A Guide to Successful HF/E Career Preparation: The Ultimate "Not-To-Do" List

Ronald G. Shapiro, Ph. D., IBM
Anthony D. Andre, Ph.D., Interface Analysis Associates and San Jose State University
Arnold (Arnie) M. Lund, Ph.D., Microsoft, Inc.
Todd Barlow, Ph.D., SAS and UNC – Chapel Hill
Sara Waxberg, Baxter Healthcare Corp. and Tufts University

Welcome to the Fourteenth Annual Human Factors and Ergonomics Society Student Career Panel. While our typical career panel emphasizes what one should do to prepare for a career, avoiding various misconstrued approaches to career preparation is as important as carrying out known beneficial approaches. Thus, this year's paper emphasizes what one should "not do" in the process of preparing for one's professional career. Following the recommendations provided in this paper will enhance the graduate school experience, the post-graduate job search process and success in the job itself. Tried and tested techniques as well as new ideas towards preparing for and finding the ideal career path and position will be presented.

Introduction

Students looking for advice on how to best prepare for their professional career often focus on learning what they should or could do to optimize their graduate school experience and/or to establish their initial career path. However, often overlooked during this knowledge acquisition process are the known pitfalls of some common career planning approaches, misconceptions about the job market and employers, and simply unrealistic expectations about professional life in the Human Factors/Ergonomics (HF/E) field. The purpose of this paper is to provide students with an appreciation and understanding of what "not to do" when planning, preparing for, and beginning their professional career.

Preparation

During your years in graduate school you will need to make a number of decisions while will impact your satisfaction with graduate school as well as your marketability as a job candidate. Making the wrong decision may make you a less desirable job candidate. So, **do not**:

- Lock into a career direction too early, and focus too completely.
    There are lots of options out there, and circumstances may change before you graduate.

- Fail to explore career directions early on.
    You are exploring your academic world, but also spend a little time exploring industry and other areas that may be of interest. Just as you don't want to lock in too early, you don't want to be naïve either.

- Focus only on academics.
    As when you were preparing for college, don't just concentrate on academics. Back then you were demonstrating breadth and the diversity of skills that would help you succeed in college and contribute to the academic environment. Now you should be demonstrating the kinds of skills that will make you successful in your future career, and that will bring value to your employer.

- Just follow, lead.
    As you become involved with projects demonstrate leadership and professional involvement.

- Be nominally involved in projects.
    It is better to be deeply involved with a few projects than nominally involved with many.

- Work alone all the time.
    Demonstrate the ability to work on teams.

- Be concerned that your thesis or dissertation is not directly related to an employer's interests.
    While it sometimes is beneficial to have potential jobs which follow right from your graduate school research areas this is not essential. What always does help is to be able to explain how the concepts, findings, or the skills you acquired relate to the employer's interest. Remember, in addition to dissertation results graduate school provides the opportunity to demonstrate: (1) knowledge in an area acquired through coursework and studying for comprehensive exams, (2) an ability to think, (3) an ability to work independently, and (4) an internal motivation sufficient to complete a long-term project with few external rewards.

- Restrict your preparation to courses in your major department.

    Product development, where most of the jobs exist, requires diverse skills. No academic major covers all of the skills you need to be successful. For example, having business skills is becoming more and more critical for industrial jobs today. Understanding not only the industry you want to work in, but the industries your customers work in is becoming more and more critical. In this era of globalization, more and more purely technical jobs are going to the lowest bidder, who may be in a developing nation. The higher paying jobs are oftentimes those which require a deep knowledge of customers and technology.

- Miss the opportunity to participate in "real world" work or the opportunity to produce "real world" deliverables.

    University teaching, research, and service are all extremely valuable experiences. Nearly all graduate students have these experiences, thus they are necessary but not sufficient to gain the most competitive jobs in industry. You really need to have coop or internship experiences and to network with professionals in industry throughout your graduate school experience if you wish to secure a job outside of academia.

- Expect that your student "real world" work is of the quality expected of more experienced professionals. Do not worry about it either.

    Focus your student work on demonstrating that you understand how to perform product-related research, the process of user centered design (UCD), its milestones, and major deliverables. Some of our panelists believe that employers evaluate students based less on what they have achieved but more on their potential. Others believe that employers evaluate student applicants based upon what they were able to accomplish relative to what others have accomplished on their projects based upon their experience.

- Try to demonstrate skills that you do not possess.

    Creating a personal website to showcase your talents when those talents are not exemplary is not a good idea. Don't fake it. If you are not confident that you could lead a project using those skills, then don't pretend you are an expert.

- Believe that earning a graduate degree makes you stand out in the applicant pool.

    Earning a graduate degree sets you apart from the general population. It establishes you as somebody that might be worth interviewing. It does not set you apart from the people already working in the field or other job applicants with similar degrees.

- Underestimate the difficulty of completing your degree while working full-time.

    A full workday can tire you out and the idea of doing work on your thesis after doing work all day can be exhausting. Work expectations today in many industries may be 60 or 80 hours per week. Thus, it may be a challenge to find the additional time to complete your graduate program.

Search

Some individuals believe that at a magical point in one's academic career one should begin to look for a job. There are certain traps to avoid in the job search process. To avoid these traps **do not**:

- Be in a position where you need to **begin** to look for a job during your last year of graduate school.

    Network, be aware of what is going on in industry, complete successful internships and ideally your job search will only need involve looking through the lucrative job offers arriving in your in box. Not everyone will be that fortunate or that well prepared, so perhaps it is a good idea to continue to read this section.

- Ever pass up on an opportunity to network with someone (any one) at a conference like this one.

    Networking will be an integral part of you finding out about job opportunities and getting in touch with the right people to get your foot in the door. You want to get to know as many people as you can in the field because you never know when they will be able to help you out. Our professional community is a small one. Many people know each other. Thus, you might not be interested in what someone is doing, but you may be very interested in what their friends are doing.

- Sit silently in a room full of people waiting for a session to begin at this or any conference.

    Network with the people around you. Participate in sessions in a meaningful way. Potential employers may remember you at the opportune time.

- Go to dinner tonight with only your friends from school.

    You can do that next week. Make new friends, be they students or professionals, and chat with them. For example The Board of Certification in Professional Ergonomics (BCPE) reception is tonight (Tuesday at HFES). Go, make friends, and enjoy the free food after the student reception.

- Focus on the superficial side of the job like salary and stock options.

    Focus on the things that will get you up in the morning and excited about the day. Focus on where

you can make a difference for your employer, where you can live out your values, and where you can grow. Make sure you'll have a life other than work. When all of those things fall into place, and you are delivering and have passion about your work, money, titles, etc. may follow. In a job you hate, you may never even make it to the point where benefits matter.

- Focus on the hunger in the stomach and take the first job just because it is there.
  While it is a job, longevity and success come from being in a job you love. If you end up jumping from job to job it will get increasingly harder to find exciting work. You need to be engaged in the job long enough to achieve something (for years), and engagement can be mighty tough when the job really doesn't match who you are and who you want to be.

Application

Assuming that you've found a job that interests you and you don't want to make a big mistake… what should you avoid doing? **Do not:**

- Treat a job application like a paper that you are writing the night before it is due.
  You are trying to build a career in an area of user experience, and every point where you touch a potential employer should reflect that. Resumes, portfolios, and web sites should appear well designed, aesthetically pleasing, without error, and should be easy to navigate and use.

- Save labor by doing the same thing for everyone.
  Think about how you are branding yourself for your potential employer. Does the employer feel like you are writing for them? Did you clearly show them how you will bring value to their needs? Your application materials should be customized for their likely interests. This will take doing some homework, and the homework should pay off when you interview. When the design just looks bad (too busy, poorly laid out, etc.), or when the resume was clearly aimed at something other than the industry you are applying to work in, and your potential employer compares such a resume with one that shows sound design skills and clearly reflects a passion for the job the employer's choice is obvious.

- Depend upon yourself to be your own proofreader.
  Have someone other than yourself read anything you write before it goes out to help catch the dumb little errors that can sometimes bite you. The worst resumes are those that are hard to read, and where there are misspellings and poor grammar. Employers ask themselves "how will the candidate sell their

work within the company, if they can't sell themselves."

- Ever talk with anyone about how you would never work for company x.
  You never know who a person works for or knows. There is always the chance that it could get back to company x and who knows, you may change your mind and try and apply one day. You never know whom you may offend by saying something like that.

- Have outrageous pictures or writing on your web site (or on anything that can be located by typing your name into a search engine).
  More and more companies are "Google-ing" their applicants. Try and remember that things you put on facebook or myspace.com are public and can hurt your job search.

- Have a nasty joke, message, or speech about telemarketers or sales people on your answering machine.
  Make sure that your answering machine/voicemail messages are appropriate and professional when you're applying for jobs. A potential employer may call you at any time. At one time I (Ron Shapiro) called an applicant to discuss a job. His message said "if you are selling something hang up now." Since I was trying to sell him on a job I did just that. I wonder if his message was directed to me.

- Forget to check email and phone mail daily.
  If you don't respond within a few days to email and/or phone mail a company will assume you are not interested in a job. Applicants have been known to lose jobs by being away during spring break and not responding to email and phone mail.

- Hesitate to brag about yourself and your accomplishments.
  It can sometimes be hard to praise yourself to others, but during the application process you have to learn to sell yourself well. There's a line that you don't want to cross between confidence and arrogance, but talking about all the things you are good at is a must.

Resume

There are many things about a resume that can make it seem weak or sloppy. **Do not:**

- Omit a clearly focused **Objectives** section on the resume.
  This section must link the employer's needs with what you have accomplished in your career and academic experience, your potential and your enthusiasm.

- Just write down your job description, talk about your results instead.

    Your potential employer can, in most cases, discern what your job description is based upon a job title. They really care about what you did with your responsibilities, not what you were told to do. Really, show what you accomplished on the job… (Got it?)

- Include fake items or embellishments.

    Including these, if undiscovered during an interview, is a quick way to get fired (and perhaps worse.)

- Include "references furnished upon request"

    It is obvious that a you will furnish references if an employer makes a fantastic offer contingent upon references. Stating *references furnished upon request* merely tells the employer that you don't think enough of them or of yourself to list references.

- Follow a resume template that makes yours look like everyone else's.

    The name of the game is to distinguish your self from the other excellent applicants. How can you do this if you are using a standard template?

- Send resumes without a note or letter which is meaningful.

    A resume without a detailed note tells me (Ron Shapiro) that you don't care about whether or not you get the job. Indeed, if you don't take the time and effort to send a meaningful note, the chances are improved that your resume will be discarded without being read and/or acknowledged.

Interview
Phone or on site interviews are the time when you and a perspective employer decide if there is a good match. **Do not:**

- Be passive.

    The worst date one of our panelists was ever on was one where the date could only talk about baby sitting, and otherwise mostly answered questions with a yes or no. The worst interviews he's ever been on feel the same. We are in a field where being able to engage in conversation and wrestling with ideas is in the DNA of the field. Does the candidate appear curious? Have they attempted to inform themselves? Do they have a point of view? Are they helping me understand how they can contribute to my needs by answering fully, by asking questions for clarification, and by enriching our exploration of ideas? Do they ask insightful questions that should indeed be important for them to get answers? The answers to an employer's questions are only part of the

interview. As important, if not more important, is whether the interview itself reflects skills that the employer believes will be important for the job candidate on the job, working with others on the team, interviewing users, and so on.

- Believe or act as if you graduate degree has taught you everything you need to know about your field.

    You should be proud of your accomplishments in graduate school. However, during an interview, humility will serve you best. There are few things more likely to create a bad impression than behaving as if you know something that nobody else knows.

- Make fun of other companies, people, bosses, or products.

    In a small field like ours, words can travel fast. You have to be careful about what you say.

- Be ignorant of the latest technology developments affecting the user experience.

    The more you know about the tools and methodologies out there, the better. It will help you to apply the best applicable techniques and also help you convince your potential employer of the contributions you can make.

- Say I don't know it because there was no course on it in school.

    You don't want to tell the interviewer that you are limited to your academic experience alone. If you don't know the exact answer to something, you can describe how you would go about finding the answer or state that you will give an educated guess.

- Ask questions during an interview that you could get the answer to someplace else (e.g. by reading website or annual report).

    You don't want to advertise the fact that you didn't do your homework on the company. Make sure you learn all that you can about the company before your interview.

- Show your greatest incompetence's.

    One of our panelists recalls an interview where a candidate was trying to explain what a great problem solver he was. In fact, the panelist concluded that the problem cited was caused by poor planning on the part of the job candidate.

- Assume your audience in an employment presentation knows your subject matter.

    Avoid using lots of jargon or complex concepts. It is easier to prepare for an audience of people that will have no idea what you're talking about and skip over the basics if they are Human Factors (HF) people, then to create a high level presentation that you have

to elaborate on every concept to explain what you mean. One technique, if using a computer presentation, is to build a navigation path into your presentation so that you can go to or skip details as appropriate. In that way you are (and always appear to be) gearing the perfect talk for your audience.

- Say, "I have no questions", when asked during a job interview.
  You want to show a company that you are passionate and interested in working for them. There is always something you can ask. Prepare some good questions in advance.

- Forget to show up for an interview or a call.

- Fail to learn from failures.

- Be a passive interviewee.

- Look bored during an interview.

- Interview without having anything to say about "why me" (as opposed to others).

- Want a job so badly that you miss learning whether the job really is a good job for you.
  Listen as much as you talk. Really pay attention to whether the team and company fit you as well as you would fit the team and company.

Post-Interview
After the interview you can really hurt the chances of getting a position. **Do not:**

- Go silent, but don't be a pain either.
  The potential for leadership is shown in part by certain persistence, and certainly by style, but too much pressure triggers a "high maintenance" flag that managers will want to avoid. A polite thank you e-mail, an expression of interest and an offer to answer more questions is always welcome. If a manager or the HR people haven't gotten back to you after a reasonable period of time (although reasonable for the company is probably longer than what feels reasonable for the candidate), a polite question about where you stand makes sense. A couple of questions here and there perhaps following up on something that came up in the interview, and reflecting more homework and thinking, or a status update on other offers you may be considering, are both motivational and can help keep you at the top of the working stack.

- Allow yourself to become passive in the process.
  You have to be persistent enough when need be.

Offer
When you receive an offer **do not**:

- Feel that you have to immediately accept the offer.
  When one of the panelists received a first job offer coming out of grad school, s/he literally choked. The pause was taken as reluctance and they upped the offer. If there is something more that you want, push back a little. The best way to do it though, is to first think through carefully what you want and what you won't settle for (even if it means losing the job), and why. Some companies and/or managers will negotiate and some will not. Some will negotiate for some positions and not for others.

- Don't just counter an offer with a number.
  When you counter with a request, offer the rationale. In one job one of our panelists was concerned about his salary not being high enough to enable him to pay for a house, and that there was going to be a delay in his ability to sell his existing house. While the employer didn't increase the salary, they arranged for a low interest mortgage and gave him an extended housing allowance until the old house could sell. The rationale, gave the company the ability to work within the constraints they had to provide an offer that was more attractive.

- Assume that since you got the offer, you're the only one they want.
  There is a limit to negotiations and often starting out in your career there is a large pool of candidates and the employer, while wanting you, may not want you so badly that they will do anything to get you.

Rejection
You may be notified that you did not receive a job offer. In this case **do not:**

- Burn your bridges. In fact, build bridges.
  Use the experience. Many of us have not been a match for one job, but later were indeed a match for a different job. See if you can get feedback on why you weren't a match for the particular job.

Summary
A student spends a great deal of time preparing for a career. A few simple errors can offset years of study and preparation. Review this article periodically throughout your job search to be sure that you are not compromising your work effort through simply doing a few things that you should not do.

NOTE