://wdr.doleta.gov/directives/attach/TEGL/TEGL07-10a4.pdf>

Books recommended by Carol Smith:

Strengths Finder by Tom Rath

Do What You Are by Paul Tieger and Barbara Barron

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No One is Unemployable (Creative solutions for overcoming barriers to employment) by Debra Angel and Elisabeth Harney

100 Ways to Motivate Yourself by Steve Chandler (I recommend this to everyone who is engaging in a job search—which takes work and motivation!)

Visit <http://www.employready.com/Free-Resources/reading-list> for Carol's complete reading list.

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