

Developing Professional Prowess: A Strategic Journey from Studentship to Prosperous Employment

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Abstract

In recent years, the use of Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS) has exploded, creating a disconnect between applicants and employers. This research effort provides applicants practical knowledge to help navigate post-pandemic employment, maximize efforts to meet ATS standards, and apply tactics that may improve outcomes. The purpose of this conceptual manuscript is to bridge the gap between being a student and transitioning to a successful professional. The essential aspects of this transition are rooted in the pivotal roles of résumé crafting and interview strategy. Drawing from existing literature, this research underscores the significance of adopting a proactive approach towards job searches, akin to responsive business models, to maximize career opportunities. It emphasizes the need for tailored résumés that align with job requirements while highlighting traditional and contemporary skills. Actionable guidelines are presented for résumé creation and interview readiness. Recommendations include customizing résumés to match job postings, highlighting achievements, and maintaining professionalism in all interactions. Interview strategies encourage thorough preparation, high levels of nonverbal communication, and the art of storytelling to convey competence and enthusiasm. While acknowledging the limitations and variability of individual circumstances, the manuscript asserts that integrating these strategies into educational curriculum can equip students with a competitive edge in the job market, particularly for entry-level positions. Additionally, this manuscript highlights additional research opportunities that involve empirical data and statistical analysis to extend literature even further.

Key words: Career planning, higher education, interviewing, résumés, differentiation

Introduction

Anecdotal horror stories have emerged in the mainstream media more and more telling of applicants applying to hundreds of jobs without receiving a single response (College Student Leaves People Shocked After Showing Results of Applying to Nearly 500 Jobs, 2024; Zhang, 2024). Recent articles also have employers bemoaning that “no one wants to work anymore” and that they are unable to find applicants. Clearly a disconnect exists between employers and potential employees (Bower, 2024). This

conceptual article looks to show research-based ideas on how students and other job seekers can better their chances at employment using inquiry-driven suggestions.

Significant research exists in terms of how organizations compete. Researchers have expounded theories on various business strategies and the operational, tactical, and strategic plans required to achieve aspirational goals and objectives. As is commonly referenced throughout the business world, *a goal without a plan is a wish*. Colleges, universities, vocational schools, and other educational institutions focus heavily on teaching students content relevant and required for their chosen profession (i.e., accounting, supply chain, law, trades, etc.). Just as every business goal should have a detailed plan of action (i.e., a strategy), aspiring professionals should have a detailed plan of action for transitioning from 'student' to 'gainfully employed.' A combination of a targeted résumé and an effective interview strategy is essential.

This conceptual manuscript identifies key enablers in achieving career success by transitioning from an anticipatory (reactive) to responsive (proactive) model for job searches. Anticipatory business models can be defined as those that produce product (i.e., build inventory) in advance of receiving firm customer commitments, thereby exposing the firm to potential obsolescence (write-offs) by customer demand not materializing. Responsive models are those that limit or delay production until targeted customer commitments are received, thereby minimizing financial exposure to the firm. These same implications to aspiring professionals in their job search are uncanny in that job seekers should also have a responsive (proactive) approach to landing a specific position by having a targeted résumé and a detailed interview strategy to differentiate themselves amongst other candidates.

The need for tailored, well-formatted résumés that not only align with job requirements but also highlight both traditional and contemporary skills is paramount for those students transitioning from a college student to young professional role. Further, the ability to discuss and engage during the interview process to exemplify qualifications, demonstrate soft skills, and show genuine interest and commitment to an organization is an essential proficiency. As such, a comprehensive understanding of these insights can significantly enhance an individual's chances of success in the hiring process. The inclusion of these topics and skills is almost always interwoven into business curriculum, and yet, this topic, and the failures that are still prevalent in the job search process, dictate a need to further study the matter and produce research to assist educators and student practitioners alike. The purpose of this research is to bridge the gap between concept and application, providing a summative, helpful guide for those seeking employment and transitioning from student to professional. This paper will first briefly review the literature surrounding job preparation via résumés and interviewing. Then, the authors will present guidelines for the creation of error-free, dynamic résumés and preparing to stand out in an interview. Finally, this manuscript highlights additional research opportunities that involve empirical data and statistical analysis to extend literature even further.

Literature Overview

Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS) have revolutionized human resources, changing the employment industry. When first introduced, fewer than 300 companies used ATS in 1995; now most employers use these systems to manage résumés and

streamline the hiring process (Holderman, 2014). ATS technology automates the initial screening of résumés, ensuring that only those meeting pre-established criteria are considered, significantly reducing the workload for human resources departments (Schlinger, 2014). The use of artificial intelligence within ATS allegedly optimizes the recruitment process making it more accurate to improve the overall selection process (Nanda et al., 2011). The system's ability to parse résumés and match them against job requirements using algorithms looks to ensure the most suitable candidates are shortlisted, although this can sometimes result in highly qualified candidates being overlooked due to formatting issues or keyword mismatches (Holderman, 2014; Schlinger, 2014).

A résumé is an essential tool for any jobseeker, and as such is a major component included in most business curriculum and applicable textbooks (Moshiri & Cardon, 2014). A well-crafted résumé is critically important, as it provides a summary of qualifications and establishes the first impression in the employment process. Throughout the literature, several key points surrounding résumé preparation have emerged. The use of active voice, action words, simple, high-contrast layouts, and the quantification of accomplishments are common themes standing the test of time (Diaz, 2013; Smart, 2004). Further, grammar, spelling, and general writing mechanics to the point of perfection remain imperative (Martin-Lacroux & Lacroux, 2017). In fact, one particular study found that hiring officials preferred résumés with less experience and no errors as compared to more experience with errors included (Charney et al., 1992).

Research also highlights the significance of refined, targeted résumés in the recruitment process, including the importance of tailoring résumés to specific job requirements, as customized résumés are more likely to capture the attention of hiring managers (Plung, 2024). As such, generic résumés can be overlooked in favor of those highlighting a strong alignment with the job description or altogether ignored by computerized ATS specifically looking for industry or position key words and phrases.

However, it should be remembered that the résumé is only a first step in the employment process. The goal of a résumé is not to secure a job offer on the spot, as it is unreasonable to think that a recruiter or hiring manager would review an application and offer a job from only textual information. Rather, the purpose of the résumé is to directly match qualifications to requirements and create interest which leads to an offer for an interview.

Interviewing is inherently stressful for a number of reasons: the key participants typically have not met before, the interview questions are unknown to the job seeker, and often there is an asymmetrical disadvantage in that the interviewer(s) almost always has a knowledge, experience, and/or information advantage. McCarty et al. (2004) highlight these very points by sharing that,

“Applicant anxiety has serious implications, as it may bias the predictive validity of job interviews and result in the selection of less promising candidates. For example, high levels of anxiety may result in a low job interview score, in spite of the fact that the candidate may demonstrate superior on-the-job performance if hired (pp. 608).”

These challenges are further complicated by a larger percentage of initial interviews now being conducted in virtual settings due to limited recruiting budgets and small staffs, travel restrictions, social distancing, or quarantining. Joshi et al. (2020) share that while video interviewing has become a common part of the hiring process for businesses, a reduction in casual interactions and observations leads to different challenges compared to in-person interviews. Video interviewing can lead to less dynamic conversations, an inability to ‘tour the facility’, fewer opportunities for a candidate to deliver an ‘elevator speech’ to a key decision maker(s), and technical issues that may be beyond the control of either party (e.g., spotty internet connectivity).

Connecting Literature to Action

While most all business curriculum integrate both assignments and classroom activities to develop a résumé, many times the mistakes that remain keep students from moving forward in the employment process. Recent research indicates that hiring managers spend an average of only about six seconds scanning a résumé and about 70% of employers say that personal deal-breakers of theirs were enough to reject a candidate before they even finished reading a résumé (Kolmar, 2022). Further, professionally written résumés have the power do more than just land an interview; they can also boost earning potential by 7% (Elmers, 2021). The power of a résumé is undeniable, and the following guidelines are offered for students transitioning to professionals:

1. Focus your résumé to show why you are the **best candidate for this particular position**, not just in general. Move away from the mindset that one cookie-cutter résumé can be identically used from one job posting to the next. Look through the job posting and the organization’s website to pull key words, skills, and requirements and use those terms verbatim. Often, résumés are initially reviewed by artificial intelligence within an application tracking system, and including these key words may improve chances of next round review. In fact, tailoring a résumé for a job posting increases the chances of getting the résumé shortlisted for the job (Kale, 2023). Keep in mind that the experience, education, and skills included will likely be dictated by the position.
2. Make sure to **include details**; do not sell yourself short. Many times, not enough information is listed to fully encapsulate all that has been accomplished in experience or education. For example, when listing education, it would be a disservice to only include the school’s name and degree. Think about including important details including academic awards, expected graduation date, relevant coursework completed, important presentations given, projects completed, university accreditation status, and GPA (Lee & Cavanuagh, 2016). As a rule of thumb, if one does not include their GPA, a recruiter may likely assume it is poor. At minimum, share a GPA that reflects work both favorably (e.g., major GPA, GPA in business curriculum, GPA Junior-Senior year) and honestly.
3. **Do not lie or embellish** about education, experience, or skills. More likely than not, the lie will be uncovered either upon an initial read or within the interview process and can be embarrassing and ultimately a waste of time. Further, many employers’

policies are such that if a misrepresentation is discovered after-the-fact, employment may be terminated (Kidwell, 2004).

4. Use a **simple, direct writing style**. Write short phrases rather than long sentences and start those phrases with action words (e.g., created, managed) (Holden, 2010). Remember that the tense of the verb chosen should match whether the action *has been* (in the past) or *is* (currently) being done. Writing briefly and directly does not mean writing vaguely; include all important details and any relevant keywords or industry-specific details. There should not be any large blocks of text within the résumé. The document should maximize effectiveness of words used to be easily skimmed.
5. Use the **chronological approach**, listing information from the most recent item to those that happened further in the past. Research confirms that this approach is most preferred by recruiters and hiring manager and can lead to positive application perceptions (Berg & Smith, 2020; Crini, 2022). Traditionally, the chronological approach lists work experience as the first section; however, the first section included should always be what the individual applicant deems as the most impactful; for example, an upcoming graduate with major prior work experience—especially if it is highly relevant to the targeted position—may elect to list ‘experience’ ahead of ‘education’ from a formatting perspective.
6. Keep it **concise**. As a rule of thumb, if you have fewer than five years’ experience, the résumé should be limited to one page. Focus on higher level jobs, pertinent years of education, and any technical skills that directly relate to the position. Need more room? Remove any objective statement (or similar) from the résumé—it is not needed and often considered “fluff.” Of course, if industry standards demand otherwise, or the job listed specifically requests such statement be included, follow those protocols, and include all requested information. A concise résumé can help pass the 30-second test and increase the chances of getting an interview (Harper, 2022)
7. Ensure the résumé is **error-free**, as mistakes and typos are seen as carelessness in the eyes on an employer (Sterkens et al., 2023). The layout of the document should be clean, professional, and easy to skim. The design should use clear, clean heading that visually separate all sections. Itemize list information and remember to always avoid large blocks of text. Also check to ensure that all résumé text is in the same font and size. Attention to detail matters.
8. Always check in advance to receive approval from those people you list as a **reference**. This approach enables reference providers an opportunity to proactively develop a list of strengths and achievements to substantially speak and advocate on your behalf. It also ensures that referent parties are not surprised by the contact, limiting their ability to contribute information, which would ultimately reflect poorly on the candidate. References should be people who can speak positively of your work ethic, skills, academic success, or personality (Cejka, 1999).

Interviewing is a combination of ‘art’ (i.e., the storytelling) and ‘science’ (i.e., the facts). The ‘science’ portion includes those elements (more static) that all prospective employers want to know (such as education, experience, and skill levels), whereas the ‘art’ portion (more dynamic) often evolves and progresses throughout an interview. While

many candidates overemphasize the speaking elements, active listening (an ‘art’ component) is important to pick up on recurring themes, opportunity areas, and expected deliverables across multiple interviewers.

Interviewees may become more comfortable and competent over time by having an effective strategy which highlights strategic fit for the specific role as well as the organization. In preparation for interviewing, the following guidelines are offered:

1. Consider an **informational interview** early in the process. Informational interviews, also called coffee chats, are a way to gain more background your potential industry and what the day-to-day work environment might be like. These meetings last only about 20-30 minutes and are casual in nature, taking place off site or via telephone/video conference. An informational interview can help you narrow your focus as to which jobs to apply to and is also excellent practice for traditional interviews (Crosby, 2010).
2. Basic **“blocking and tackling”** skills are essential (Simons, 1995). Nonverbal communication can impact your job prospects as much or more than the words you say or are included on your résumé (Nova & Susanti, 2022) Always arrive early and always bring extra résumés, as you will likely meet more people than expected. It is always better to over-dress than under-dress, so plan an outfit accordingly. The goal is to minimize anything that would become a distraction for either the interviewee or the interviewer. Immaculate personal hygiene is a must— “college hygiene” is not acceptable. Learn basic table etiquette, as interviews often involve a luncheon with other employees. Finally, a firm handshake and looking someone in the eye as one is speaking is a sign of confidence and character. In other words, don’t forget the basics!
3. Know about the **organization’s history** (founding, major products/services, major achievements, growth plans, recent financial performance and leadership changes, events in the news, and any other important key points in the news) to convey a sincere interest in the company and a comprehension of recent key events. Having a deep understanding about the targeted organization can allow the candidate to connect with the interviewer(s) on a personal level (Haseltine & Gould, 2013).
4. Effectively express that you are not looking for a job, but rather an **opportunity** (L. Smith, Senior Supply Chain Manager – Valvoline Global, personal communication, November 3, 2023). For example, if one is interviewing for an internship, one might say something like “I want to use the programming skills I have developed in college and through prior experience in my internship to help the company serve customers more efficiently.” For an upcoming graduate, one might say “I’m nearing the completion of my degree and want to start my career with a really innovative company.” Keep in mind, jobs and careers are not the same. A career progresses over time to higher levels of responsibility (and compensation). As such, never use the words ‘job’ and ‘career’ interchangeably. They are not synonymous.
5. Convey **professionalism** in all ways. Do not say unflattering things about current (or past) work experiences, coworkers, your university, degree program, professors, or classmates. Present yourself accurately and precisely, and always accentuate the positives (Krishnan & Srinivass, 2022).

6. Speak directly about **ways to help the organization**. Most interviewees talk about how organizations can help their personal goals. Reverse that! Instead, a candidate should share ways in which they can help the organization achieve its goals and objectives; this is key to effective interviewing. Ask about specific organizational challenges and objectives, and then accentuate innovative ideas for improvement (Plung, 2024).
7. Be sure to overtly convey **specific examples** (and/or strengths) in terms of each desired skill or competency listed on the job description (Plung, 2024). Use appropriate industry and/or specific functional language (e.g., supply chain) to gain credibility of commitment and mastery of concepts.
8. A major interview topic now often includes **flexible work arrangements (FWAs)**. FWAs often consist of some forms of working remotely (in whole or in part) and/or setting one's work schedule (e.g., hours, days, start/end times, etc.). Weideman et al. (2020) offers that employer human resources practices largely govern major components of FWA plans. Additionally, FWA opportunities may differ by industry, level of employment (e.g., entry-level employee vs. senior-level employee), and type of role (e.g., operational, tactical, or strategic focus). Be prepared to discuss, engage, and effectively convey your skills and openness to work as needed.
9. Have some **questions prepared and written down**. Interviews should always be a two-way conversation between the organization conducting the interview and the individual interviewing the organization (Barclay, 2009). Some great questions include: What are the future growth areas (new products/services, new markets, expansions)?; What are some of the major objectives of the organization (quality, customer service, innovation, costs, new markets)?; Does the organization/management provide regular updates to employees on KPIs (key performance indicators)?; Does the company/organization provide ongoing training and educational incentives (e.g., tuition reimbursement)?
10. Always specifically **ask for the job** (assuming it is a good fit) at the end of the interview. Do not make the interviewer wonder if you really want it (L. Smith, Senior Supply Chain Manager – Valvoline Global, personal communication, November 3, 2023). An effective closing could include: "After all the interviews and learning more about your company and meeting so many talented people, I really want the position and know I can make a meaningful contribution." Close strong!
11. Finally, it is key to remember that **desire often beats talent**. The smartest person is not always the most successful. Interpersonal skills, including the ability to work well with others, dedication, commitment, and perseverance are paramount (Dugal, 2019; Trofymenko et al., 2023). Never underestimate the importance of communication skills—to superiors, to peers, to direct reports, and importantly, if your role entails being in contact with the public at large, persons outside of a firm, such as, suppliers, customers, or other stakeholders. The ability to effectively communicate is often the difference between success and failure.

Future Research & Conclusion

While this conceptual effort focuses on tips for students transitioning to professionals, future research should look at how ATS are impacting job placements. Research should focus on number of applicants hired, how long the process took, number of jobs applied to, and whether the job remained vacant and for how long. Experiments should be conducted with dummy applications to various companies to test the validity of the job seeking ideas put forth in this research effort. While some research exists on the impact of ATS in the workplace, most is over a decade old and doesn't impact the current, post pandemic environment.

Future research might also work to empirically measure and ascertain the mastery of these skills. From a convenience sample level, all of these guidelines have been integrated into student instruction, curriculum, and encouraged actions over the past five years at an AACSB accredited regional university and have generated highly positive employer reactions. Upon data collection in a professional business communication course over the past two academic years (a required class for all business majors), mock interviews and résumé preparation reviews as completed by business executives yielded overwhelmingly positive responses. After meeting with a student, business executives were asked to assess student and classify their performance as Failed to Meet Expectation for Entry-Level Employee, Met Expectation for Entry-Level Employee, or Exceeded Expectation for Entry-Level Employee. Of the 197 responses for one academic year (Fall 2022 through Spring 2023), an overwhelming 99% rated students as meeting expectations (15%) or exceeding expectations (84%). While this data is anecdotal in nature, it is a valid checkpoint for ensuring that student success is at the forefront of curriculum and instruction and supports assessment of résumé preparation and interviewing skills. These students will ultimately represent their collegiate institution in their chosen fields, and their professional reputation and that of the University is at stake. Future research should better work to measure skill development and outcomes in students and alumni.

These guidelines on writing résumés and preparing for interviews are presented to improve the student experience when transitioning into professional careers in a summative manner. Interviewing requires an ability to “tell one's story” in a compelling and comprehensive way—albeit often in a short period of time. But generally, the preparation and presentation of a résumé precedes the actual interview. As such, it is not an “either or”, but rather, mastery of both collectively and holistically that often leads to securing a highly desired position.

Of course, it would be irresponsible of the authors to claim that these guidelines will guarantee success in the job search process; further, the direct success seen from integrating these guidelines into student instruction and curriculum may not generalize in all situations. However, these skills and tasks are an excellent starting point to help students gain a competitive advantage against other applicants, especially for entry-level positions where employers are looking for ways to differentiate candidates.

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