

First job interview? Do your homework

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You've taken the cap and gown to storage. You've sold back your books for the last time. You've kissed research projects goodbye.

After earning that college degree, it's time to put your feet up for a well-earned rest.

Not so fast.

With the ultra-competitive job market, it's becoming more necessary for recent college graduates to do one more homework assignment: study the company to which they are applying.

Hiring managers say they're impressed by applicants who have a good grasp of the company and its industry — information that often can be retrieved by visiting the company's Web site.

They also notice when that knowledge is painfully absent.

"If you go on a first date and all you talk about is yourself, you're probably not going to get another date," said Marky Stein, an author and career coach in San Jose. "Companies are the same way."

When job candidates are ignorant about the company and industry, interviewers "tend to think that the person is just out for themselves," she said. "In other words, they're just out for what they can get from the company, not what they can give to the company."

Stein isn't alone. Most interviewers agree that research is essential to have a productive conversation with the candidate.

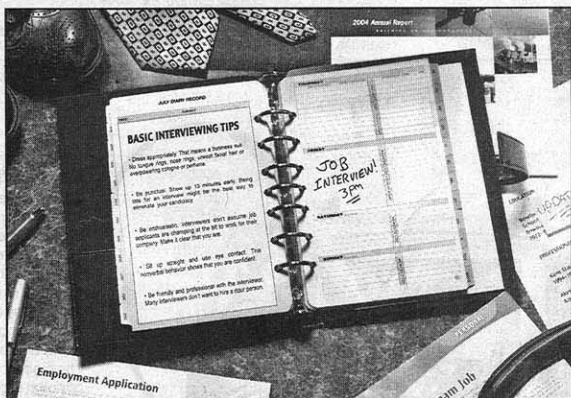
From her experience hiring bank tellers, branch managers and sales managers at Key Bank, Alexandria Fontecchio finds that recent college graduates lack this preparation more often than their older competitors.

She asks, "What do you know about Key Bank?" That question leads to many young, blank stares.

They reply, "I just want to get started with my career."

Not good enough.

"It's so competitive," Fontecchio



Recent college graduates are advised to keep doing homework on interviewing techniques and on the companies to which they are applying.

Photo illustration by Ed Suba Jr. / Akron Beacon Journal

said. "The people who have done their homework will get ahead every time."

Mike Kartson, a middle-level education major at the University of Akron in Ohio, had never heard of this requirement until he took several interviewing workshops offered through the university's Center for Career Management.

He said researching a company gets the attention of interviewers.

"It impresses them when you know stuff about them," Kartson said. "They aren't just going to ask you the basic questions. They are going to make you think."

Preparation isn't limited to research, however. Applicants should examine how participation in a student group or college job will help a recent graduate perform in the desired position, said Kent Kirch, director of global marketing for Deloitte & Touche.

"If they can correspond those activities to the position they are after, that can be helpful," he said.

These experiences can come in unexpected places, said Frank Scanlan, manager of the Society of Human Resources Management, a trade association in Alexandria, Va.,

that represents more than 190,000 human-resources professionals.

For example, if the recent graduate organized a trip to Europe with her friends, that can be mentioned as a leadership experience.

Meghan Phillips, an international business major at the University of Akron, was able to use that example in a recent job interview. She had helped a former high school teacher plan a class trip to Europe.

She said her experience helped show her employer she was organized, resourceful and good at multitasking.

Of course, everyone knows that making a good first impression is important.

Shake hands firmly. Use eye contact. Sit up straight. Strengthen your voice. Those things are essential to a solid first impression, said Alan Nierenberg, author of "Winning the Interview Game." It's also what he sees recent college graduates fail with the most.

Recent grads often "don't come across strong in their first impression," Nierenberg said. "First impressions are lasting. They either carry the interview in a positive or negative way."