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# Librarians on the case

## Helping students prepare for job interviews in an uncertain economy

In this time of economic uncertainty, once you land a job interview, it is more important than ever to outshine the competition. At the University of Pittsburgh Business Library, we have collaborated with Career Services staff at the Katz Graduate School of Business to offer workshops designed to prepare students to ace their interviews and land that all-important first job. Librarians often teach company and industry research methods, but by working closely with career services staff, we were able to present these research skills in the context of interview preparation, which raises the stakes for participants.

Public libraries traditionally excel at serving their clientele's career development needs through their collections, workshops, and services. Given the economic crisis, people are relying even more heavily on public libraries, as evidenced by an increasing number of news articles published recently. University libraries have also ventured into supporting students in their job searches.

In a 2005 article, Christopher Hollister describes the relationship that the University at Buffalo Libraries developed with career services for undergraduates, including librarian-led workshops, collection development, and even weekly reference librarian availability at the career center. This not only led to a more visible presence on campus, but also "reached a population of students which might not normally view libraries as relevant to their needs outside of academic course work."[1] This "real-world" connection appears throughout the information literacy literature, and provides insight into how to make these skills seem immediately relevant to students.

Because business school rankings such as those by *Business Week, U.S. News and World Report,* and the *Financial Times* continue to drive MBA program development, it becomes important to link information literacy goals to those rankings. Yoo-Seong Song writes about the connection between the success of career services and the success of the business school's reputation as a whole. MBA program rankings base their evaluation in part on the job placement rates and reported salaries. Song suggests that business librarians can play a role in improving MBA students' career search experience, which could result in improved rankings for the business school.[2]

### Career research workshops

While working with the MBA Career Services team at the Katz Graduate School of Business, we identified an opportunity to augment the students' current level of interview preparation by teaching information literacy skills. We taught students to go beyond reading the company Web site, developing a more comprehensive view of the company and industry. In crafting our approach to the material we presented, it was important to keep the examples clear and relevant to the interview setting.

During planning meetings, we demonstrated several databases to the Career Services team. While their response was extremely positive, they were continually surprised at the complexity of navigating the databases.

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For this reason, we found it necessary to limit the number of databases presented to two or three at the most. Together, we developed four areas where the library could assist students in preparing for interviews. The workshop was approximately 60 minutes, and was structured around the following four areas.

## Quiz questions

Companies may ask students questions that have factual answers, such as,

- What is the name of our CEO? Who are our key competitors?
- What did our stock price close at yesterday?
- How did our company perform last quarter?
- Did you see the article on our company last week?

Such questions vary, and students must be prepared to communicate basic facts about the company in order to demonstrate their awareness and agility. Several library databases provide company profiles that satisfy this information need. The company's Web site may also provide answers to some of the quiz questions; however, companies often offer inconsistent levels of information. Using the databases for basic information provided an opportunity to get acquainted with how the information is organized, leading into more complex searches.

## Big-picture questions

In order to prepare students to answer big-picture questions, we focused a portion of the workshop on finding industry profiles and in-depth articles on issues in the industry. We also showed them how to find a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) for the company, as it provides a brief analysis of the company's relationship to the business environment. Additionally, we reviewed how to find quarterly financial data in library databases. MBA students' ability to read financial data allows them to gain a financial picture of the company's position within the industry. Knowing as much as possible about the company's top competitors and their financial position enables the student to understand the financial landscape the company is currently facing.

## The why question

The Career Services team advises students that now more than ever it is crucial to be able to articulate *why* they want to work for a particular company. This means knowing enough about the company to be able to describe how their skills and qualities will be of value to the organization. Career Services refers to this as "defining your value proposition," originally a marketing concept that has been applied to career development.

## Asking questions

The end of the interview is often when the interviewer gives the interviewee an opportunity to ask questions. Career Services continually emphasizes the importance of this opportunity. Researching the dynamics within the industry can help students prepare such questions. For example, if a student is interviewing for a human resources position at an international company, that student may be better prepared if she/he is aware of how the terms of the U.S. aid to failing financial institutions has impacted global and domestic talent recruitment. An educated question about this Troubled Asset Relief Program might prove helpful during the interview.

We know from ACRL's Information Literacy Competency Standards that part of being information literate is being able to ask informed questions. This is part of a set of critical thinking skills that promotes independent, lifelong learning. Furthermore, the standards reinforce the idea that this set of skills must be built into to the structure of the educational experience. The standards committee writes, "Achieving competency in information literacy requires an understanding that this cluster of abilities is not extraneous to the curriculum but is woven

into the curriculum's content, structure, and sequence."[3] By tapping into students' motivation to impress a potential employer, question development and research skills become intertwined and immediately relevant to the students.

## Collaboration

We developed a relationship with Shawn Graham, director of career services,[4] over the course of several months. He initially approached us, wanting to learn about our outreach efforts, and how we taught company and industry research to students. After the initial conversation it was clear that we had shared goals as well as different skill sets. After more discussion, we were better able to articulate these shared goals, and began planning the workshops.

The workshop was livelier as a result of our work together. Graham was involved informally in the presentation, offering insights at strategic points. Given our different areas of expertise, this significantly increased the value of the workshop for students.

The Career Services staff has unique insights into the needs of students and employers; they visualize the relationship among students, alumni, and companies as part of a continuous whole. In talking with them about their observations on the interview process, we were able to "hear" what the students' information needs were, and develop research strategies to assist them.

We also gained a better sense of the language Career Services staff uses to reach out to students. This helped us to entice students to attend our other drop-in workshops.

The Career Services team recommends that students conduct a multi-tiered job search focusing on several areas of interest simultaneously, rather than relying on a single plan. For example, a student might prefer to work in human resources, yet might also be open to general management. Career Services recommends researching and building a network in both areas, using research databases as a part of this multitiered approach.

## Knowledge workers and information literacy

The concept of "the knowledge worker" was first described by Peter Drucker, a prominent scholar who shaped the field of management. The term refers to the shifting emphasis from managing raw materials and manufacturing to managing highly educated employees in a knowledge-rich environment. In an interview with *Harvard Business Review* in 1993, Drucker discusses how information is one of the main tools for managers, though "few are information literate."

He goes on to say that "knowledge is taking the place of capital as the driving force in organizations worldwide."[5] Interestingly, the term "information literacy" surfaced in Drucker's writings throughout the 1990s, though he describes the knowledge worker decades earlier. Lisa O'Connor writes about this as a part of her examination of the diffusion of information literacy concepts in the business literature.[6]

Louise Klusek and Jerry Bornstein also point out the frequent references to knowledge workers in the business literature. They provide an analysis of how information literacy skills are embedded in business careers specifically, and the workplace in general. After analyzing business and finance occupation profiles on the Department of Labor's O*Net database, they found that information literacy skills are highly valued in the workplace, and that "workers actually report using these skills in their jobs."[7]

Our collaboration with Career Services helped us gain insight into how business research skills are relevant to a corporate setting. Career Services staff helped us focus our search examples on practical applications and provided context. We witnessed how career research translates coursework-based information literacy skills to workplace applications. Assisting students in this way is an opportunity to help them recognize that research skills will be highly valuable in their careers.

## Outcomes and challenges

Many of the students were concerned about having access to library resources after graduation. Alumni do not have access to electronic resources at our university, so we took this opportunity to introduce them to our public library's resources. After using research databases for a meaningful life move, they are more likely to see the public library as a lifelong resource. Several students commented on the usefulness of the public library information.

We are working with Career Services to attempt to track the on-campus interview scores of those who attended this workshop. This is challenging, as many factors can affect the outcome of interview scores. Yoo-Seong Song reflects on the difficulty in assessing information literacy when instruction is provided outside credit-bearing courses, as a part of the co-curriculum.[8]

Of course, assessing students' information literacy skills related to coursework presents its own set of challenges. Nancy Cunningham's article in *Academic BRASS* applies the ACRL information literacy standards to business information in great detail, and has assisted us in refining instruction programs.[9]

As a result of working with Career Services on this workshop, we are sharing resources and making better referrals to one another. Our library's online research guide[10] is now integrated into the Career Services intranet for students, and they promote library resources during their weekly drop-in session, "Career Services Express." In addition to these outcomes, we are discussing the possibility of participating in a series of workshops they deliver to new MBA students, "Discovering your Career in Business."

We have learned a tremendous amount from working with the Career Services Team, and look forward to expanding our programs for students. We see a tremendous amount of potential in offering career-focused information literacy programs to undergraduates in all areas of study, helping them to enter the workforce with confidence and developing lifelong information literacy skills.

## Notes

1. Christopher Hollister, "Bringing Information Literacy to Career Services," *Reference Services Review,* 33:1 (2005) 104–11.

2. Yoo-Seong Song, "Collaboration with the Business Career Services Office: A case study at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign" *Research Strategies,* 20, (2007) 311–21.

3. Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, 2000, www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency.cfm (accessed May 4, 2009)

4. Shawn Graham is director of MBA Career Services at the University of Pittsburgh and author of *Courting Your Career: Match Yourself with the Perfect Job,* published by JIST Works in 2008.

5. T. George Harris, "The Post-Capitalist Executive: An Interview with Peter F. Drucker" *Harvard Business Review,* 71 (1993) 115–22.

6. Lisa O'Connor, "The Diffusion of Information Literacy in Academic Business Literature," *Journal of Business and Finance Librarianship,* 13:2 (2007) 105–25.

7. Louise Klusek and Jerry Bornstein, "Information Literacy Skills for Business Careers: Matching Skills to the Workplace," *Journal of Business & Finance Librarianship,* 11:4 (2006) 3–21.

8. Yoo-Seong Song, "Collaboration with the Business Career Services Office: A case study at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign" *Research Strategies,* 20, (2007) 311–21.

9. Nancy Cunningham, "Information Competency Skills for Business Students," *Academic BRASS,* 1:1 (2003), www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/rusa/sections/brass/brasspubs/academicbrass/acadarchives/volume1number1/academicbrassv1.cfm (accessed May 4, 2009).

10. Doing Business Research at the University of Pittsburgh, www.library.pitt.edu/guides/business/contents_nof.html. ✌