

Business

POSTED ON 27/05/06

CAREER COACH

Collecting trash can be a treasured experience
Customer service skills are golden, so don't banish the
McJobs from your resume, VIRGINIA GALT writes

VIRGINIA GALT

Psychology student Duncan Greig eventually hopes to become a psychiatrist. In the meantime, he cheerfully spends his summers working for Vancouver-based TrashBusters.com.

The environmentally conscious company, which, for a fee, helps people unburden themselves of excess household baggage, supplements its employees' pay with bonuses based on the amount of garbage they recycle. That boosts the top rate to \$14 an hour -- well above the \$10-an-hour average that Canadian employers pay 18- to 24-year-old summer employees.

For 23-year-old Mr. Greig, who is putting himself through university, the job offers an added bonus: He has completely furnished his apartment with other folks' cast-offs.

Even more valuable, he believes, is the knowledge he is picking up on the job through his daily interaction with customers.

There's no question that the people skills Mr. Greig and his co-workers are developing are good for business. But they will also benefit these young employees in their future careers, long after they have moved on from TrashBusters, says chief executive officer Mike McKee, who co-founded the company in 1995 after graduating from the University of British Columbia with a commerce degree.

Mr. McKee's advice to students looking for summer work, and graduates looking for their first full-time job: Don't play down that prior experience working for McDonald's on your resume. Many employers place a premium on strong customer service skills.

"One of the key things we are looking for is customer service skills . . . Experience working at other companies that have a strong customer service record -- companies like Safeway or McDonald's or Starbucks -- is always a real asset when we are recruiting people," he says.

"It really makes a difference with our customers when they can have a good conversation with the people who are picking the stuff up from their homes or their businesses."

Sales experience provides great footing for most careers, says John Challenger, chief executive officer of Chicago-based consulting firm Challenger Gray & Christmas Inc.

"Even if you have never set foot in a business class, there are sales jobs to be had offering a great foundation, regardless of your long-term career goals," Mr. Challenger says.

"Every job at some time or another requires you to sell a product, an idea or yourself, so hands-on experience and the confidence gained in a sales position is invaluable."

Mr. Challenger says students and graduates who hold out for "the perfect first job" are bound to be disappointed. "In the beginning, you should be testing out some different career paths," he says. "It doesn't have to be -- and it won't be -- perfect."

As an undergraduate, Mr. Greig says he didn't expect to find a summer job related to his field of study. However, the collaborative culture at TrashBusters and the environmental focus fit with his values.

"At the end of the day, I go home feeling that I have made good money, I've picked up some good things and we [as a company] have been socially responsible," says Mr. Greig, who is spending his third summer with the firm.

Mr. McKee employs up to 50 people during the summer peak. In addition to training his young work force, Mr. McKee, at 32, sets an example by continuing his own career development.

"I work with a business coach . . . and I learn from mentors, more experienced business people, who I go out to lunch with on a regular basis. The business coach has helped me a great deal in terms of how to manage people," he says.

"Your employees are either your biggest asset or your biggest liability, depending on how you treat them."

He expects his workers to also learn as they go, try new things -- and have some fun in the process.

a long-term commitment. You should regard the first job as just that, and no more. It will equip you with the experience you need to move on to the next level.

Don't come across as a know-it-all: Some of your advisers have likely told you to study up on a company in advance and ask a lot of questions to show your preparation and interest. But Challenger says peppering your interviewer with questions is a mistake. You are taking control away from the interviewer, who undoubtedly has questions for you. "Taking the initiative can lead you into one of the cardinal mistakes of job interviewing -- appearing to tell the employer how to run the business, which is fatal for entry-level," Challenger says.

Say yes as often as you can: As a newcomer to the job market, you are not in a position to argue with what is offered by prospective employers. Your objective is to convince the employer that you will be a superlative employee. If the money falls short, you'll have to consider whether the experience will be valuable enough to take the job anyway.

Follow up: Employers are under no obligation to contact you after the interview. It is your job to follow up.51.7%

EMPLOYMENT RATE

FOR STUDENTS IN THE

SUMMER OF 2005

46.9%

EMPLOYMENT RATE

FOR STUDENTS IN THE

SUMMER OF 1998

\$10.03

AVERAGE HOURLY WAGE

FOR 18- TO 24-YEAR-OLDS

IN THE SUMMER OF 2005

\$8.01

AVERAGE HOURLY WAGE

FOR 15- TO 17-YEAR-OLDS

IN THE SUMMER OF 2005

Source: Statistics Canada