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When to get help

Coaches and consultants can bring out the best in a job-seeker

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When people find out Sheryl Spanier is a career consultant, the first question they ask is: "Can you get me a job?"

It doesn't quite work that way. Spanier doesn't run an employment agency. And she is not a headhunter. But she is the person executives turn to when they need help in leadership strategy, prioritizing professional goals and, yes, getting a job.

"My preference is to help my clients be independent," said Spanier, who runs a firm that bears her name in New York City.

"I help them with self-assessment, developing a plan, networking techniques, self-marketing tools, developing realistic methods of job pursuit," she said. "Yes, I give homework. And when they have offers, I help in making decisions and negotiating."

When someone is faced with a layoff, has hit a wall in a career or is contemplating changing careers, the thing to do these days is to hire help. And there's an entire industry there to assist you, made up of career coaches, consultants and counselors.

But do you really need the help? And if so, how do you go about finding it? Here are some tips to help you navigate your way:

SHOULD YOU HIRE HELP?

That all depends on the type of person you are. If you know what you want and are incredibly organized, you might do fine on your own. But many people need help. Career coaches and counselors can provide much-needed direction and set deadlines to keep you moving along.

Lisa Silvershein, the founder of Ark Career Coaching in Basking Ridge, likens her job to that of a personal trainer.

"A personal trainer always takes you to the next level, keeps you moving forward," said Silvershein. "That's what a career coach does."

Jo Bennet, a partner at Battalia Winston Amrop, an executive search firm, said if you want to change careers or have hit a wall at your current job, hiring a counselor can be beneficial.

"The hard part is the thinking part," Bennet said. "Sometimes, you have strengths you don't want to use. It's really rethinking who you are."

HOW DO YOU FIND A GOOD PROFESSIONAL?

There are the Yellow Pages and the internet, of course, but referrals are the best way to go, Bennet said.

If you're a victim of corporate downsizing, companies will often provide career counseling; if they do, take it. In addition, human resource departments can recommend counselors. You could even call your alma mater and ask which career consulting firm it recommends.

Once you get a few names, go ahead and talk to them to see whom you like best.

"You've got to look at their background, ask them for a résumé, how long they've been doing this and what kinds of people they've counseled," Bennet said.

Some career counselors offer a free initial consultation. They likely won't dispense advice, but they will tell you what you can expect if you sign up for their services. And it gives both sides an opportunity to see if they fit.

Even if you only talk to the counselor on the phone initially, ask for references. And call them.

Nick Corcodilos, host of the "Ask the headhunter" website and a book of the same name, said the best career counselors are "licensed psychologists (who) tend to be solo practitioners who have a solid roster of clients they'll give as references."

Unfortunately, Corcodilos said, he's heard too many stories of people who have been scammed.

"The racket is simple: These companies suggest their 'expert counselors' will 'market you' through their exclusive 'insider' channels and get you access to 'unadvertised job listings,'" Corcodilos wrote in one internet post. "In fact, they do little more than re-write your résumé and give you a regular kick to 'get you out there networking' -- all of which you can do for yourself."

He cautions that people should be wary of counselors who guarantee they'll find you a job or promise an inside track to unadvertised jobs and connections.

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

That varies. A single session can start as low as \$50 and run as high as several hundred dollars. A lot of companies offer three- and six-month packages that can cost several thousand dollars.

Corcodilos suggests paying by the session, so you can walk away anytime. Others said at the very least, you should try a single session before committing to more.

"Don't sign up for the \$4,000 packages," said Mike Robinson of Careerplanner.com.

Ford Myers, president of Career Potential in Haverford, Pa., only sells packages -- three or six months. The larger package takes people through a five-phase program, from assessing their careers to searching for a new job to assimilating into the new position. But he offers an initial hourlong session for free.

"I never say I'm going to guarantee you a job or a time frame for finding a job or a 15.5 percent increase in your current salary," he said. "What I do guarantee is they will get a quality ... learning experience and they'll never look at their career the same way again."

Robinson said it might take a few tries before finding the right person.

"It's like shopping for a new car," he said. "You should do it carefully. If you don't click, say, 'Thank you very much' and move on."

WHAT SHOULD YOU EXPECT?

Initially, career counselors will ask a lot of questions to get a handle on your needs and the types of issues you are facing. Often, they will give you a test to help determine if you're doing the right kind of work, or show you other careers that could suit your skills.

Some will conduct sessions entirely by phone. Others, like Sheryl Spanier, will insist on meeting you, so they can see how you present yourself.

"On the telephone, you can't pick up what might be obstructing someone or help that person be more effective," she said. "Mannerisms matter. Facial expressions matter. You can't see that on the telephone."

Robinson of Careerplanner.com said after one session, "you should get some very clear direction on the next three or four steps you've got to take.

"You should also get and hear some ideas you've never thought of before," he said. "If you're not getting new ideas, you're with the wrong person."

Often, counselors will bring in other consultants to help with things like writing résumés and cover letters.

WHAT IF YOU DON'T WANT TO SPEND THE MONEY?

There are options.

The least expensive is what Corcodilos calls "the library vacation." He suggests you spend at least three days -- up to a week -- at the library, checking out anything that interests you. Research the best companies in your field of interest to understand the industry. Then, lay out a plan.

If you still need guidance, Corcodilos suggests calling the career department of your local college or check out job-hunting clubs, which are often run out of churches or the YMCA.

Dennis Dooley, a former deputy attorney general for the New Jersey Division of Gaming Enforcement, started a job-hunting group in a church after a few members lost their job. He thought it would last six months. That was 17 years ago.

Now, the club meets every Tuesday night at the YMCA in Basking Ridge from 7:30 to 9 p.m.

If you need more structure, but don't want to shell out a lot of money for a counselor, Myers sells his system in a downloadable workbook called "The Ultimate Career Guide," which also includes audio files. The cost: \$97.

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