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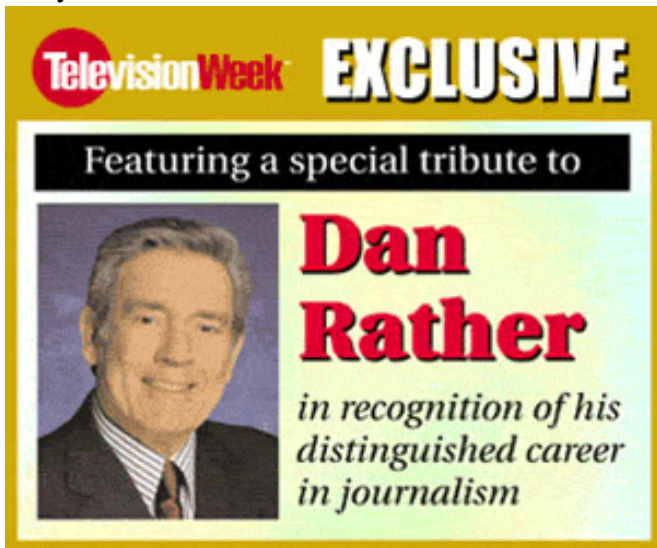
Hone Skills With Entry-Level Jobs

Aspiring Young Media Professionals Exploit Opportunities to Learn Data Analysis and Independent Thinking

By Mark Dominiak

Special to *TelevisionWeek*

Story continues below...



A common occurrence in the quest to put out a good column is simply finding worthwhile subjects to which to devote the space. While searching for what to dive into this week, I happened to receive a polite e-mail request from an aspiring young media person asking for advice on a number of questions.

Two things occurred to me. The first was that I have had young media people pose questions like this to me quite often in the past. The second was that, as evidenced by the request, young media people are still asking these types of questions.

Here are a few of the questions I received.

- What types of jobs are available in media planning, buying or research for recent graduates?
- What skills are needed to fill and advance beyond entry-level positions?
- What are the best salaries for recent graduates in this field and which companies should I consider?

As a senior media person, here's my perspective on these questions for aspiring media people to consider.

Entry-Level Positions

As with most areas of endeavor, finding a thrilling entry-level job is rare. In the media field, the entry-level job is basically that of an assistant, whether that's a planning or buying assistant or assistant research analyst. Depending on the organization an entry-level person joins, new hires might be assigned to a specific account or put into a pool that serves a variety of client businesses.

But whatever the assistant position, new hires will likely get cycled through some kind of training program that will help prepare them with skills to plan, buy or simply procure and manipulate data in general and on a specific piece of business.

Each of the entry areas provides necessary grounding for any young media person. Research will help new hires understand where media data comes from, how it's quantified and how it's used. Buying areas help new hires understand how to use much of that data to transact and steward deals with vendors. That's important not only from the perspective of understanding the economics of media as a commodity, but also from that of understanding the dynamics of the buyer/seller relationship.

From my perspective, entry-level planning positions are best viewed as a starting point. Planning at its best is founded in good, solid consumer strategy-digging in and really understanding the consumer's perspective. If entry-level people can become proficient at seeing the world through the eyes of the target consumer, they more effectively ply their media skills when planning, buying or conducting research.

Regardless of the area an aspiring media person may choose as an entry point, it's important to keep one thing in mind: New hires are doers. They need to quickly and accurately provide for the needs of the team members to whom they report.

It doesn't sound glamorous, but in truth, as young media people get better at procuring and providing information, they become better versed in the value of the information. The more information young media people sponge up in the entry-level position, the better prepared they will be to make the leap to higher career levels.

Necessary Skills

As far as skills, proficiency with math is a must. Because so many parts of the media process require significant ability to manipulate and interpret data, being good with numbers is essential. It almost goes without saying that the ability to use a computer and software fits in here.

In today's world of consolidation and streamlined staffs, being able to think independently and being able to solve problems is a big plus. Often there won't be easy access to the next level of supervision, which requires new hires to take some bit of initiative. Supervisors appreciate people who can think for themselves or think ahead.

It's also beneficial if new hires can effectively communicate via written documents and presentations, or verbally in presentation. Those abilities make for people who can take well-crafted work and effectively communicate it to internal audiences and to clients.

When looking to advance from an entry-level position, there is one important thing to keep in mind. At entry levels, assistants become really good at "doing." Early on in their careers, that is pretty much what is expected of junior people: "Do this."

When young people become very proficient at doing, they frequently fall into the trap of thinking that they're ready for

advancement. Unfortunately, new levels of responsibility usually come with new skill requirements far beyond simply doing. Those are the skills of managing and leading. Namely, it requires the ability to manage many tasks and lead perhaps many people who are the "doers" of those tasks.

Managing people is different from managing or doing things. Most things have black-and-white answers. People need to be handled from a human perspective. So in short, as young people advance in their careers, they need to be sensitive to the need for developing quality people skills and become adept at building solid interpersonal relationships. It's a lot harder to motivate another human being than it is to punch numbers into a calculator.

Salaries and Shops

Salaries will vary by the type of organization an entry-level person may be considering and according to where in the country positions are being considered. Two things bear mentioning here. First, prepare to be underwhelmed. Few organizations are willing to pony up big dollars for an unproven commodity. Second, don't let the initial salary get to you. That's not the most important part of the new position. The most important compensation is in the skills and information learned and in the network of industry contacts young people start to build.

As far as which shops to target, it's better to use logic to construct a list. From an economic perspective, consider shops with solid financial backgrounds, whether it's within a holding company or a smaller independent place. The finances of the organization are likely beneficial to a young person's stability in the organization.

Aspiring new hires should sit down and take stock of their personal values. What makes them who they are? What qualities do they look for in friends, etc.? Then take that set of value criteria and try to connect with people at shops of interest.

Ask what kind of people work at those shops. Can anything be learned about the principles or vision of the shop? Take the time to see which shops match up the best to personal values. A happy fit may make for a happier entry-level experience.

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