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Career Paths: Not What You Might Think

Robert J. Frederick

From orientation through graduation, UNI's Academic Advising and Career Services has the unique role of supporting academic, personal and career success for our students. One interesting component of our office operation is our contact with employers. Each year over 600 employers come to campus. They post over 7,000 job and internship opportunities on our electronic job posting board, *CareerLink*, and they routinely offer thousands more at our career fairs. In the 2005-2006 academic year, they conducted over 1,500 formal interviews on campus and thousands more of the informal type during and after our fairs. Each summer, we visit over 100 employers as we seek to build and maintain strong relationships with employers who recruit our UNI students. Throughout these activities, our office-staff ask questions of the employers concerning desired skills, resume and cover letter expectations and interview tips and techniques. We also follow up with students in an effort to assess what their job search experiences were like, what skills employers asked about and what student's perceptions were concerning careers and the job search process. The following represents several very important themes that have come out of these varied conversations.

For over two decades, employers have been transforming their hiring process from a major, degree, GPA centered approach to a skills centered approach. Employers have told us that proficiency in the classroom or a specific academic background, while important, has not necessarily lead to long-term success on the job. However, specific skill development and use tends to be a stronger indicator of future success. When we inquired what these skills were across a broad range of employers, a pattern quickly developed. The "core skills" included: communication, leadership, organization, problem solving, teamwork, creativity and technology skills. While all of the "core skills" are seen as important, communication and leadership are the core skills consistently listed as the skills most desired by our employers.

Now, it should come as no surprise that many employers place a high value on the importance of leadership skill development. A quick literature review in the career guidance section of the local bookstore will show you dozens of titles that deal with this issue. Recently, however, communication has taken on an ever-increasing value for our employers. To help frame the argument, allow me to clarify what the employers mean by communication.

Interpersonal oral communication continues to be vitally important in most of the team-centered work environments that exist today. However, the current hot button issue is written communication. After recently talking with numerous key UNI employers about communication, a majority indicated that written communication was "critical" to job success and the biggest "problem" area with many recent graduates. Many indicated that too many students have developed poor writing habits and/or are transferring their email and blog-text jargon and shortcuts into the office communication process. The absence of spelling rules, grammar, punctuation and syntax are problematic but it did not end there. In one conversation with Iowa's largest private employer (an employer that employs one out of every two hundred

and eighty Iowans), they bemoaned the fact that students were not able to write in a clear and concise manner, create a central theme or develop an abstract from a larger body of work to present to upper level administration (this was in general and not specific to UNI). In fact, they, along with many other organizations, are now issuing writing tests as a part of their interview process. Additionally, the cover letter has become as important a document as the resume. Beyond being a letter expressing interest in a position, it is a writing sample that is carefully analyzed for grammar, spelling, punctuation and syntax as well as style, readability and clarity. When you consider that a resume and cover letter are the first impression you make with an employer and how carefully many are now scrutinizing them, it is apparent that excellent written communication skills are necessary.

As for the other “core skills,” employers continue to carefully look for evidence of skill development and use in a candidate’s resume and cover letter, both in the interview and within the candidate’s references. Whether in or out of the classroom, employers want to see evidence of leadership, organization, teamwork, creativity and technological skill development. When asked where these were best developed, employers were less concerned about the specific activity that caused a candidate to use these skills but were more concerned that they were involved in activities that required the use of them. Many employers also indicated that they base their interview questions on skills assessment using behavioral based interviewing techniques. This is a technique that is predicated on the idea that past behaviors are good predictors of future behaviors. Employers formulate questions that focus on candidates past experiences in and out of the classroom as they seek out demonstrable evidence of these “core skills.” As one employer stated, “The more a person is involved in (out of class) activities, the better they tend to do in our interview process. They have stories to tell about successes and failures and what they have learned from them. They have utilized the skills we are looking for in our future team leaders.”

What does this emphasis on “core skills” in general and communication skills specifically mean to graduating seniors? Plenty. Today over 50% of organizations that attend our general UNI career fairs in the fall and spring now list “all majors” as the majors desired for the positions they are filling, both interns and full-time. More and more companies are asking us to see and talk with humanities majors, fine arts majors, education majors and social science majors. To be sure, there will always be specific skill areas like accounting or computer science that require a very specific academic preparation, but the number of companies that are truly interested in all majors continues to increase as the “core skills” emphasis shifts to the soft skills set.

I recently toured a Fortune 500 company facility in Iowa. An area supervisor from the company provided the tour. His knowledge of the business and operations were very impressive and he was clearly chosen to give the tour because of his interpersonal skills and technical expertise. When our conversation turned to his academic preparation, I asked him where he went to college and what he studied. He indicated that he graduated in 2003 with a double major in philosophy and religion! Not business, not supply chain management, not finance. When I asked him how he came to be at this company, he indicated that they recruited him based on the quality of his activities on his resume and his excellent cover letter. Of course, that simply got him the interview. His excellent experiences, strong interpersonal communication skills and his excellent scores on their written test got him the job. His story is less unique than one might think.

This past summer, I helped a family services major get a leadership internship in a Fortune 100 retail organization. His background in family services was not the reason that this company hired him as an intern. He has impeccable leadership and communication skills and

they were drawn to that through his resume and cover letter. I recently saw him on campus and asked him about his experience. He indicated that he had a wonderful yet challenging internship that culminated in a full-time offer after graduation. Now it should be noted that this is a company that does not automatically offer interns a full-time position. Their ratio is about one out of ten. Although he indicated that he is not pursuing a full-time position in retail, he loved the training, the challenge and the opportunity to prove himself in a fast paced environment. I decided to follow-up with this particular employer to capture their thoughts about this intern. They spoke of strong leadership and excellent organization skills. The mentioned that has was a very quick learner, was able to analyze a situation quickly and draw conclusions and, most importantly for them, was able to effectively communicate with all levels of his team both up and down the leadership chain. Throughout the thirty-five minute conversation I found it interesting that they never mentioned his academic preparation, his major or his GPA. I asked if the latter were important. The regional recruiter for this organization stated, “He is clearly a good student so we know he is a learner. As for majors, we are not particular. A student’s GPA is reviewed but it is neither a barrier for hiring nor an indicator of success. We do not use GPA as one of our offer decision points. The soft skills are key. We need strong leaders who can effectively communicate. Period.”

So, what should students know and do to prepare themselves for these new opportunities? My advice is always simple. First, select a major you love and are passionate about. You will be more successful both in and out of the classroom. Second, get involved. If it is true that approximately 80% of your time in college is spent out of classroom, then look for opportunities to get involved in groups, clubs and organizations. It does not matter if they are paid or volunteer but remember, it is better to be a leader in a few organizations than a follower in many. Third, get your feet wet early with an internship or two or three. Most organizations now offer internships to sophomores so don’t wait. Clearly these experiences are not just for seniors anymore. Also, a recent *National Association of Colleges and Employers* survey indicated that 94% of employers look for at least one internship on a candidate’s resume. Fortunately, you can get assistance with locating an internship that’s right for you in your career services office. Fourth, develop your formal communication skills. Each writing and speaking experience is an opportunity to develop a “core skill” in the global market place. Finally, attend the career fairs. You may be surprised to discover that most companies are not only seeking full-time hires but interns. These events are not just for graduating seniors.

The world of employment is constantly changing. However, one thing remains the same. Employers know they need an educated work force to deal with the 21st century economy. In the global market place, malleable employees who have the ability to learn, lead and communicate are critical. So, if “core skills” open the doors of opportunity, then seek out ways to hone them and don’t forget to enjoy the journey.

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