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A Way to Try a Job on for Size Before Making a Commitment

By TANYA MOHN

For Caroline Holley, taking a job after meeting the boss once makes about as much sense as agreeing to an arranged marriage.

"It seems kind of insane, but that's the way most decisions are made," said Ms. Holley, a Brooklyn resident in her 30's who worked as a temp before accepting a job as education and training administrator at the American National Standards Institute in Manhattan last year.

"Temp to perm" or "temp to hire" are industry terms for employees like Ms. Holley who work on a temporary status before becoming permanent employees.

"It's a much better chance to get to know each other," Ms. Holley said, noting that her temporary work status offered her the opportunity to size up the office culture before making a commitment to work there.

It might be called workplace dating, and it is on the increase. "It's snowballing," said Marty Gargle, an owner of the Employment Line, a New York City staffing service that helped Ms. Holley find her job.

The service reports that close to 80 percent of all new hires the agency placed last year were initially placed in temp jobs; five years ago it was less than 30 percent. Most placements are clerical and administrative workers, Ms. Gargle said, but increasingly they include midlevel managers, lawyers and even executives.

The depth of the trend, at least officially, is not known. "It is not something that is tracked," said Jim Brown, a labor market analyst for the New York State Department of Labor in Manhattan. Anne Accini, Ms. Gargle's co-owner at the Employment Line, said that temp-to-perm was a great way "to get to know if the boss is a pussycat or tiger." It is particularly good, she said, for people with poor or rusty interview skills — "excellent workers but they just can't interview to save their lives."

Such hiring was rare in the 80's, Ms. Accini said, but grew steadily during the hiring boom of the dot-com era in the 90's. Then the bubble burst.

Since then, said Richard Wahlquist, president and chief executive of the American Staffing Association, based in Alexandria, Va., "Companies have learned to hire much more strategically."

Temp-to-perm is a prudent way to do that. With the economy on the rebound, the demand for good workers is increasing as well and companies are having a hard time getting qualified applicants, Mr.

Wahlquist said.

All this has been good for temporary workers, who are often hired to fill immediate needs and end up as permanent employees even though they did not initially seem like ideal candidates. Meanwhile, they can explore career options, make money while looking for the perfect job and exercise more control over their work lives. Unlike quitting or being fired, leaving a temp-to-perm job leaves no black mark.

"It's a good opportunity to go in and possibly find a job you like," said Matt Deane, who was fresh out of Bates College when he took a temp-to-perm job at the American National Standards Institute. "And it's an easy out if it is something you'd never do in a million years."

Mr. Deane, who is now a director, stayed for almost 10 years after his initial three-month commitment.

Temp-to-perm placements include jobs that evolve into staff positions and those like Mr. Deane's, which are expected to become permanent from the start. "It was such a good match from the beginning, that within a few weeks I knew it was going to be a good fit," Mr. Deane said.

Jana Zabinski, one of his colleagues at the institute, who also started there as a temporary, was eager to get into public relations after working in the fashion industry. Although she had no experience in the field, she felt confident she could do the work. "How do you prove that if it is not written on your résumé?" she asked. James Essey, president of the TemPositions Group of Companies, which has offices in the New York City area and California, says that temp-to-perm workers have "a total leg up, kind of like a summer intern."

Charles Griemsman, an editorial assistant at Harlequin, a book publishing house, worked in corporate communications after college but wanted to get in the door of a new industry. Even with a degree in English and American literature from [Princeton University](#), he said, it was not easy. "The first day I was assigned to write blurbs for six books," he said. "It was a practical route to where I need to be."

But the "try before you buy" concept benefits employers as well.

"It's less expensive than the traditional route" of paying outright to a staffing agency for a hire, Mr. Essey said, because there is generally no fee to pay when a temp-to-perm employee is hired permanently. And employers do not incur costs of benefits like health insurance, unemployment liability or vacation pay during the temporary work period. The staffing service pays for whatever benefits temp workers get.

Susan Krause Liebman, director of human resources at Barnard College in Manhattan, called temp-to-hire "a very positive way to do it all around; it makes financial as well as ethical sense."

Though the least expensive method of hiring is for businesses to bypass agencies and run ads themselves, working with an agency for a temp-to-perm worker is "less of a hassle," she said. "We don't get deluged with résumés, interviews and testing. And we end up with 2 strong candidates rather than 20 that have to be screened."

Gary M. Sobo, a partner of Sobo & Sobo, a law office in Middletown, N.Y., said his firm also preferred to hire temp-to-perm workers, often waiting six months before making definite job offers. That period, he says, offers the "opportunity to explore all those things you couldn't tell during the interview."

Diana Kornish, owner of Here's Help Staffing Services in Middletown, who is also president of the New York Staffing Association, says temp-to-perm work can produce some unexpected matches.

Consider Stacey A. Schick, who moved back to Orange County, N.Y., from the West Coast nine years ago, when she was seven months pregnant with her first child. Ms. Schick, a retailing manager, said: "I was running four stores. I did it well and wielded a lot of power."

When she was unable to land a job in retailing, Ms. Schick took a two-week data-entry job at the Orange County Association of Realtors.

"I didn't know how to turn on a computer" but "they needed bodies," said Ms. Schick, who is now the education coordinator at the association and the mother of two.

"Honestly, I would never have considered it" if a suitable job had come her way in her original field, she said. "But it has afforded me the opportunity to have a family and be able to have time with them."

Retailing often required 70-hour weeks, she said. "But I ended up doing something I really enjoy. It can't get any better than that."