How a career sponsor can help your job search

A couple days ago I picked up a “Business Self-Help” book (so says the back cover) that my dad recommended to me. He suggested *(Forget a Mentor) Find a Sponsor* because it explains why women and people of colour should seek out sponsors in addition to mentors. Doing so, research shows, will significantly increase their chances of career success. My dad was looking out for me, and in picking up the book from the public library, my aim was to learn more about the world of jobs and careers.

I tell you this story because it explains why I wasn’t expecting what I discovered in the book’s first few pages. I started wondering about the author’s credentials when she — Sylvia Ann Hewlett — mentioned visiting Cambridge University as a young child (on page 2). Here’s what I discovered: Hewlett is a PhD! She earned her first degree from Cambridge, then went on to study at Harvard and finally London University, where she earned her doctorate in economics. “Hidden PhDs” are everywhere! (Thanks to Aimée Morrison for this wonderful term.)

After graduating, Hewlett “landed a sought-after first job: as assistant professor of economics at Barnard College, Columbia University, and began to forge what should have been a promising career in academe.”

Uh oh. Turn the page and… she’s denied tenure. Ouch.

How did I deal with this massive setback? Not well. I had plowed twelve years of my life into this career of mine and I felt bewildered, betrayed, and brutally cast out. I mourned the waste of time and energy, but more importantly I mourned the loss of a beloved profession — one that I deeply valued and was exceptionally good at. Tenure decisions are ‘up’ or ‘out’ — you’re either promoted to associate professor (and given lifetime job security) or you’re fired. The decision came down in April, and by mid-May, I was packing up my office.

(Hewlett was shocked and felt ambushed because her department has unanimously supported her, her recent book received “stellar reviews,” and her teaching ratings were “off the charts.”)

But here’s the moral of the story, for Hewlett: she learned an invaluable lesson. “I now understood that climbing the ladder in any competitive field required heavy-duty support from a senior person with heft and influence.” That was something she hadn’t had, and she wasn’t sure how to find one now. “But after some soul searching, I realized that I did have such a person in my back pocket.” That person, a Columbia
dean and former CEO, “wasn’t particularly influential at Columbia . . . but he did have power in the wider world, and most importantly, he was a great fan of mine.” (All from pg 9.) He advocated for her, and helped secure her a job heading up a New York-based non-profit. Hewlett is now founder and CEO of the **Center for Talent Innovation**.

I’m still making my way through the book, and I’ve got some serious thinking to do about whether there’s a place for sponsorship in my own career as a just-starting-out business owner. What about you? Have sponsors played an important role in your professional journey?

**PRICING:**

- Kindle $9.00
- Paperback $14.98
  - 25 used at $9.36
  - 54 new from $9.57