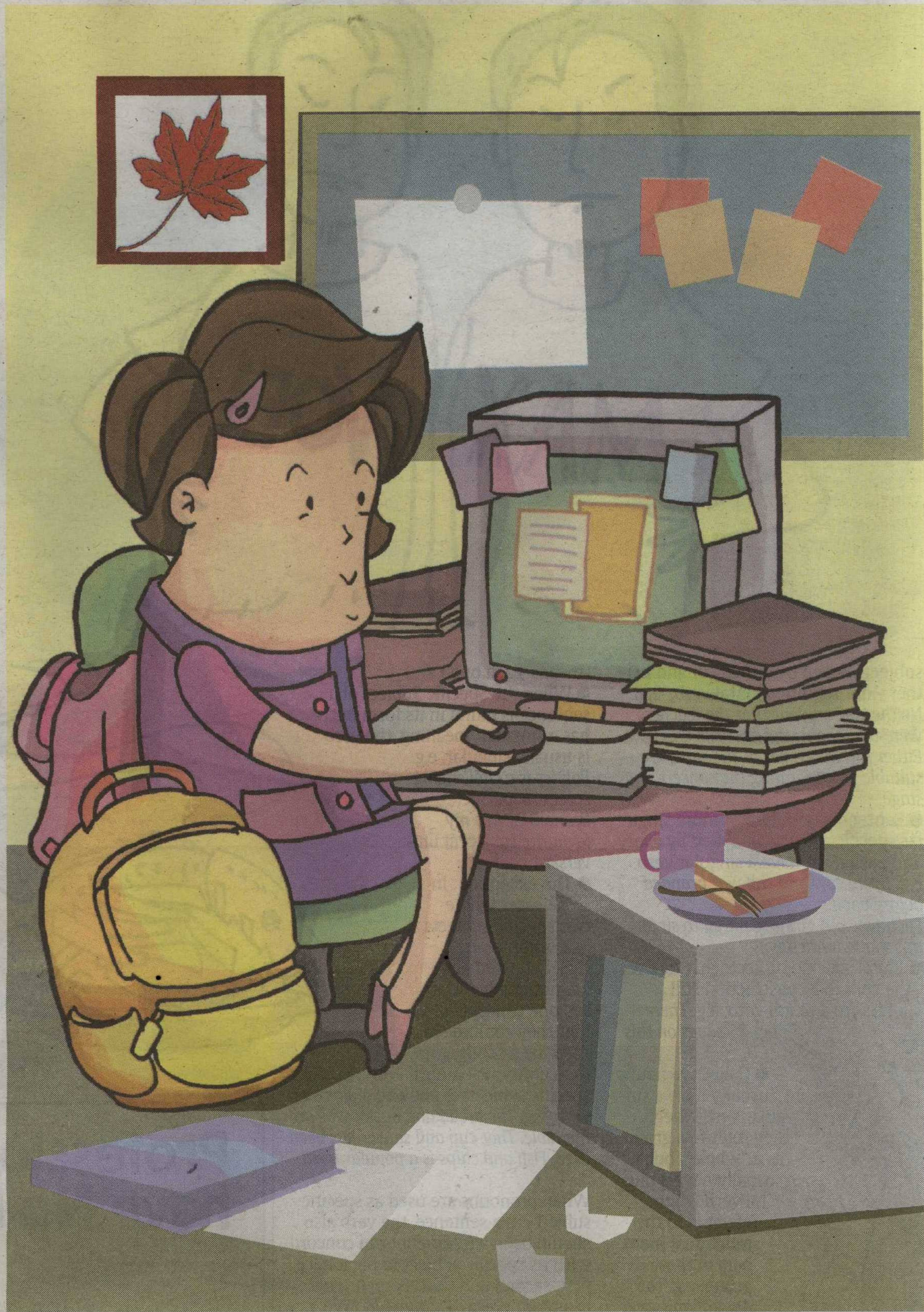


Snob job hunting

Looking for a chance to be an intern can be as hard as finding a job but for one lucky lass, her stint as a research assistant taught her that landing a dream job is not impossible.



ask the all-important question of how long the interview was going to be. I figured one hour was probably standard, so it shocked me when I ended up being in there for four hours.

Thank God the professor fed me! She took me for lunch where we chatted some more, and that's when we had a debate about Eastern versus Western philosophies in education. Not the most relaxed lunch, I can assure you.

I was offered the position two days later, and we agreed on a start date slightly a month later. The Human Resources department sent me an email a week later saying that due to policy, they were posting my position.

Thankfully, they later assured me that it was just a formality to inform the public of the vacancy and they would close the position in a week and formally offer me a letter following that.

It's been slightly more than three months since I started working with A. Sometimes I am buried in so much work, I don't even have time to file my notes or write in my log for weeks on end.

I also have sticky-notes with A's tasks and instructions all over the edge of my computer screen and there are reminders all over my whiteboard; I have even recently put in a request for a second monitor to help me read and compare documents (yes, she said okay).

Work is gruelling, and tempers (hers) often run short, but all in all, I'm enjoying my work and my work place. The university is gorgeous and the workplace benefits are awesome. I can actually get a massage almost every other week! All I need is a doctor's note saying I need one, and with an injured back, that's not hard at all.

Although she works us to the bone, she does take care of us in other ways. For example, upon hearing I don't drive and of the back injury I sustained when I fell earlier this year, she sent me to buy a backpack with hip support, so I could use it instead of lugging a suitcase when going into schools to do behavioural testing. Daphne in a bag-shop with no budget is a dream! All the office chairs are also ergonomic; mine can actually "rock" so I can stretch my spine.

A also approved a purchase-card under the lab for me to use so I didn't have to make out-of-pocket purchases to be reimbursed later. We also have almost monthly lab dinners, generously paid for by A...and her grants. And she gave me a sweater for Christmas "because you're always cold."

I'm glad I was such a "snob." And I'm glad I am a worrywart who put in the work, because if I had been a lazy-snoddish-worrywart, I wouldn't have gotten much out of it.

So take it from somebody who's just been there thinking it was impossible: It's not. But you have to be patient if you want to land the dream job, and you have to be prepared to work. Employers can sniff passion out a mile away. I would definitely say landing your dream job, whatever it may be, is a combination of the right credentials, passion, hard work, networking, luck, and good timing.

Oh, and people were right when they said workplace benefits are an important thing to look into when job-scouting (especially for positions that notoriously don't pay well...like grant-funded positions), so I also pass on "people's" advice to you.

Good luck!

STILL remember this time last year when I was in a frenzy e-mailing professors around Canada enquiring if any of them would be hiring in the near future because I was graduating in a few months. While it was heartening that many replied and were very encouraging of my efforts, the answers were mostly the same: "We already have a research assistant, or we don't have enough funding, or we will contact you in the Spring when we know if we got the grants."

Such is the reality of academia. Spaces are sometimes non-existent, funding is limited (so be prepared for low pay), competition is high, and finding the right lab fit (e.g., research interest, skills, and personality) was an arduous task.

It did not help that the number of qualified people was increasing. My situation was further complicated by the fact that I was emailing people as an international student, and one with only an upcoming undergraduate degree. Most research positions wanted at least a masters, or more years out in the field. Priority is also always given to Canadians and landed immigrants in any case. Fair, of course, but neither worked to my advantage.

I skyped with my parents almost every week with the same worry: What if I don't get a job upon graduation? They listened to me every single week and my mother's advice was always the same.

She always said "just work hard and everything will happen in due cause." Dad would agree, and add that "it's still early, so it's okay, don't worry", his way of calming me.

As the date of the last day of classes approached, my concerns increased. I had two interviews lined up, but neither were in a research field I was actually really passionate about. My supervisor snorted into her coffee and assured me "you'll get a job, trust me".

My cousin was more realistic. She reasoned with me that since I was being a "snob" (I wanted a research-related position and wasn't willing to settle for anything else because I wanted a job that would further prepare me for graduate school), I had to be patient.

The economy was not the best and unemployment rates were higher than usual. She cautioned me that I should give myself a year. I raised my eyebrows but knew she was right: Most of my seniors who did not apply to graduate school took about that time to find a job, many longer.

Frustration

I spent hours every day after graduation combing university, hospital, and research websites looking up possible openings. It came to a point where I spent about as long as a work day doing that. And almost gave up in frustration.

But you know what? Mum was right. Things did happen in due cause. I had sent an e-mail to a professor (let's call her A) asking about joining her lab. I received an email two seconds later informing me she was out of the office. I was very intrigued with A's work and made a note in my calendar to follow-up with her upon her return. Two weeks after her return, I still heard nothing from her, so I sent her a polite reminder about my e-mail.

And was pleasantly surprised to receive an encouraging reply within a few hours. She apologised for not getting back to me sooner for she had been down with pneumonia and offered me an interview the very next day because she had an opening.

The problem was, she was in Vancouver, which was five hours away by flight from Toronto. But so excited I was, I almost jumped on the next plane out!

A had clearly overlooked the fact that I was so far away. She then offered me the next best thing: Get three reference letters and send them to me and we can decide if we should meet.

Some intense e-mail exchanges and one-and-a-half months later, I found myself looking at an e-mail from the same professor inviting

me for an interview and to meet at her lab. The best part? She was paying for most of my expenses.

My friend asked if I was going. Are you kidding? Of course I was! Even if I wasn't offered the job, I was at least getting to see Vancouver.

I prepared for that interview like I never prepared before. So I had mailed the reference letters (oh, thank you, professors!), and the ball was now entirely in my court. I e-mailed A and offered to give her lab a presentation of my work. I figured that would give me bigger control over the interview; this way, they hear what I want them to hear instead of relying on them asking me the right questions.

I spent over a week crafting a presentation that would give them a well-rounded introduction to

my work in 20 minutes; research shows that's how long you have to keep people's attention.

As the lab was a very holistic lab with the members excelling in both academics and extracurricular activities, I factored that it would be important for them to see what I could bring to them besides academics.

Being prepared

My former professor (not the one who snorted into her coffee) from university vetted my slides over coffee and dessert.

You know what they say about how unexpected things will still catch you by surprise no matter how well you prepare? "They" were right.

Despite my preparation, I did not