There’s been a lot of trepidation facing the class of 2009.

The joy of graduation has been somewhat overshadowed by the bleak economic situation, with daily headlines trumpeting unemployment rates, home foreclosures and bankruptcies.

But those like Julie Swaner [misspelled as Swanner], who have made lives of helping others find employment, are charged with a mix of reality and encouragement.

Swaner doesn’t even work with new graduates, as she runs the Alumni Career Services at the University of Utah and helps those who have been out of school for two years or more. She said that while traffic through her doors has increased and the job market has changed, there are still reasons to be optimistic.

“It’s highly competitive,” she said. “There are lots of jobs out there, but there are also many more job hunters, so the search becomes one that is hyper-competitive. It requires a greater clarity.”

Swaner said it’s no longer enough to walk into a company and list your qualifying characteristics. You need concrete evidence and experience to demonstrate your accomplishments. She also said that job seekers have to overcome their fear of networking, which accounts for about 80 percent of jobs won.

“Most people don’t understand networking and don’t know how to use tools like LinkedIn,” she said. “They just don’t know how to do it, they are uncomfortable, they think you have to be an extrovert. You don’t have to be an extrovert, but you do need to put yourself in social situations. Sitting at home hitting apply, apply, apply won’t get it done.”

According to Swaner, networking is the most important part of the job search, but researching and doing background research is just as important.

“Find out what industry you want to be in, what role you want to play and target 15-20 companies,” Swaner said.

“Know the company and the benefits and figure out what it is you want to be and then drill deep. Most people aren’t willing to drill deep, they want to throw wide.”

She said that while research may seem cumbersome and difficult, it’s absolutely essential, especially at the interview level. She said that this part of the process — despite being vital — is often overlooked.
“It’s not easy, and you don’t want to think about it until you have to, but a lot of times you find you don’t have the skills because you’re spending more time buying a suit for the interview than researching,” she said. Swaner said as soon as an interview is set up, digging for information becomes essential. She said the worst thing an applicant can do is come in and know nothing about the company and its specifics. Research must be done at all levels.

“The kiss of death … is when the person comes in and says: ‘I don’t know much about Kennecott Copper, what can you tell me?’ You need to know what companies they may have bought, if there are any new leaders, what the stock is selling at and what key issues they are facing.”

And the research step needs to go beyond just the company.

“You need to research the person who will interview you as well as the company,” Swaner said.

“In an interview, it’s about rapport. If you can figure out they are passionate about fly fishing or went on an Alaskan cruise, use that. Look for clues that can be utilized in receptive ways.”

In addition to research, author Ellen Gordon Reeves, who is the “job-hunting expert” for the Columbia job-hunting course and author of the how-to book “Can I Wear My Nose Ring to the Interview?” also said it helps to tailor your resume and your interview responses to the company’s needs and objectives.

She said to be honest, but also to be memorable.

“Become the master of the anecdote,” Reeves said.

“Every line is code for: ‘I can do this.’ Be prepared to explain everything on your resume as a mini-anecdote that will linger in the mind of the interviewer.”

Reeves said that job-seekers should tailor their resumes to show how the applicant fulfills the needs of the company to which they are applying and to eliminate unnecessary information.

“A lot of people say you need an objective on the resume, and I object,” she said. “Why waste resume real estate? Every line has to be code for ‘I can do this’ and show, don’t tell. Use measurable deliverables to quantify everything.”

Another mistake Reeves said many are guilty of is that of not taking the time to make sure their resume gets into the hands of someone in the company.

“I really do not advise sending your resume into the black hole of cyber space,” she said. “It’s demoralizing. Find someone inside the company to talk with. A personal referral is
best thing you can have.”

She said a contact in the company can also be used to provide information on what’s needed in a prospective employee.

Strategy is also important to consider when accepting a job. Reeves said few people walk into their dream jobs, but they are attainable with some patience.

“Keep your dream job in mind and work toward it, but if you don’t land it, don’t panic,” she said.

Especially in this economy, just work toward what you want and remember that dreams can turn into nightmares. People think they know what they want to do, but doing something day after day can be different.”

The final thing Reeves said to be aware of was the way technology can help or hurt in the job hunt. She said a professional e-mail address, for example, is absolutely necessary.

“Often the Internet is the first contact, and I’m not hiring hotmama@hotmail.com,” Reeves said.

“Everything is an act of self preservation, and you have to have a professional e-mail address with just your name. If you have a common name, add a number or letter like johndoe4.”

Social networking sites are also fair game for potential employers, so Reeves said that those who are currently looking for a job should be aware of the image they are projecting online.

“Young people say MySpace and Facebook are our social spaces,” she said. “You are being naïve. Whether you like it or not, these have become professional spaces, so you have to untag crazy pictures of yourself and even tell your friends, ‘I’m job hunting, don’t post things on my wall,’ keep it person to person.”

Facebook can be used as an advantage, though, to show commitment to the industry you are interested in and to facilitate networking.

“You can send discreet notes saying: ‘Does anyone know someone at X Y and Z company, because I’d like to set up an informational interview,’ ” Reeves said. “One thing that Facebook and MySpace is excellent for is moving beyond your own geographical area.”

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