

**PREPARING STUDENTS FOR JOBS TODAY:  
IT'S NOT JUST WHAT YOU KNOW, IT'S ALSO WHO YOU KNOW**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses how technology has radically changed the way college students and graduates seek entry-level positions. Greater competition for jobs and depressed economic conditions have made it difficult for students to find work. Students now compete with experienced people in the job market, and delayed retirements only increase this pressure. The technology that has transformed the employee selection process also makes it difficult for job seekers without specific skills to find jobs. This paper describes these transformations, and discusses ways that students can enhance their job search by creating and connecting relevant learning experiences inside and outside the classroom. Ultimately, the best way to find a job is to augment job seeking techniques with a variety of different strategies, including building a network of professional relationships.

**INTRODUCTION**

College aged students and recent college graduates are facing a very difficult market, although job candidates without a college degree face a far worse situation [11]. The Atlantic Magazine recently reported that 53 % of college graduates are out of work or underemployed. Of that number, about half are unemployed and the other half are working at jobs that do not require a degree. The importance of earning a degree has never been higher, although, certain degrees have more marketability than others. Students with skill-based degrees in the sciences, and other technical fields, including accounting, are more likely to have success in the job market [12]. The rise in overall unemployment means that college students compete for entry-level jobs with unemployed industry professionals with more experience.

One response to this increasingly challenging job market is to distribute that resume as widely as possible using the Internet. Resume and employment sites, from Monster.com to Craigslist, seem to offer the most numerous job postings for helping recent graduates find suitable employment. Unfortunately, this strategy has become increasingly ineffectual for a variety of reasons.

First, jobs posted on the Internet receive a lot of applications. Recently, Eric Auld, a blogger who is looking for a full-time job without success, decided to explore the employer side of the job market. He posted a fictitious job on Craigslist, to test, first-hand, how bad the job market really is. He advertised for an administrative assistant, making about \$12-\$13 per hour, with health benefits. Within 24 hours, 653 people had applied for the job [2]. Of those, 23% had five or more years of relevant work experience, 66% had some kind of degree or certificate in higher education (AA and above), and 39% had a Bachelor's degree.

Second, with the heightened competition to find work, applicants are more inclined to embellish a resume than in previous years, by exaggerating skills. A recent survey found that 70% of recent college students were willing to lie on a resume to get a job [1]. Human Resources functions such as employee selection have been transformed by HRIS [5]. Ironically, a medium that seems ideally suited to matching applicants with jobs is increasingly problematic.

In this paper, we discuss the transformation of the job-search process via the Internet, and identify a variety of pedagogical strategies we have used to help prepare our students as they begin their careers. These strategies are intended to address the problems that college students face when their job search occurs on massive job-search engines, such as Monster.com or Craigslist. We outline learning activities that faculty can include to help students seeking internships and post-baccalaureate entry-level positions. We emphasize the importance of teaching these skills to students early in their academic lives, so they can begin building professional networks with peers, professors, alumni, and others who can help them.

### **MCLUHAN'S TETRAD AND NEW TECHNOLOGY MEDIA**

To help understand the impact of the Internet on job searches, we enlist the classic work of futurist Marshall McLuhan [6]. McLuhan, recognizing that innovations can sometimes have unintended and counter-intuitive consequences for society, described a series of impacts as an innovation evolves. Specifically, his tetrad model has four elements:

Enhancement: When a technology is introduced, it enhances our ability to accomplish something.

Obsolescence: An enhancement in technology causes an older technology to become obsolete.

Retrieval: Obsoleting has the effect of recalling some lost value from society.

Reversal: Taken to an extreme, the technology reverses on itself.

The online job database has clearly changed the way people apply for work [10]. In the following paragraphs, we use this model to help explain the effect of the Internet on searching for employment. This analysis provides a theoretical background for the educational strategies we describe later.

#### **Enhancement and Obsolescence**

Companies like Monster.com and Dice.com were founded in the early 1990's to provide clearinghouses for resumes and jobs. From a technological perspective, this offered a clear improvement over the paper-based traditional process, which began when a job applicant submitted a paper copy of a resume on heavy paper with a cover letter in an envelope. The applicant had to copy the resume and send it to many firms, affixing addresses and stamps. Sites like Monster and Dice have made it possible for the applicant to submit a digital resume to many jobs with the push of a button. Further, potential employers can post jobs and find qualified applicants from all over the world. The applicant can even request notifications from the site when a potential job becomes available. The apparent improvement in efficiency has been so compelling that it has rapidly displaced paper-based resumes. While not entirely obsolete, the paper-based job application is increasingly rare. A Pew Research Center's Report [7] found "41% of all Americans have searched online for jobs, up from 17% ...in March 2000."

With the move toward online jobs databases, competition for jobs has increased thanks to the speed and reach of the Internet. Employers benefit from a large number of applicants, but there is also a challenge:

how do they manage this information? The technological solution to the info-glut of online job sites was the resume scanner: the automated tool for scanning, recognizing and categorizing the text on resumes. In the late 1990s, software and services such as Zoho, PCRecruiter, and Resumator were created to scan resumes and search for specific desirable attributes and keywords. A typical resume scanner and program would seek keywords (e.g., “SAP” or “Java”), as well as skills, certifications, and previous employers. However, categorizing digital resume data is not a trivial task; even careful selection of fields and filters for resumes can be a “hit-or-miss” process [4].

From the applicant’s perspective, the challenge is how to get selected from among a large number of applicants. Realizing that resumes are selected by recruiting management software, job applicants began designing their resumes to contain keywords that increased their chances of being selected. Indeed, applicants have begun to personalize all aspects of the job search. Instead of sending 50 duplicate resumes to find work, consultants suggest that each resume sent should be specifically tailored to that particular job listing. This includes changing the objective so that it fits the job title and description, rearranging your accomplishments so those most relevant are evident immediately upon review, and changing the keywords to specifically fit the job.

Personalization goes beyond keywords. It could also mean that you would save your electronic file with the job title after your name (SueNguyen\_SystemsAnalyst\_2012.docx). Personalization may be helpful for the applicants, but it has become problematic from the employer’s perspective. As applicants became knowledgeable about how to use keyword selection to improve their chances, the software began to select too many “ideal” candidates. To better manage the number of applicants, hiring companies focus on specific skills/requirements, which filter appropriate job applicants as well as inappropriate ones.

As a result, jobs go unfilled, despite large numbers of applicants. Cappelli [3] discusses several possible reasons. First, there is a decrease in the willingness of employers to train people; instead, they seek applicants matching their job requirements and experience. Less experienced graduates have less of a chance in this context. Online applications often ask a series of questions, some of them answered by a simple “yes” or “no”. If an applicant marks these questions incorrectly or enters too high a salary requirement, their resume automatically is eliminated from the pool, even when their skills might match what the employer needs. When the employer does find someone with the skills and expertise they need, they often are unwilling to pay a higher salary because of the current oversupply of applicants.

## **Retrieval and Reversal**

McLuhan (1968) argued that as innovations evolve in a society, there are unexpected consequences. In the case of the Internet-based job market, we are beginning to see the retrieval of personal relationships as a key factor in a successful job search, and a reversal of the trend towards digital databases as the primary means of fitting applicants to employers (and vice versa). In McLuhan’s terms, there is a “retrieval” of this cultural value. Staffing companies can help sift through the applicant database and provide a manageable pre-screened pool of qualified applicants, and we also see a tremendous growth in the use of social networks. Networks provide a conduit for important information about applicants and employers that cannot be readily transmitted via a digital resume database. Many of these networks are facilitated by technology, such as LinkedIn. Others are more traditional: formal and informal connections that are developed through personal relationships. A recommendation from a current employee or other trusted source is valued more highly than a keyword search. In the context of the current labor market, this retrieves the need for human-in-the-loop types of networking that even LinkedIn may not offer.

Thus, students still need to acquire social skills that can help them in their careers. Van Rooy, Alonso, & Fairchild [9] have argued that successful job seekers should rely on both traditional as well as internet job searches. With the increased use of Facebook and instant messaging, the younger generation may require more exposure to job seeking social skills. The goal of the learning strategies described in the next section is to better prepare students for job-seeking and career-building in this context.

## **LEARNING STRATEGIES FOR CAREER SKILL-BUILDING**

The following learning strategies that have helped students in Computer Information Systems at Cal Poly Pomona have been divided into classroom and non-classroom strategies. Taken together, they help in creating a departmental culture where the expectation is readiness for professional workplaces.

### **In the Classroom**

In one of the first courses CIS majors take, students participate in several learning activities that seek to foster their understanding of the workplace and themselves as CIS professionals in those workplaces. They also create several career artifacts to help them focus on the future and what they need to get there.

### **Speaker Panels of Alumni Professionals**

Since, for students with little experience, “seeing is believing,” we have found that students relate best to having professionals in the field who are alumni of the program come to class and describe their work and careers. This form of interaction provides some of the best first-hand proof for students that the skills that they are asked to acquire in the classroom has a direct connection to their ability to get a job and advance in their careers in the future. Many students do not have a sense of what a career looks like, and professional panelists (even those with just a few years of experience) help the students to understand the contours of a CIS career.

### **Forecasting Success Exercise**

In this brief classroom exercise, students are asked to imagine themselves in their future jobs. Once they have done so, the students are asked jot down a comment that someone might say about them after they left the room. The purpose of this activity is to have them focus on the CIS professional that they hope to become in the future. A classic, beginning response that a student might write could be: “That person is reliable and prompt.” After more thought, and subsequent trials, the responses become more aspirant, such as “That person is a great team player and can solve any technical problem. I would work with them anytime,” or “That guy will be a CIO before he’s 30.” Again, this allows the student to put themselves into the shoes of a CIS professional.

### **Resume Development**

Typically, a college Senior creates their resume and looks for a job. By this time, it is often too late to look for an internship or take an additional class that qualifies a student for a specific job. By developing a draft resume early, students see what they have and, more importantly, what they lack in terms of experience and skills. Creating this document in the classroom forces students to confront these issues and provides motivation for getting guidance from faculty, Career Center staff, alumni, and others. Also, students have heightened motivation to prepare themselves with certain coursework, internships, and activities that give them relevant experience before graduation. Finally, sending students to the corporate website of the “dream” employer can help improve the quality of their resume

[8]. Organizational websites bring in higher quality applicants than their-party websites. By focusing on organization-specific information, students learn about employers, and boost their applicant quality.

### **Elevator Pitch Introductions**

Students are unprepared to introduce themselves effectively. When called upon to introduce themselves in professional settings, many students ramble or mention less relevant information, such as their families, what they do for entertainment, or how old they are. Formalizing this opportunity in a classroom setting, emphasized the importance of first impressions in a job content, and gives the student a chance to prepare and practice saying, out loud, what their potential professional contributions to an employer might be.

### **Outside of the Classroom**

#### **Internships**

Student internships or co-ops often lead to full-time positions. The 2012 Internship and Co-op Survey of the National Association of Colleges & Employers found “employers expect to increase internship hiring by almost 9% and co-op hiring by about 8%. Of their total 2011-12 expected new college hires, more than 40% will come from employers’ own internship and co-op programs.” For employers, this is an easier trial before committing to a full-time hire. Also, interns can see if the work suits them.

#### **Student Clubs**

Student clubs give students the opportunity to take on leadership roles, to work on teams, and to complete projects and organize conferences that bring in alumni and other industry professionals. These people can also become an important part of the students’ networks and a source of potential references.

#### **Professional Networks**

Students need to begin building professional networks early in their studies. Their own peers are important network members while they study and may be important career network members. Students can add to their professional networks by connecting with alumni, both through on-campus visits by alumni, attendance at club and professional meetings, and networking sites such as LinkedIn.

#### **Professional Organizations**

Professional organizations often have student chapters or include students in their meetings or events. These organizations might also sponsor scholarships, inform students about career opportunities, and provide discounted/free access to certification programs. These opportunities, in addition to cultivating more professional relationships, can be important to students needing internships or jobs on graduation.

#### **Utilizing Career Center Services**

It goes without saying that the campus career center is an important part of a student’s job search and contacting the center should begin early in the student’s time on campus. These centers provide face-to-face training and advice, and have online resources to help students explore different career options. They also provide access to on and off-campus career fairs, and give them the opportunity to network with company recruiters. Most importantly, they arrange on-campus job interviews (often the only time

employers will come to the students). On-campus interviews can provide students with a golden opportunity to find a good position, if they manage the interview carefully. Yet many students remain ignorant of these services, so emphasizing their availability in connection with coursework can fill any gaps that might arise.

## CONCLUSION

As the research and experts indicate, the use of multiple resources and media for job seekers is important to their success in their first as well as their subsequent searches. Moreover, developing professional networks provides lasting social capital and career skills that can only enhance their success in the workplace. Developing and connecting these learning strategies can not only enhance the chances for individual students to succeed in their job searches, but also can develop a departmental culture and the department's linkages to professional organizations.

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