

From Classroom to Career: Preparing Students for the Workplace in Dynamic Times

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Abstract: New hires must prepare to make an immediate impact in a fluctuating and dynamic job market. Teaching career readiness and employability skills helps prepare college students for a job search and, ultimately, success in their careers. This paper discusses how an academic program at a university adapted to prepare students for the workplace during a global pandemic and fluctuating job market. Highlighted virtual initiatives include a career fair, career counseling, internship and job search programming, and interview preparation.

Keywords: career readiness, career development initiatives, college-to-career transition, employability skills

“You’re hired!” Those are the magic words candidates seeking employment opportunities want to hear. However, training, certifications, and degrees do not guarantee hiring for a candidate. Employers want candidates with a solid combination of soft and technical skills. In a fluctuating and dynamic job market, new hires must prepare to make immediate impacts in their positions.

Background

In today’s workplace, employers have two concerns: finding quality employees and training them to be effective workers. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) reports that employers have a challenging time finding candidates with the hard and soft skills needed to be successful in industry (Wilkie, 2019). Research by Farner and Brown (2008) found employers reported college graduates’ skills are not at the level needed to complete tasks required in the professional world. Tulgan (2015) interviewed tens of thousands of workers over two decades. He found that young hires are more likely to have significant weaknesses in key skills including professionalism, critical thinking, and followership. Individuals who enter the professional workforce without employability skills are unprepared for the world of work. Yorke’s (2006) employability definition, commonly used in higher education, is “a set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to secure and be successful in their chosen occupation(s) to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy” (p. 8). Overtom (2000) defines employability skills as “transferable core skill groups that represent essential functional and enabling knowledge, skills, and attitudes required by the 21st century workplace” (p. 2). According to Helyer et. al (2014), employability skills can refer to interview skills, job search skills, to soft skills such as teamwork and communication to personal attributes such as punctuality and self-confidence to industry specific skills. Essentially, “employability” relates to skills graduates need for professional workplace success. In every industry, employers want candidates with well-developed employability skills.

Each year, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) conducts research and publishes a list of the top attributes employers want in candidates seeking employment. The

NACE *Outlook 2022* reported employers sought the following top attributes: leadership, ability to work in a team, written communication skills, problem-solving skills, verbal communication skills, strong work ethic, initiative, analytical and quantitative skills, flexibility and adaptability, and technical skills. Consider what the workforce would look like if everyone lacked these skills: People who cannot communicate, cannot work well with others, and cannot solve problems sharing workspaces and workflows. The professional workforce would not function smoothly.

One strategy to help prepare students to make an immediate workplace impact is incorporating career readiness strategies and employability skills — such as soft skills training, career counseling, internship and job search programming, and interview preparation — into an academic curriculum. Educational institutions prepare students to enter the workforce. Cruzvergara et al. (2018) found that due to increased attention on college students' career development, higher education institutions see career readiness as an institutional priority. Stebleton et al. (2020) noted that career readiness and education must begin early in the undergraduate experience and should continue until graduation. Teaching these skills has greater importance in a fluctuating and dynamic job market when employers expect new hires to be prepared and make an immediate impact in a position. Teaching career readiness and employability skills helps prepare students for a job search and, ultimately, career success.

Methodology

This research study used a case study approach. According to Merriam (1998), “A case study is an examination of a specific phenomenon such as a program, an event, a person, a process, an institution, or a social group” (p. 9). Case studies are one methodology that can be utilized to systematically study a phenomenon. The focus of research in a case study is on one bounded unit of analysis (Merriam, 1998). The unit of analysis, also referred to as the case, can be a person, a program, an organization, a group, an event, or even a concept (Patton, 1980). For this research study, the unit of analysis was the career development initiatives developed by one academic program at a higher education institution.

Example of Career Development Initiatives

Initiatives highlighted in this paper were developed specifically for undergraduate students majoring in construction management at a four-year institution, Ball State University, located in Muncie, Indiana. The content of each initiative was tailored to students at all class levels in the construction management discipline. Programs offered to students included a career fair, career counseling, internship and job search programming, and interview preparation.

The baccalaureate construction management program at Ball State University has hosted a major, industry-specific career fair since 2007. This annual event is open only to construction management majors at the university. Employer participation at the event has grown steadily from 10 employers in 2007 to 63 companies in 2022. The construction management program's faculty internship coordinator planned and managed this event, which included all aspects of employer registration and preparing students for attendance (Warner & Jones, 2017).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 Construction Management Career Fair was held virtually instead of in person. The Career Center at Ball State University was instrumental in the virtual Career Fair's success. The Career Center provided the virtual platform to facilitate the

event, assistance with employer and student registration, and technical support throughout the event. Construction continued during the pandemic, and companies still had a strong need for new employees. Though the virtual Career Fair was successful, there were challenges. Both employer registration and student participation decreased significantly from previous years. The Construction Management Career Fair was able to transition back to an in-person format in 2021 with some safety guidelines in place, such as required face masks. In 2022, the event occurred with no restrictions. The 2022 Career Fair saw record attendance from both companies and students. The Construction Management Career Fair will continue to be an annual event for the foreseeable future.

The construction management program offered multiple workshops and programs to help students prepare to attend the Construction Management Career Fair. An initial workshop was offered beginning in 2010. Since 2010, the workshops have increased in number and in scope (Warrner & Jones, 2017). Workshop topics included résumé development, how to work a career fair, networking, and interviewing skills. Workshops were offered in a variety of formats, in-person and virtually, at various times throughout the day to reach the most students. In addition to these workshops, students could attend an annual résumé-critique clinic where they received immediate feedback on their résumés. Students unable to attend these events could arrange an appointment with the faculty internship coordinator for individual questions or to review their résumés. Specific career counseling also was available to construction management students that was tailored to their career interests in the construction industry. The internship coordinator for the construction management program met with students throughout the year to address questions about internship and job search skills, career exploration within the construction industry, interview skills, resume development, and salary negotiation. Students could arrange these meetings either in-person or virtually. Individual appointments allowed students to obtain information and advice specific to their career questions and needs.

Though the Career Fair and related workshops were available to all construction management majors, students were not required to attend these events. Example reasons for not attending include accepting an internship or full-time position prior to these events, having scheduling conflicts, or having interest in employers who were not in attendance. To ensure that all students majoring in construction management were introduced to career development and employability skills, these skills were included in the curriculum of a required course. Feedback from the program's industry advisory board steered development of the required course, CM 222: Technical Presentation for Construction Managers. The industry advisory board was established in 2007. Advisory board members include representatives from general contractors, subcontractors, and suppliers in the construction industry. The Technical Presentation for Construction Managers course focused on written and verbal communication skills necessary to be successful in the construction industry. In addition to communication skills, this required course's curriculum included career development and employability skills to ensure all students majoring in construction management learned the essentials. Throughout the semester, all students learned about résumé development, interviewing skills, professional networking, professional image and etiquette, and internship and job search skills. Information about employability skills — including communication, teamwork, and organization — was also included in the course's curriculum. Required curriculum inclusion ensured all students received

this information. Because this course typically was completed at the sophomore level, students learned these essential skills early in their academic careers.

Lessons Learned

The importance of partnerships was the primary lesson learned from the measures implemented by Ball State University within the construction management baccalaureate program. Partnership with the program's industry advisory board were imperative for including career readiness and employability skills in a required course in the program's academic curriculum. That course was the primary method for ensuring all majoring students learned those skills. Other industry partnerships, made through construction-related professional organizations, program alumni, and networking events, were also crucial in the success of these initiatives. These partnerships helped increase the number of employers attending the Construction Management Career Fair, which increased student employment opportunities. In addition to industry partnerships, partnership with the Career Center at Ball State University was instrumental in the success of transitioning to the virtual Career Fair in 2020. The construction management program already had a positive relationship with the Career Center, which helped coordinate and plan the event. Partnerships on and off campus were essential to help connect students to employers for internships and full-time employment opportunities.

An additional lesson learned was the importance of having a faculty internship coordinator manage all of the initiatives. The current faculty internship coordinator has been with the construction management program since 2007. This faculty member received assigned time during the fall and spring semesters to work with internships, plan the annual career fair, and manage career development programs and initiatives. In addition to overseeing the internship program, the internship coordinator managed all employer relations, worked with the industry advisory board, and taught the required course CM 222: Technical Presentation for Construction Managers. Having one person responsible for all these tasks ensured continuity for the academic program's career development initiatives. Both employers and students connected with the internship coordinator for assistance with any events and initiatives.

The final lesson learned was the importance of adaptability, which is imperative when planning any programming for students. Though no one could have predicted the COVID-19 global pandemic, other factors — such as recessions, changes in workforce demographics, and technology — can all have an impact on hiring needs and employment opportunities. Adapting to accommodate a changing and fluctuating job market is critical to ensure programs prepare students for career success.

Plans for the Future

In the future, all established initiatives highlighted in this paper will continue, including the Construction Management Career Fair, career development workshops and programs, and résumé-critique clinic. Plans for the future include increasing industry partners' involvement in these events. One strategy to increase involvement is to include human resources professionals from industry to participate in a résumé-critique clinic on campus. This would allow students to receive critical feedback on their resumes from professionals working in the industry. Another strategy to increase involvement is to include industry partners in a mock interview program.

This future initiative will partner current students with a working professional in the construction industry for a practice interview. Not only will this program allow students the opportunity to practice interview skills, but it also will help students increase their professional networks through meeting with an industry professional. Another future initiative is a series of transitioning from college to career programs. These programs will include alumni presentations about budgeting, developing a professional network, work-life balance, and navigating workplace culture. These programs will allow current students to understand further the transition from college to career and help prepare them for life after college.

Conclusion

The initiatives shared in this paper are selected examples of strategies an academic program can implement to help students develop career readiness and employability skills. These initiatives have proven successful as tools to help prepare students for their careers. Since employers want new graduates to make immediate impacts in the workplace, higher education institutions' imperative is developing strategies to teach career readiness and employability skills with the goal of preparing students for successful careers.

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