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How Ph.D. students can demonstrate to employers that they are career ready (essay)

Submitted by Joseph Barber on November 14, 2016 - 3:00am

Employers value candidates who have developed career readiness competencies throughout their diverse academic experiences. Graduate students and postdocs in particular should aim to incorporate those transferable skill sets into their professional development so that they can be seen as more than just researchers and teachers. More than that, they need to be able to provide tangible illustrations of such skills and competencies in action to convince future employers that they are qualified for professional roles.

In a previous post [1] I introduced the seven career readiness competencies we are developing at the University of Pennsylvania, based on the original National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) competencies [2]. I also gave examples of some of the ways that the first three competencies could be illustrated [3]. In this post I will focus on the other competencies from the list we are using at Penn: teamwork and collaboration, leadership and project management, professionalism and work ethic, and career management.

Teamwork and collaboration. Don't be fooled -- it is actually quite easy to be on a team. Indeed, sometimes it is so easy that you can find yourself on a team, a committee or a collaborative research project when you don't even want to be. Teamwork is more than just participating on a team, however. It is about being able to effectively deal with all of the chaos that comes from a group of individuals with their own ideas, approaches, experiences, knowledge, egos, quirks and associated bad habits that is trying to work together with a mostly common goal in mind. Teamwork is about developing and managing relationships, negotiating conflicting ideas and uneven workloads, and self-advocating for your own role, ideas and results. Simply stating "worked on a team" or "participated in a team project" on a résumé or in a cover letter doesn't illustrate any of the most important teamwork skills.

Not all team experiences are pleasant, but each one can be a learning experience that can help you anticipate future challenges

and hopefully address them more effectively. Think about the last team-based experience you had and try to list all of the different roles you played within that team (leader, motivator, scheduler, conflict resolver, devil's advocate, etc.). Think about the challenges that made that team experience complex and stress inducing. Then think about how you helped to overcome these challenges. Tell people why you enjoyed the experience, if you did. Tell them how you know your role was essential to the team's success. Show them how flexible an employee you can be by illustrating the different types of professional working relationships you established with a wide diversity of people.

Leadership and project management. Certain industries, like consulting, put a lot of focus on leadership skills when they list desired experience in job descriptions. But the employer survey results [4] that NACE collected in the development of their career readiness competencies show that leadership is not always seen as a vital trait. After all, most entry-level positions suitable for Ph.D. students or postdocs are generally not positioned as leadership roles -- those roles come later on in the normal career trajectory.

That can be a relief to many students and postdocs, because some academic experiences may not feel like they offer many opportunities to be leaders -- although that depends on how you define leadership. You don't have to be called a leader, or be in a leadership role, to demonstrate leadership qualities. If you have ever changed someone's mind or their perspective about an issue, you have demonstrated leadership qualities. If you have convinced other people to get involved in a project or program even though there was disagreement and a lack of consensus, then that is leadership. If you have been able to help others use their natural skills and abilities when working on a project, then that is leadership. If you think of leadership as more of a state of mind, then there are always opportunities to describe this competency in action even within a purely research setting.

That is not to say that seeking out actual leadership roles won't be helpful. Serving as the vice president of a group on the campus run by students or postdocs can sound impressive. However, much like participating in a team, just listing a fancy-sounding title can feel a little empty if you can't effectively demonstrate your skills in action. Be ready to tell a story about how you managed your emotions, and those of your colleagues, while working on a challenging project. Disappointment and negative results are a normal part of research; how did you overcome that? This part of the story is likely to be engaging to a future employer and represents a much more professional perspective of what leadership actually involves than merely listing leadership titles.

Professionalism and work ethic. Here is a list of common behaviors that I see from students on a regular basis that hint at a lack of professionalism:

1. Setting up an appointment with an adviser and then not showing up on the day of the appointment.
2. Registering for an event with no real intention of attending the event.
3. Turning up 15 minutes late to an appointment, but not apologizing for being late or making any mention of it.
4. Continuing to ask questions once an appointment has come to an end, despite the adviser standing up, opening the door and suggesting the next step of setting up a follow-up meeting to ask additional questions.
5. Leaving a panel discussion 20 minutes into a 90-minute program

These are all relatively minor faux pas and can be easily addressed, but they can also be additive. Once a student or postdoc shows a consistent pattern of such unprofessional behaviors, people will find it harder to imagine them being able to present themselves professionally when it is much more important (like during a client-focused meeting).

When it comes to demonstrating this competency to future employers, you must do so through actions. I have seen an offer for an internship at a prestigious nongovernmental organization rescinded because the student's tone was unnecessarily rude and dismissive in emails with an administrative assistant about finalizing the paperwork for the position.

If you want insight into what professional behavior looks like, spend more time talking to alumni in professional roles and asking them about their day-to-day work experiences and challenges. In fact, ask them what professional behavior looks like at their organization and actively listen to their reply so that you can model similar types of appropriate behavior. Respecting the time of your networking contacts, sending thank-you notes, choosing the appropriate tone for even informal communication, following up or showing up when you said you would -- these are all great demonstrations of this competency in action.

Career management. Like leadership, the career management competency isn't one that employers will ask about directly in job announcements, and it doesn't rank as highly in the list of essential traits [4] that they are looking for. But a good employer will hope that you can advocate for your own professional development and growth. In this way, if you do stay and grow within the organization, you will be able to contribute in meaningful ways at every point in your upward trajectory.

Whether or not career management is important from the employer's perspective, it is always going to be essential to you -- not just for the first position you are seeking but for every other position you will have throughout your professional life. The goal of "identifying and expressing skills, strengths, knowledge and experiences relevant to both the desired position and career goals, and identifying areas necessary for professional growth" can be achieved by working on developing all of the other career readiness competencies that I have been describing.

This won't happen in a week or a month, but by working with career advisers, mentors, supervisors and your peers, you can continue to develop as a professional over time. Who doesn't like lifelong learning? It sounds like something that most Ph.D. students and postdocs I know would, and should, willingly embrace.

Author Bio:

Joseph Barber is associate director of career services at the University of Pennsylvania and a member of the Graduate Career Consortium -- an organization providing a national voice for graduate-level career and professional development leaders.

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[1] https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2016/08/29/importance-knowing-competencies-employers-seek-essay
[2] http://www.naceweb.org/knowledge/career-readiness-competencies.aspx
[3] https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2016/10/17/advice-grad-students-demonstrating-career-readiness-competencies-employers-essay
[4] http://www.naceweb.org/knowledge/career-readiness-employer-survey-results.aspx

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