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When the Whole Family Is Out of Work



ISTOCK

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by *Lisa Reswick*

"What do you think of this?" our 21-year-old daughter asked as she emailed her cover letter for a job application to me and my husband. "Too long," I said before hitting "send" to shoot my own letter over to them. "Okay," I said, "now read mine."

As parents of a new college graduate, we expected to guide her into the workforce, dispensing sage advice on résumés and networking. We never dreamed that when the time came, we'd be right there beside her, scrambling for work ourselves. Yet there we were, the three of us, sitting around the dining table bouncing cover letters off each other — our daughter with her new bachelor's degree, us with our master's degrees and lengthy résumés. As it turned out, we needed as much help as she did.

My husband and I had responded to the precarious nature of our post-recession careers by downsizing from Manhattan to Queens. Shortly after, I lost my job, his consulting practice shrank and our daughter arrived home. This would make a great reality show, we thought. Who'll find employment first—Mom, Dad, or darling daughter?

We're certainly not alone in facing these challenges. More than one-third of young adults in America ages 18 to 31 live with their parents, according to [a recent analysis of Census data by Pew](#) -- the highest share in four decades. And a [government report released last year](#) shows that workers over the age of 55 experienced longer spells of joblessness than younger workers.

Trying to help our daughter, we found that things had changed so much since we graduated college as to render our job-hunting tips nearly useless. Our formerly impressive credentials now tagged us as overqualified. At least we were more up-to-date than my sister, who'd advised her daughter that emailing résumés was tacky and she should get them printed on nice paper stock.

As someone who started her career on a manual typewriter and now helps develop apps, I had kept current. However, no amount of hair dye or Pilates will change my birth year, easily findable with a quick Google search. One of my least favorite moments was at the unemployment office, where the main bit of guidance offered by our workshop leader -- "Make sure to take the dates off your resume"-- was given while she was standing underneath a poster proclaiming, "Age Discrimination is Against the Law."

Soon after, a recruiter, booking me for a freelance gig, said, "The manager you'll be working for is Mimi Harbach." I stifled a small scream. Mimi was the daughter of friends, just a few years out of college. Her mom had asked me to give her career advice a few years back, and I'd taken her to lunch. Now I'd be reporting to her, and not even as an employee, as a temp. Later the recruiter called me back. "Mimi says she knows you and wants to make sure you're okay with working for her."

"Of course," I lied. I made the best of it—although it only lasted a week.

My husband, tired of looking for clients, was seeking a steady job with benefits. A coach, chosen because he'd worked in my husband's field of public relations, offered to help him vault over the "overqualified" barrier. The coach saw clients at his apartment, where the sofa pillows were embroidered with uplifting messages like "If you think you can't, you're right," and "The best is yet to come." But after an hour of conversation, the coach admitted, "I don't think I could get a PR job myself at this point," before accepting my husband's check for \$200.

If we had too much experience, our daughter had too little. A film major, she took an unpaid internship at a documentary house, hoping for inspiration, experience and

connections. Instead, she found drudgery.

She called me in a crisis. After months of scanning photos and ferrying hard drives to post-production houses, she was finally invited to a shoot. But then her boss said there were too many people and she'd have to wait in a coffee shop. "They didn't even offer to pay for my coffee!"

While waiting, she was told to feed the producer's parking meter and pick up a prescription. She misread the parking stub and arrived late to find a \$65 ticket on the windshield. She burst into tears. A kind man rushed to her aid, offering his own parking stub stamped with a later time. He suggested she show it to her boss and claim that the ticket was a mistake. "Mom," she asked, "should I do that?"

At last, I had valid working world advice for her: don't lie to your boss.

We were lucky. I got a new job, but with a lower salary. My husband picked up two new clients. Our daughter survived the parking ticket debacle and moved on to a stint with AmeriCorps that comes with a stipend instead of a salary, so she's still bunking with us. Our dining table discussions now concern who should do the dishes. But her position ends in the fall, and our work situations are always tenuous. We'll be back to those cover letters in no time.

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