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# Alternative Career Opportunities, or, Don't Sell Yourself Short!

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**G**ONE are the days of working summers in a pizza parlor and then obtaining a good job after graduation." That is a quote from an article in the November 24, 1993 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. The article was titled "Getting a Jump on Jobs" and was written by Beverly T. Watkins. In her article about cooperative education, I found the inspiration needed to begin to help students who should be looking towards and finding alternative career opportunities. For technical theatre undergraduates, this can be a very important part of their educational process; one that, perhaps, we as faculty and mentors, are not helping with as much as we should. This article will attempt to do the following: Part one - Discuss who is making an attempt to prepare their students for work outside of the field of study; pose the question of whose responsibility is it for preparing those students: faculty, universities and colleges, or the students themselves. Part two - What alternate career opportunities are out there for technical theatre students outside the realm of theatre; and how do they get that job?

The first question that tech majors need to ask themselves around the middle of their junior year is, "Am I being prepared to pursue career opportunities outside of my chosen field of study?" For most of you, the answer would be "No." Either you are not doing the preparation yourself, you are not aware of the need for the preparation, your faculty and/or mentors are not doing it with you, or there may not be an outlet at your institution of higher learning for them to give you that outlet.

In a survey that I sent out to all colleges and universities in Kentucky, only a small percentage (fewer than 3%) of the surveys returned acknowledged any help in the form of organized, structured post-graduation job opportunity discussions. All the forms returned indicated that the students wanted and needed that type of instruction. Also, in response to the question "If you feel you may have to look for alternate work plans, in what areas do you feel qualified?" most students responded with other tech theatre areas outside their area of expertise (which shows a very naive approach to their situation), or left the answer blank. So,

in just one small survey from one state, we find that the students are not receiving proper training to locate alternate career options in a structured classroom situation.

My survey was generated after reading Beverly T. Watkins' article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* about a program at Northeastern University where they have begun an extensive program of job training and placement. Northeastern University's President, Mr. John A. Curry, states that "America is beginning to understand that 'this' [higher education] can't be just study and 'that' [working] can't be just work." Therefore, Northeastern developed the attitude that cooperative plans would allow for study and growth in a professional job situation. Because of this new system of training, according to Watkins, about 40% of Northeastern's students go to work for the companies they have co-oped with. Let's look at the nuts and bolts of that program:

- At Northeastern, all undergraduates, except those in the College of Arts and Sciences, are required to co-op. (Most Arts and Sciences students co-op anyway.)
- In the 1992-93 academic year, 6,560 of Northeastern's 11,750 full-time students were doing co-op programs.
- Students earn an average of \$8,900 per year while they work.
- They pay no tuition while they work, and the university continues to cover them with medical coverage and other benefits.
- They have a staff of about 40 people who do the link-up with potential employers.
- The brokers use large businesses (IBM), cultural groups, government agencies, public and private not-for-profit groups, and local "mom and pop" organizations.
- A \$60,000 fund was established by the university's president (and another \$30,000 raised by the fine arts coordinator) for Fine and Performing Arts students. Because 60% of the jobs that can be used by the students in these fields are non-paying jobs, this fund allows those students to get that on-the-job training, and receive a stipend from the school instead of the corporation who hires them.

This information, which came from Watkins' article, leads to the conclusion that many of the students who do not have access to this type of placement service and co-op environment are at a disadvantage, especially if they are not receiving any type of organized job skills or placement help in their own area of study.

In the opening of this article, I stated that we would "Pose the question of who is responsible for preparing the students for finding work outside their field of study." Is it the university's responsibility? Northeastern seems to believe so. Is it the faculty's responsibility? Some faculty seem put out when asked to write letters of recommendations for their students. How would they feel about adding a one-hour course to their load to help their students land jobs? We might, if the administration will give us an hour release somewhere else. Given the time constraints, money constraints, and the history of offering such preparation for the students, I suggest all the students recognize that (as bad as this is; and it is bad) they will find themselves responsible for finding jobs, and certainly for finding alternate career opportunities.

This brings me to the second area of focus for the article: what alternate career opportunities are out there for technical theatre students, and how do they go about obtaining that job? Let us first look at what career opportunities are out there. According to *The Adams Jobs Almanac 1994*, the following careers are possible choices for someone with a technical background:

- Visual Artists — The job outlook for them is better than average. The demands for visual and graphic art will be very strong as companies try to accommodate a more visually oriented public. Average salary= \$21,400 per year.
- Computer Programmer — The job outlook is much above average. Annual salary around \$34,000.
- Hotel/Motel Management — Job outlook is much better than average. These employers look for communication skills, maintenance skills, and problem-solving skills. Salaries vary according to property size and franchise.
- Buyers (Retail) — Job outlook is average. Employers look for someone who can make quick decisions and has good problem solving skills. Need retail experience and on-the-job training. Annual salary is \$17,600 to \$34,600.
- Personnel Training/Labor Relations — Job outlook much better than average. Employers look for people with training in varied areas of specialization. Communication skills a must.
- Restaurant/Food Service — Job outlook better than average.

In *Career Selector 2001* by James Gonyea, the following listings can be found and are possible alternate career opportunities for tech theatre personnel: acrobat, actor, airbrush painter, amusement park personnel, airline personnel, architectural drafter, art teacher, audio-visual technician, bartender, bill collector, bricklayer, chauffeur, choral director, clerk/typist, clothes designer, comedian, computer operator, construction worker, cosmetologist, critic, dance studio manager, dance instructor, delivery person, demonstrator, disc jockey, museum exhibit builder, fast food worker, grip, illustrator, interior designer, janitor, landscaper, lobbyist, make-up artist, media director, narrator (voice-over), television/media work, office manager, painter, playwright, production coordinator, recreational leader, insurance salesperson, sales, sign painter, theatre manager. Jobs listed as “hot” that might fit as an alternate career choice are: artists, CAD designers, computer operators, data processors, equipment technicians, information officers (computer experts with personnel skills), and security systems personnel.

All of the above information was gathered from only two sources available at local bookstores. In order to locate other job possibilities, do not forget to look at the following: help wanted ads, employment services, your own network, alumni placement offices, professional associations (SETC, USITT, etc.), electronic databases, and direct correspondence with employers. Surely you can now see that there are other areas of work that would make you happy. Now, how should you go about finding the specific area for you?

The first task at hand is to evaluate yourself. Profile yourself. What are you interested in? What do you think fits you? James Gonyea breaks it down to the following criteria:

- The title of the job. Does it sound good to you? Is it appealing to you?
- Description of the job. Appealing?
- Level of aptitude. Does it require high, medium, or low levels of: intelligence, verbal skills, spatial skills, and coordination?
- What is the level of interaction with: data, people, things, etc.?
- Salary.
- Future outlook. Can you see yourself doing this job ten years from now?
- Environmental conditions. Inside or outside? Noisy or quiet? Hazardous? etc., etc.

- Physical demands.
- Does it fit your temperament? Working alone, controlling others, being controlled, making your own decisions...etc.
- How long will it take you to feel competent on the job?

*The Adams Jobs Almanac 1994* suggests listing things you enjoy, such as: working with things, working with people, working in an office, doing studies, evaluating technical data, repetitive activities, creative activities, helping people, working with machines, receiving admiration from others, seeing immediate results, etc. Then list things that you feel are your skills: understanding and using words well, mathematics, spatial relationships, seeing and/or working with details, using your hands, etc. And finally, evaluate your work ethics and your life goals to make certain that the job is compatible to you.

By evaluating your skills, likes and dislikes, and by researching what jobs there are and descriptions of those jobs, you are now able to locate an alternative career area. Now you must apply for those jobs that are available in the alternate career area. How do you do that?

According to Richard Lathrop in his text *Don't Use A Resume*, you are about to attempt to enter into a field that is not your first choice; a field that you are not quite prepared for. If that is the case, don't use a resume! By definition, a resume is "a summary of experience submitted with a job application." Resumes tend to list a summarized version of experience. They almost never say anything about your *abilities*. If you are entering a field where you do not have a great deal of experience, then your resume would be short and unfulfilled. You need an outlet that will allow you to express your abilities. You need to let them know what you can do; not what you haven't done.

### YOU NEED A QUALIFICATIONS BRIEF!

What does a qualifications brief look like? It will deal with the following information. It will:

- Focus on the needs of the *employer*, not on your past.
- List your abilities, not spend time addressing your duties.
- Indicate how *well* you perform, not just what you performed.
- It will stress accomplishments as an important part of your qualifications.
- It will reflect your character and personality as a live human being (resumes tend to describe people in dry terms that read like a wholesale catalog).
- *Most importantly*, aim at your intended career choice, not necessarily in the direction you have taken in the past.

The qualifications brief should include:

- Your name.
- Address and telephone number.
- Your objective.
  - Do not use past job titles. Instead use wide, general terms when stating your goals or objectives.
  - Focus your stated goals or objectives in terms that match the potential employer's objectives. Employers look to expand operations, increase production, increase efficiency, increase quality, increase income, increase sales, etc. Don't say you worked in the box office. Say that sales increased 65% during the term you had

control over the box office. In your objectives, be honest, show how you have met the employer's needs, and show your dedication to the cause.

- The approach: Should it be "functional" or "chronological"? If you are making a career switch, be functional in your approach. If there is considerable cross-over application in the switch, then be more chronological. The "functional approach" can best be served by using a paragraph of your employment history. List (in reverse chronological order) your job title, employer, and a brief description of the duties performed.
- Emphasize success. Prove your worth. List the scope of your work, effects of your work, accomplishments, words of praise received for jobs well done, appealing aspects of your personality, specific examples of successful performance.
- Education. List degrees earned, hours applied, awards, special honors, leadership positions, foreign language ability, etc.
- Personal data. Age (in date-of-birth style), height and weight (if they are an asset), marital status (optional), health, etc.
- End on a high note. The last bit of reading might move you into the "circular file" or the "interview" file. So end the brief with a bang! List special awards, most important award received, etc.
- **Avoid:** A cover sheet (the brief will serve as both), experience summary at the top of the brief, details about work over ten years old, all age references other than date-of-birth, reasons for leaving other jobs, pay scale, names of references (employers will ask for references when they want them), your social security number, all attachments.
- Add eye appeal! Make the brief look good. No dot-matrix printing jobs. Use good quality paper (neutral colors) and a professional printer (unless you have a laser printer), use wide margins, use headlines, use short paragraphs, make it look professional!

In addition to a qualifications brief, you will also want to have that resume and portfolio ready in the wings. It never fails. As soon as you get a job, another may come open to you in your field. You must remain prepared to go after that job with even more gusto. Attack the job you want. Get the job you can.

In this article, I have examined the following: Who is attempting to prepare students for work outside their chosen field? Who is responsible for that preparation? What are some alternate career paths for technical theatre students? And how does the student get that job? As faculty at institutions of higher learning we must prepare our students for life outside the womb of the campus. This means all possible avenues must be covered. Is it too much to ask of us to meet with our juniors and seniors once a week for 12 weeks to insure they will work? Is it too much to ask of us to write that letter of recommendation within 48 hours so that student can perhaps get that summer stock job?

Students, is it too much to ask of you to evaluate and profile yourselves? Are you willing to research the jobs available and the type of jobs that appeal to you? Do you have your qualifications brief prepared to sell yourself to that future employer?

All those things, and more, must take place to help students locate alternate career opportunities. Most importantly, learn about yourself. Figure out what you can do and what will make you happy. Let those people know that you can do that job. By being aware of the possibilities of work areas that are out there, and by preparing yourself for those options, you can get that carry-over job! Don't sell yourself short: sell yourself!

**REFERENCES AND NOTES**

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