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Choosing a **Career** in Changing Times

By PHYLLIS MCINTOSH

Young Americans are choosing careers later, switching jobs more frequently and seeking different benefits than their parents' generation.

In some ways, it has never been easier for young Americans to pursue a career. A wealth of information about education opportunities, potential employers and specific job openings is as close as the nearest computer. Yet, many young people today are taking longer than previous generations to complete their education, find a job that suits them, and settle onto a career path. They are choosier about jobs they accept and likely to change jobs more frequently. To this generation, loyalty between employer and employee is a bygone concept.

Cyber surfing for careers

No development has had a greater impact on how Americans search for jobs than the Internet. In the past, graduating students had no choice but to attend career fairs, meet with company representatives, and peruse reams of information at the campus career center in order to learn about job possibilities in their field. Today, students can, at their own convenience, research potential employers via company Web sites and even apply for jobs online.

“Many students find it more comfortable to explore in a passive way,” says Edwin W. Koc, research director for the National Association of Colleges and Employers in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. “The disadvantage is that this makes it more difficult for employers to judge the student as a job candidate. Employers...in the United States still rely very much on face-to-face contact. Our surveys show that students who landed jobs earliest were those who combined a Web search with direct meetings with employers.”

The newest online tools for job seekers are the popular social networking sites, such as Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn, which enable users to let hundreds of people know instantaneously that they are in the market for a particular kind of job. Employers seeking to fill jobs are also turning to these sites. In Koc’s surveys, about 17 percent of employers say they use the social network sites as part of their recruiting, and 7 percent of students say they have been contacted by an employer directly through their social network site. The downside for job applicants is that many more employers—44 percent—use the sites to check the personal profiles of potential job candidates, according to a survey by www.Vault.com, a Web site that focuses on careers. More than 80 percent of these employers say that seeing something negative in a job candidate’s online profile would affect their decision to hire.

The Internet is also making it possible for more and more Americans to earn college degrees online, a convenience especially for older students with jobs and family responsibilities. However, in a Vault survey, 63 percent of employers said they would favor a job candidate with a traditional college degree over one with an online degree. On the positive side, 83 percent of employers and hiring managers consider online degrees more acceptable now than five years ago.

Postponing adulthood

While the job search itself may be easier, young Americans

seem to be having more trouble charting their course in life. Indeed, many stumble into a career rather than pursuing their education with a clear-cut career goal in mind, according to John Flato, vice president of research and consulting at Vault. Half of all college students change their major during their first year. And while more than 40 percent of freshmen plan to go on to graduate studies or professional school, that number drops to 20 percent by the time they are seniors. The study by the National Association of Colleges and Employers showed that most college students elect a major because they enjoy the course work. Except in fields such as engineering, where undergraduate work is strictly designed to prepare students for a specific career, students do not connect their major with what they will do when they graduate, Koc says.

Perhaps because of all this uncertainty, it now takes college students an average of six years to complete what used to be a four-year degree, says Flato. One reason, he notes, is that colleges are anxious to retain students and do not allow those who change majors to take an extra course load in order to graduate in the traditional four-year time frame.

Nor does graduation from college automatically launch young people into adulthood. Overall, they are marrying later, and for economic reasons many move back home. Doting parents are content to provide some continuing financial support, and some stay deeply involved in their adult children’s lives—even to the point, say career experts, of accompanying them to job interviews or calling an employer to find out why their son or daughter wasn’t hired.

To many young graduates, the first job is merely a stepping stone; half change jobs within 12 to 18 months. “In some ways, the exploratory process that used to occur in college is occurring during the first years in the work force,” says Daniel H. Pink, an author and lecturer on issues of careers and employment. “A certain amount of stumbling [into a career] is inevitable and I think healthy when you have a labor market that is hard to predict.”

Shifting trends

One of the most significant trends in the United States is the disappearance of long-term loyalty to an employer. Young people recognize that changing jobs is the fastest way to advance in both salary and responsibility, and unlike their parents and grandparents, few expect to stay with the same company for decades. Nor do they expect long-term loyalty and job security from employers. “People are seeing their friends and family going through layoffs, terminations and acquisitions, so they’re saying if companies are going to do that, I’m going to look out for myself,” notes Flato.

For their part, employers are making it easier than ever to change jobs. Health insurance coverage for new employees usually starts immediately, with no waiting period, and traditional company pensions have been replaced by 401(K) retirement plans. Employees make their own contributions to these plans, and keep the funds even when they leave a job.

More than any previous generation, young Americans are searching for meaning in their work. Surveys show that they seek out employers who are environmentally friendly and socially responsible, and they want jobs where they can make a difference in the world. They gravitate also to employers who provide a variety of workplace amenities, such as a fitness center, on-site health care and child care, barbershops, laundry and dry-cleaning services—anything that makes it easier to balance work and personal life. In several recent surveys, college students asked to name their ideal employers gave top billing to the giant search-engine company Google, famous for its free gourmet cafeteria and other amenities for employees.

For a significant number of young people, geographic location is a major deciding factor in job acceptance. Some are seeking a

certain lifestyle in or near a major city or a specific region of the country. Many also prefer to stick with the familiar and will decline a job offer because it is too far from home, according to a National Association of Colleges and Employers study.

Despite their choosiness, recent college graduates can expect their employment opportunities to remain relatively strong, experts say. Young hires are attractive to employers, because they are less expensive to recruit and more receptive to on-the-job training than more seasoned employees. As workers born in the years following World War II—the so-called baby boomers—begin to retire in the next few years, large numbers of jobs will open up, especially in government and education, Koc predicts. He adds that overall job prospects will remain good for business majors—the most popular college major in the United States.

As more and more routine tasks are assigned to computers, “skills such as artistry, inventiveness, empathy and big-picture thinking, already at a premium today, also will become even more important,” says Pink.

One thing is certain: In today’s economy, nothing is more constant than change, both in the way young Americans approach careers and in the kinds of jobs they will occupy. As Pink says, “Some young people can expect to land jobs 10 or 20 years from now in industries that might not even exist today and have job titles we might not even have the vocabulary for today.”



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For more information:

National Association of Colleges and Employers

<http://www.naceweb.org/default.asp>

IRC 401(k) Plans

<http://www.irs.gov/retirement/article/0,,id=120298,00.html>

At Google, Hours Are Long, But the Consomme Is Free

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/23/AR2007012300334.html>

Fortune says I should work at Google

http://workinprogress.blogs.time.com/2008/01/23/fortune_says_i_should_work_at/