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## A Formative Evaluation of a Master's-Level Career-Coaching Course for Performance Improvement Students

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## A Formative Evaluation of a Master's-Level Career-Coaching Course for Performance Improvement Students

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A Formative Evaluation of a Master's-Level Career-Coaching Course  
for Performance Improvement Students

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**Abstract**

We conducted a formative evaluation of an iteratively evolving career-coaching course. All eleven master's students who had enrolled in the course between Winter 2016 and Fall 2017 participated in the evaluation. Our evaluation addressed three research questions: To what extent does participation in the career-coaching course affect participant confidence? To what extent did participants attain their stated course goals? To what extent did career-coaching contribute to participants' current job situation? Analysis of quantitative and qualitative survey responses indicated that participants consistently reported increased levels of confidence after career coaching in terms of their ability to identify appropriate job positions, pursue job opportunities, reflect on their own development, and their overall career readiness. Most participants also reported that they met their goals and valued their career-coaching experience. At the time of the survey, five of the participants reported that they had found jobs within the field.

PULL QUOTES

“Participants consistently reported increased levels of confidence after career coaching...”

“All participants reported that they found value in the course...”

## A Formative Evaluation of a Master's-Level Career-Coaching Course for Performance Improvement Students

### Introduction

#### Background

A host of publications laments the lack of workplace readiness of college graduates (e.g.: Burrus, Jackson, Xi, & Steinberg, 2013; Cabellero & Walker, 2010; Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Casner-Lotto, Rosenblum, & Wright, 2009; Conference Board, 2008; Hart Research Associates, 2015; Hurst, Azevedo, & Hawranik, 2018; Oliver, Whelan, Hunt, & Hammer, 2011; O'Neil, Jr., Allred, & Baker, 1997; Rainie & Anderson, 2017; Society for Human Resource Management, 2008). Likewise, other publications claim similar readiness gaps also exist in students graduating from graduate school (e.g.: Colwell, 2010; Doe, 2015; Ezzo, 2013; Rose, 2012; Wendler et al., 2010; Wendler et.al, 2012). This situation represents a shared responsibility to decrease ramp-up time for newly graduated professionals to reach competent performance in the workplace. Among other responsibilities, universities are responsible for producing workplace ready graduates. Further, businesses are responsible for onboarding these graduates effectively and efficiently (Villachica, Plumlee, & Svenson, 2014).

Responding to these trends, universities have sought to improve their offerings. For example, Wendler et al. (2012) suggested that universities make career-counseling services available to graduate students, track outcomes and job placement, broaden the focus of their courses to include professional skills, and enhance collaboration with industry and government through research and internships (p. 31-33). Rose (2012) recommended that universities

- prioritize professional skills training for graduate students,
- dedicate resources for professional skills training for graduate students,
- provide both technical and soft skills training,

- coordinate graduate studies and professional development activities, and
- assess ongoing activities (p. 30-33).

She also mentioned that Canadian universities are now providing workshops to graduate students on professional skills through academic departments and partner units (career centers, library, teaching services).

Seeking to improve the workplace readiness and career advancement opportunities of its students and alumni, our online master's-level Organizational Performance and Workplace Learning (OPWL) program in the Pacific northwest of the United States has also recognized that its student population has been changing. Before 2008, students in this program were instructional designers and workplace trainers who met a variety of learning and development needs for their organizations. These adult learners were typically about 42 years old and had 12 years of experience in the field. This population possessed deep experience in training, with much of it based in manufacturing and finance. Their previous experience yielded rich examples shared in their online course discussions. These students also brought their workplace skills to bear in completing coursework involving real projects for real clients. After completing their coursework and the degree, these former students reported professional advances in their careers.

By 2008, 8.7 million workers had lost their jobs in the United States (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2018) and were encouraged to upgrade their skills by returning to school. Where 1.9 million students aged 40-64 were enrolled in colleges or universities full time, that number had swelled to 2.3 million by 2011 (Airoldi, 2016). Our OPWL program received its share of those students. Joining our existing students in the program, these new students changed the make-up of our student body. These new transitional students were no longer long-time learning and development professionals. Instead, they were second-career professionals that had

worked on the periphery of the field, as well as recent undergraduates that were unable to get work and had no previous professional experience.

In addition to the emergence of two student profiles in our student body, the workplace itself was changing. In 2009, passage of the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health Act required hospitals to implement electronic health record (EHR) systems (Palabindala, Pamarthy, & Jonnalagadda, 2016). In 2010, the introduction of iPad further affected the workplace and workforce, fueling existing demands for mobile learning. In that same year, ten thousand baby boomers started turning 65 every day, beginning the mass exodus of that generation from the workplace. Ernst & Young predicted that roughly 75 percent of the global workforce will be millennials by 2025 (EY, 2015). The prevailing winds were changing the makeup of our student body. Our program needed to provide resources for their changing needs.

To respond to these trends, our OPWL program began revisiting professional standards, program outcomes, and strategic partnerships. We reviewed our coursework and began expanding opportunities for career coaching, internships, and mentoring. We have continuously iterated the workplace experiences that we offered our students. As depicted in Figure 1, the program draws on relevant professional standards from the

Insert Figure 1 about here.

- International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI);
- Association for Talent Development (ATD); and
- International Board of Standards for Training, Performance, and Instruction (IBSTPI).



These standards informed the following learning outcomes for the program:

- Rigorous
  - Improve workplace performance in a way that is systematic.
  - Improve workplace performance in a way that is systemic.
  - Improve workplace performance in a way that is consistent with established professional ethics.
  - Improve workplace performance in a way that is consistent with established professional standards.
- Responsible
  - Align performance improvement solutions with strategic organizational goals.
  - Make recommendations that are designed to produce valued results.
- Respectful
  - Collaborate effectively with others, in person and virtually.
  - Communicate effectively in written, verbal, and visual forms.
- Reflective
  - Use evidence-based practices.
  - Contribute to the professional community of practice.

As part of meeting these program-level learning outcomes, existing courses in needs assessment, instructional design, and evaluation already include a workplace experience component where students work with a client in a sponsoring organization to complete a performance improvement project. All student projects require data collection and analysis. Completion of these *real-world projects* requires students to build professional skills in data-driven decision making, virtual teaming, consulting, project management, and business acumen.

While students need to complete three different projects in these courses to graduate, anecdotal data that the program advisor and faculty had collected indicated that both professional and transitional students—as well as graduates—needed additional support. They need help navigating career choices, landing internships where they could complete authentic performance improvement tasks in the workplace, and meeting job announcement requirements that specify several years of workplace experience. Alone, these three courses featuring real projects and real clients could not ensure the workplace readiness of transitioning students.

To these ends, the OPWL program created career-coaching capability that eventually became a Foundations of Professional Development course. The course aligns with the International Coaching Federation (ICF) definition of coaching: “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential” (International Coaching Federation, n.d.). Other terms used to describe the career-coaching role are *career counseling*, *career mentoring*, or *career advising*. The research team has chosen to use the term *career coaching* as we feel it most closely describes the services that the course provides to the clients who participated in the iterations of the career-coaching course. The Foundations of Professional Development course also allows the career coach the flexibility to meet the desired goals of the participant as well as the level of structure that the participant needs. Some course participants need little coaching structure as they already have a sense of their goals for the coaching experience. Other course participants have a less defined sense of their goals and need more coaching structure, which appears in the syllabus excerpt appearing in Table 1. The course allows career coaches to provide the level of structure their participants need.

Table 1

*Course syllabus for career coaching students needing more structure*

<b>Week</b>	<b>Topics</b>	<b>Assignments</b>	<b>Key Deliverables</b>
1	Course Startup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Readings:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>10 Things You Should Know About Career Coaching</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Intake Assessment
2	Job Search	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Readings:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Barriers to Achieving Your Dreams and How to Overcome Them</i></li> <li>○ <i>The Ultimate Job Search Guide: Literally Everything You Need to Know to Land a Job You'll Love</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>• Identify 3 Desired Positions or Job Announcements</li> <li>• Summarize Your Time Spent on Assignments, Research/Reading, and Include a List of Your Lessons Learned. Prepare for Your Next Call.</li> <li>• <b>Optional Readings</b>--Student Self-Directed Searches                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>How to Conduct an Effective Job Search</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Submit 1 Job Description or Announcement
3	Career Development Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Readings:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Goal-Setting: Developing a Vision &amp; Goals for Your Career Plan</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>• Identify 3 Professionals Who are in a Position You Desire and Schedule a Time You Can Meet with Them to Explore Their Path to Getting There</li> <li>• Summarize the Reading to Include a List of Your Lessons Learned</li> <li>• Create a Career Development Plan</li> <li>• Summarize Your Time Spent on Assignments, Research/Reading, and Include a List of Your Lessons Learned. Prepare for Your Next Call.</li> <li>• <b>Optional Readings</b>--Student Self-Directed Searches:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Guide to Writing a Career Development Plan</i></li> <li>○ <i>Career Development Templates and Samples</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Draft Career Development Plan
4	Building Professional Networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify 3 Field-Related Professional Association Search</li> <li>• Plan to Attend the Next Available Professional Organization Meeting (In-person or Online). Determine if You are Eligible to Serve as an Officer on the Board or as a Volunteer</li> <li>• Summarize Your Time Spent on Assignments, Research/Reading, and Include a List of Your Lessons Learned. Prepare for Your Next Call.</li> <li>• <b>Optional Readings</b>--Student Self-Directed Searches:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>What is Networking and Why is it Important?</i></li> <li>○ <i>How Can I Build My Professional Network?</i></li> <li>○ <i>Ways to Use Social Media for Professional Networking</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>	2nd Draft Career Development Plan

5	Resume Writing & Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using the Job Description or Announcement Submitted in Week 2, Draft a Resume. Ensure the Resume is in Alignment with the Job Description or Announcement</li> <li>• Summarize Your Time Spent on Assignments, Research/Reading, and Include a List of Your Lessons Learned. Prepare for Your Next Call.</li> <li>• <b>Optional Readings</b>--Student Self-Directed Searches:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Types of Resumes and When to Use Them</i></li> <li>○ <i>Guide to Writing an Effective Resume</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Draft Resume
6	Cover Letter Writing & Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using the Job Description or Announcement Submitted in Week 2, Draft a Cover Letter. Ensure the Cover Letter is in Alignment with the Job Description or Announcement</li> <li>• Summarize Your Time Spent on Assignments, Research/Reading, and Include a List of Your Lessons Learned. Prepare for Your Next Call.</li> <li>• <b>Optional Readings</b>--Student Self-Directed Searches:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Guide to Writing Impactful Resume Cover Letters</i></li> <li>○ <i>Cover Letter Formats and Samples</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Draft Cover Letter
7	Interview Tactics, Techniques & Methods	<p>Prepare to Participate in the Mock Interview for the Job Description or Announcement You Submitted in Week 2.</p> <p>Summarize Your Time Spent on Assignments, Research/Reading, and Include a List of Your Lessons Learned.</p> <p><b>Optional Readings</b>--Student Self-Directed Searches:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Top Interviewing Tactics You Should Know</i></li> <li>○ <i>What Are the Different Types of Interview Techniques</i></li> <li>○ <i>The Best Tips to Prepare for an Interview</i></li> </ul>	Final Draft Resume Final Draft Cover Letter
8	Interview Tactics, Techniques & Methods (continued)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prepare to Participate in the Mock Interview for the Job Description or Announcement You Submitted in Week 2.</li> <li>• Summarize Your Time Spent on Assignments, Research/Reading, and Include a List of Your Lessons Learned.</li> <li>• <b>Optional Readings</b>--Student Self-Directed Searches:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Interviewing Mistakes to Avoid</i></li> <li>○ <i>How to Sell Yourself in an Interview</i></li> <li>○ <i>Most Common Interview Questions</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Final Draft Career Development Plan
9	Mock Panel Interview	<p>Participate in the Mock Interview</p> <p>Reflect and Prepare to Share on Gained Insights, Outside Resources, and Being a More Engaged Member of the Professional Community in Week 10</p> <p>Summarize Your Time Spent on Assignments and Research/Reading.</p>	Mock Interview

**Optional Readings--Student Self-Directed Searches:**

- *What to Do After an Interview*

10 Coaching  
Engagement  
Assessment

- Final Reflections and Key Lessons Learned

Course Evaluation

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The department also greatly expanded its internship capabilities to provide more opportunities for students to gain workplace experience hours and to create artifacts for their professional portfolios. The department also expanded mentoring capabilities by adding a 1-credit course, part of which, helped students identify and work with mentors to achieve a specified goal. This manuscript focuses on a formative evaluation of the career-coaching component.

### **A Formative Evaluation of the Career Coaching-Capability**

At the time of the study, the career-coaching course involved student participants working one-on-one with an ICF-certified career coach who held a Ph.D. in adult learning who was also an OPWL program graduate. The current version of the course involves participants working with a cadre of 6 career coaches, all of whom have worked in the field at least 3 years after graduation. Five of the current coaches either possess coaching certificates or are earning them. One coach holds a Ph.D. in psychology and is not pursuing a coaching certification. The course supports two outcomes:

- *Learning*: Improve professional readiness to enter and advance in the OPWL workplace.
- *Development*: Build self-confidence addressing societal, organizational, and personal issues affecting course completion as well as entry and advancement into the OPWL workplace.

Given the importance of self-confidence in meeting the course's outcomes, we employed Keller's ARCS model (2010) to create a motivational design for meeting the course's cognitive and developmental learning outcomes. As shown in Figure 2, this model consists of the following components and their corresponding strategies: Attention, Relevance, Confidence, and Satisfaction. Career coaches are responsible for gaining and maintaining the attention of their participants. They also work with them to establish relevant goals and monitor progress against them. Completion of the following learning and development activities should produce Confidence and Satisfaction:

- Learning Activities
  - Target OPWL workplaces, positions, and jobs
  - Maximize coursework learning opportunities
  - Pursue an OPWL job opportunity (i.e., resume, cover letter, job targets)
  - Reflect on personal development through goal setting and one-on-one coaching/mentor conversations
- Developmental Activities (International Coaching Federation, n.d.)
  - Discover, clarify, and align with what the client wants to achieve
  - Encourage client self-discovery
  - Elicit client-generated solutions and strategies
  - Hold the client responsible and accountable

Insert Figure 2 about here.

### **Research Questions**

With the career-coaching course in its fifth iteration, the time had come to conduct a formative evaluation. Why conduct such an evaluation for a 1-credit elective course? First, every

academic credit costs our students money, and we wanted to be sure that the Foundations of Professional development course was producing expected benefits. Second, the OPWL department views the course as a force multiplier. Career coaching targets goals involving the translation of coursework into decisions about where to work, where to apply, how to customize resumes and cover letters, and how to handle interviews. Without these building these professional skills, some students who otherwise did well in coursework could find themselves unable to confidently apply their skills and knowledge in ways that would meet their professional goals. To these ends, we sought to answer the following three research questions about participant experiences with the course.

RQ1: To what extent does participation in the career-coaching course affect participant confidence?

- identifying appropriate OPWL job positions
- pursuing OPWL job opportunity
- reflecting on own OPWL development
- overall career readiness
- job positions sought
- career-coaching goals
- extent of goal achievement
- best and most challenging aspects of experience

RQ2: To what extent did participants attain their stated course goals?

- job positions sought
- career-coaching goals

- extent of goal achievement
- best and most challenging aspects of experience

RQ3: To what extent did career-coaching contribute to participants' current job situation?

- current employment status
- job seeking (i.e., applications, interviews, offers received and accepted)
- relative contributions of coaching, internships, and other factors
- job perceptions (i.e., skills and expectations)

### **Significance**

According to a recent Council of Graduate Schools/Graduate Record Examinations Survey, more than 1.8 million graduate students were enrolled in certificate, masters, or doctoral programs, in the United States during the Fall of 2016. Of them, 74.2% enrolled in master's programs. These students earned 572,907 master's degrees in the academic year of 2015-16 (Okahana & Zhou, 2017). Polson (2003) notes that universities once viewed graduate students as extensions of their undergraduate counterparts who could handle their studies without additional services. She contends that graduate students are more likely to work full-time and enroll part-time. They may need additional services to help them socialize their roles as graduate students, orient them to their program of study, move through the graduate experience, and prepare for their careers. In addition, Peterson (2006) reports that graduate students can face difficulties balancing their academic pursuits with their personal lives. Students in our program must balance competing demands of coursework, jobs, families, and personal lives.

These graduate students are hoping to land jobs in academia, industry, government, nonprofit, and military settings (Bellow & Weissinger, 2004; Lehker & Furlong, 2006). A lack of



workplace readiness and effective onboarding into the workplace artificially increases ramp-up time to competent performance. Decreasing the time it takes newly employed professionals to reach competency benefits universities, employers, and graduates alike.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Having obtained Internal Review Board approval for this study, we collected scaled and open-ended self-report survey responses from the 19 participants who participated in career-coaching and/or internship experiences between January, 2016 and December, 2017. Of them, all 11 participants who participated in different iterations of the career-coaching course completed the surveys. Their online survey results represent a census of this target population. Academic records indicate that participants completed their career coaching experiences in Spring 2016 ( $n = 1$ ), Fall 2016 ( $n = 2$ ), Spring 2017 ( $n = 5$ ), and Fall 2017 ( $n = 3$ ). The compiled survey data provided a snapshot of participants' career-coaching experience across four semesters.

### **Instrument**

After creating a draft version of the survey, we considered different options for piloting this instrument. To simplify the interpretation of survey results, we wanted to obtain a census of all students who had completed career coaching and internship experiences. This desire for a census, as well as the relatively small numbers of students who had completed career coaching and internship experiences, ruled out piloting the survey using a sample drawn from the larger population of all participants. Instead, we opted to conduct a formative evaluation of the survey using a hybrid approach that combined expert review by the three career coaches who taught the Foundations of Professional Development course and an evaluation question that asked the coaches to provide feedback based on their experiences completing the survey (Tessmer, 1994).

The principle investigators acted as the evaluators for the expert review. In an email message, they asked the coaches to assume that they were a student who had completed the career coaching course or internship. The coaches were asked to respond to all online items and to note anything they found confusing or causing discomfort. They were also asked to respond to the length of the survey and provide input about questions we should add. Two coaches provided feedback that led to revising survey items, adding a few questions, and changing the stemming in the survey flow. The third career coach declined to participate, claiming that she graduated from the program too long ago and only recently started her career coaching work.

After completing the formative evaluation of the survey, we used Qualtrics to administer the final version of the online survey between March and April of 2018. The survey consisted of 49 items. Participants completed two survey items to provide their informed consent. They responded to 19 items about their career-coaching experiences. They could also complete up to 11 additional items about jobs in the field. The bulk of the quantitative items consisted of unipolar 6-point rating scales (*1 = Not at all, 5 = Extremely, 0 = Not applicable*). The survey also included 7 open-ended items about targeted job positions, career-coaching goals, best parts of career-coaching experience, most challenging parts, anything else about career-coaching experience, and anything else about their current job.

### **Procedure**

We sent the survey invitation centrally through Qualtrics' email application. We monitored survey responses and sent up to three reminders (including personal requests by our program advisor) to program participants to reach a 100% response rate. After we collected the data, we removed personal identifiers including all names, geographic references, names of coaches or internship locations and employer names. We inspected responses to scaled items to

see if participants rated any scaled item as not applicable. Owing to the function of branching logic in the survey, we found no such responses. Next, we removed responses where a participant had indicated that a survey item was not applicable.

We employed a qualitative analysis in our review of the survey data. We created frequency distributions to analyze ranked items. We used an inductive thematic analysis for open-ended items (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016). To this end, we completed the following tasks:

1. *Data familiarization*: We all read and re-read open ended comments to become familiar with them and the patterns they contained.
2. *Data coding*: A member of the team manually labelled each data item within each open-ended item to generate initial in-vivo codes.
3. *Theme building*: A member of the team combined the codes into overarching themes related to our research questions.
4. *Theme refining and testing*: The research team met to review and reach consensus on each code and its association with a theme.

## Results

### Career Coaching and its Effect on Participant Confidence

As part of Keller's (2010) ARCS motivational design for the career-coaching course, the project team wanted to determine the extent to which the course affected participant confidence. To this end, participants answered a set of four paired items about their perceived confidence related to their preparedness to identify and pursue job opportunities before and after career coaching. Item scales ranged from 1 – *not confident* to 5 – *completely confident*. A response of 3 indicates that participants chose a midpoint between not confident and extremely confident.

Table 2 summarizes participant responses regarding their confidence before and after the career-coaching course.

Table 2

*Pre-post comparison career-coaching questions*

Item: How confident were you in your	Scale	Before Career Coaching		After Career Coaching	
		n	%	n	%
ability to identify appropriate OPWL job positions	1 - Not confident	1	9	0	0
	2	3	27	0	0
	3	5	45	2	18
	4	2	18	7	64
	5 - Extremely confident	0	0	2	18
	Total	11	100	11	100
ability to pursue an OPWL job opportunity	1 - Not confident	5	45	0	0
	2	2	18	0	0
	3	4	36	4	36
	4	0	0	4	36
	5 - Extremely confident	0	0	3	27
	Total	11	100	11	100
ability to reflect on your own OPWL development	1 - Not confident	0	0	0	0
	2	4	36	0	0
	3	4	36	1	9
	4	3	27	6	55
	5 - Extremely confident	0	0	4	36
	Total	11	100	11	100
overall career readiness	1 - Not confident	3	27	0	0
	2	2	18	0	0
	3	4	36	3	27
	4	2	18	3	27
	5 - Extremely confident	0	0	5	45
	Total	11	100	11	100

Participants consistently reported increased levels of confidence after career coaching in terms of their ability to identify appropriate job positions, pursue job opportunities, reflect on their own development, and their overall career readiness. Where 36% of participants indicated they lacked confidence in their ability to identify appropriate job positions before the career-coaching course, 0% of them reported such lack of confidence after career coaching. Where 18% of participants reported feeling confident before the course, 82% reported feeling confident after completing the course.

Similarly, 63% of participants reported that they were not confident about their ability to pursue an OPWL job opportunity before completing the career-coaching course. None of them reported a lack of confidence after the course. Where no participants reported feeling confident about their ability to pursue a job opportunity before the course, 63% reported feeling confident about pursuing these opportunities after completing the course.

A similar pattern emerged regarding participants' responses about their confidence regarding their ability to reflect on their own professional development in the field. Before completing the career-coaching course, 36% of participants reported that they were not confident in their reflection ability. After completing the course, no participants reported a similar lack of confidence. Before completing the course, 27% of participants reported that they felt confident about their ability to reflect on their own professional development. After the course, 91% reported that they felt confident about this ability.

A similar pattern emerged regarding participants' responses about their confidence in their overall career readiness. Before completing the career-coaching course, 45% of participants reported that they lacked confidence in their career readiness. After completing the course, none of the participants reported this lack of confidence. Before career coaching, 18% of participants reported feeling confident about their overall career readiness. After completing the course, 72% of participants reported that they felt confident about their career readiness. Most of the career-coaching participants reported spending between 2-5 hours per week on the course. However, two participants reported spending between 20-25 hours per week.

### Attaining Stated Course Goals

**Job positions sought.** Participants answered an open-ended item to report the job positions they had targeted. As illustrated in Figure 3, participants sought an array of career interests. The range of job positions grouped generally into five categories: instructional design, training, development/coaching, human relations, operations/management, and other. The most frequently listed areas were instructional design/performance consulting ( $n = 11$ ), and management or administrative ( $n = 5$ ).

Insert Figure 3 about here.

**Career-coaching goals.** Participants responded to an open-ended item to report their goals for the career-coaching experience. They reported a variety of goals, which clustered around the following three themes:

- building on their OPWL experiences,
- finding the right employment, and
- engaging in personal reflection.

As we analyzed these three themes, we understand the ultimate goal for all of the participants' tracks toward employment. For some that starts with a focus on building skills, and for others it requires a reflection on existing skills and affective readiness to seek a new position—whether with their current employer, another employer, within their current industry/sector, or by branching out. A few of the responses fell into both themes; however, most of the responses fell firmly into the category we identified as “finding the right employment.”

The right employment theme included a strong emphasis on skills, whether enhancing those that participants felt like they already had or building new skills. Specifically, the theme included, “building a resume,” “improving networking skills,” “interviewing skills,” and

“writing cover letters.” Another variation of the skills-based answers included gaining better insight into the field when participants were shifting from other careers into OPWL related positions. These responses stressed “gaining insights” and to figure out “if and how” they could make a leap from one career into a new area. One respondent expressed social norming indicating a desire for “comparison to other OPWL graduates/job candidates.” Perhaps not surprisingly, those new to the OPWL field sought assistance articulating what they have learned in the program so that they could secure an interview and a position. For example, one participant, a “life-long federal employee” with both military and civilian experience, explained that he initially sought to “learn how I could transition to the private sector.” During the coaching experience, however, he shifted his goals to an internal position and portrayed that shift as a positive outcome.

Other participants blended reflection on the field as well as their own experience. For instance, one was deliberating between pursuing a doctoral degree and trying to “move up the ladder” in his/her current field. Others were actively weighing various options within the field including private versus public organizations (e.g. “[...] identify the type of organizational structure in which I want to practice OPWL”). Many of these reflective type goals echoed the type of sentiment expressed by the respondent who said, “I was hoping to get a job, but I got a lot more out of it. I didn't find a job, but I got closer to that goal by learning to understand how I can be successful in the HPT field.”

**Achieving goals.** According to Keller’s (2010) ARCS theory of motivational design, gaining and maintaining attention, showing relevance, and building confidence should lead to satisfaction. The survey used several items to measure satisfaction with the career-coaching course. As depicted in Table 3, we asked participants to rate (1-5) the extent to which they felt

they had met their goals and their perception of the overall value of their coaching experiences.

The majority of participants reported that they achieved their goals (72%) and valued their coaching experience (82%).

Table 3

*Achievement of Course Goals*

Item	Scale	n	%
To what extent did you achieve your goals after completing the career-coaching course?	1 – Achieved no goals	0	0
	2	0	0
	3	3	27
	4	4	36
	5 – Achieved all goals	5	36
Total		11	100
How would you rate the overall value of your career-coaching experience?	1 – No value	0	0
	2	0	0
	3	2	18
	4	2	18
	5 – Extremely valuable	7	64
Total		11	100

**Best and most challenging parts of career-coaching.** The survey used two open-ended items that asked participants to share the best and most challenging parts of their career-coaching experience. These findings are discussed below.

*Best parts.* Many responses to the best part of the career coaching experience mentioned the personalized attention that participants received that fostered reflection, confidential discussions, and guidance—among other benefits. While all their responses offer insights about their perceptions, a few of them capture themes that resonate through the set of responses. These are illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4

*Best and most challenging parts of career coaching*

	Themes	Sample comments
Best parts of career coaching	One-on-one coaching	“[Name] was so encouraging and supportive. It was great to have someone (who wasn't me) reflect back to me what they thought I knew, where I stood in



	fosters reflection	relationship to my peers, and what the possibilities were, especially ones I hadn't thought of.”  “Dialogue with the career-coach; sharing my challenges and difficulties faced in my path to professional growth/career change, and obtaining insight from a real world professional.”
	One-on-one coaching fosters confidential discussions	“Having experienced people to talk to about my insecurities, questions related to the industry, and resume improvements gave me the boost I needed in my confidence. I am changing careers so it was a great value to me to have individuals to lean on.”
	One-on-one coaching fosters guidance	“Having a sounding board to discuss my concerns and help me synthesize a plan that best fit my interests. Also advice on how to be successful in the OPWL degree program as I continue working towards my Masters. Helped me to refine my interview skills and resume.”  “The guidance provided by the instructor, who occupied the valuable space between mentor and coach. Through active questioning and targeted assignments, the instructor led me on a journey of discovery during which thoughts were focused, goals were narrowed, and objectives were achieved.”
	Coaches exhibit helpful behaviors.	“I liked getting to know my advisor, [name]. She was very supportive, even in areas that weren't specifically related to coaching.”
Most challenging parts of career coaching	Need clearer outcomes and deliverables	“Not having a clear outcome or structure (outside of coaching calls). However, this expectation was my own, and through no fault of my coach.”  “Believing what [my career coach] said and putting in the time.”  “My career coach felt that I was professionally and academically prepared for most of the positions I applied for during this course, but the employers did not appear to share the same view as my coach (recent OPWL Masters [sic] degree was not enough, as all employers were asking for current 1-2 year experience in that field), I imagine due to the competitive job market.”
	Needed more direct guidance from coach	“an outlined program with goal markers or projects to be completed over the course of time would have been more valuable. For example, within 30 days revise resume/CV, after 45 days mock interview 1, 60 days identify jobs you want to apply for/apply for them ...etc.”  “if this career-coaching course could tie program learning objectives to real life work experience (e.g., [...] short term unpaid internship opportunities with local employers for roles pertinent to the OPWL Masters to allow graduates to obtain that real world

	hands on experience that the employers are demanding.”
Difficulty of developing reflective practices	“Knowing what I wanted for my career”
	“Submitting to the process of self-discovery”
	[It’s impossible to] “flip open a textbook and find a solution.”
Managing participant expectations	“Honestly, updating my resume and preparing to interview for a job”
	“finding open positions to apply for” given the participant’s regional parameters,
	“just the constant waiting for possible callbacks for interviews from prospective employers.”

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***Most challenging parts.*** We also asked participants to describe the most challenging part of the career-coaching course. Their responses ranged widely. Some participants wanted more outcomes and clearly delineated deliverables. Another participant expressed a perceived gap between the coach’s confidence in him/her and the feedback coming from the field. Other participants wanted more structure in the course with an instructor providing more direct guidance. Another theme concerned managing participant expectations of their career-coaching experience. These challenges were largely a result of the job search process, some of which are well beyond the participants’ and coaches’ control while others simply require doing the required work or “putting in the time” to secure a position. The sense we get from these responses is that participants are not necessarily expecting the coach to overcome these challenges – they are largely part of the job search process. Another participant who selected the midpoint (3) on the overall satisfaction scale for the career-coaching course commented about the value of coaching for someone who has extensive work experience:

In general the career-coaching experience was positive and may be more helpful for younger graduates with less work experience. In my case, I already had extensive experience in interviewing, updating my resume and cover letters (and from the feedback

received from the coach, I was pretty much on track), but for my specific needs, I feel that the opportunity to have real life hands on experience in a Learning and Development, Instructional Designer, or HR role would have been more helpful to me - possibly open up more job options. From feedback that I have received from the HR and Learning and Development Dept [sic] at my current organization and other organizations, although the OPWL program is an advantage to have on my resume, they are more interested in current real life experience in that field. Sometimes I feel the Academic perspective is much different than the professional one.

**General trends.** The number of positive statements far outnumbered statements to the contrary. Participants stressed the connection they felt with mentors and the confidence they gained from the experience. They described their coaches as encouraging, supportive, someone to lean on, attentive, and caring. When participants used metaphors to describe their experience in mentoring those comments thematically depict moving toward clarity. For example, “I no longer feel like I am blindly walking into the unknown. My coaches shared valuable information with me and allowed me the opportunity to practice in a safe environment I prepared for this big change.” Another wrote, “I began the experience somewhere in the middle of an existential wilderness, and ended at the edge of the woods with a clear path forward.” A third offered, “The instructor led me on a journey of discovery during which thoughts were focused, goals were narrowed, and objectives were achieved.”

We looked carefully at the combination of the scale and narrative responses related to satisfaction with the experience, challenges, and meeting initial goals. We began by examining the data from participants who selected the midpoint of the scale (3 of 5) in response to the question, “To what extent did you achieve your goals after completing the career-coaching

course?” In two of the cases, the participants seemed to be looking for an assessment or evaluation of their potential in the field. For example, one wrote, “...determine my skill levels in comparison to other OPWL graduates” and the second participant wrote a detailed goal statement. This participant was hoping the career coach would, “assess my current process and formats and offer insight and suggestions for best practices; better identify what I was already doing correctly and what I needed to improve/change.” When we look at the same person’s response to “what was the most challenging” part of the career-coaching experience, his/her response was, “Although the career-coaching experience was positive and helpful to build self-confidence and ensure that I was on the right track to professional growth opportunities, I felt that the job market and local organizations did not align with the positive feedback I received from the coach.” Ultimately, this participant did not meet a goal of gaining employment, and the inability to attain this goal apparently affected satisfaction with the coaching experience.

### **Extent to Which the Career Coaching Course Contributed to Participants’ Current Job Situation**

**Current employment status.** The survey asked participants to select the answer that best reflected their current employment status. As summarized in Table 5, almost half of the respondents had obtained a new job. Almost half were actively searching for a new job. One person had not applied for any positions but reported that finding a new position was not his/her goal.

Table 5

*Current Employment Status Responses*

<b>Item</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
You are in the same position as you were prior to the course/internship	1	9
You have earned a promotion or made a lateral move within the same organization you work for now	0	0

You have obtained a new job with an organization that you haven't worked with before	5	45
You are actively searching for a new job but have yet to obtain one	5	45
Total	11	100

**Job attainment versus job seeking.** Table 6 compares job-seeking experiences of the five participants who had attained new jobs to those who were still actively searching. We were interested in tracking milestones in the job-hunting process. Specifically, we were interested in comparing the number of jobs participants had applied for with the interviews they had landed, offers they received, and offers they had accepted.

Table 6  
*Comparison of Job Seeking Experiences*

Item: How many	Scale	Attained New Job		Actively Searching	
		n	%	n	%
jobs have you applied for since completing your career coaching course?	0	0	0	1	20
	1-5	0	0	1	20
	6-10	3	60	1	20
	More than 10	2	40	2	40
	Total	5	100	5	100
interviews have you landed since completing your career coaching course?	0	0	0	2	40
	1	1	20	1	20
	2	1	20	0	0
	3	0	0	2	40
	4	2	40	0	0
	More than 4	1	20	0	0
Total	5	100	5	100	
offers have you received since completing your career coaching course?	0	0	0	3	60
	1	2	40	1	20
	2	2	40	1	20
	3	1	20	0	0
	4	0	0	0	0
More than 4	0	0	0	0	
Total	5	100	5	100	
offers have you accepted since completing your career coaching course?	0	0	0	5	100
	1	3	60	0	0
	2	2	40	0	0
	3	0	0	0	0
	4	0	0	0	0
	More than 4	0	0	0	0
Total	5	100	0	100	

Of the five participants that had attained a job, three of them had applied for 6-10 jobs. Two had applied for more than 10 jobs. Of the 5 participants still seeking a job, the number of

jobs they had applied for varied widely, ranging from 1 participant who had not applied for any jobs to another who had applied for 1-5 jobs, another who'd applied for 6-10 jobs, and 2 who had applied for more than 10 jobs. Of the participants that had attained a job, one participant reported landing a single interview. Another reported landing 2 interviews. Two participants reported landing 4 interviews, and one participant reported landing more than 4. Of the participants still seeking jobs, two had yet to land an interview. One reported landing an interview. Two participants reported landing 2 interviews. No participants reported landing 4 or more interviews.

The five participants who attained a job reported receiving 9 total job offers. Of them, two participants reported receiving 1 offer, two participants reported receiving 2 offers, and one participant received 3 offers. In contrast, the five participants who were still actively searching for a job reported receiving 3 offers. Of them, three participants reported having received no offers. One participant reported receiving 1 offer. Another participant reported receiving two job offers. As these participants also reported that they were still actively searching for jobs, we must assume that they turned these offers down. We will be following up with participants to find out more about the offers they accepted, considered, and turned down, which we'll address in a forthcoming article. Of the 5 participants who accepted job offers, three participants accepted a single job offer. Two participants accepted two different job offers. We do not know if these offers are for full- or part-time work, nor do we know if a participant accepted one job and then left it to pursue a better second offer. None of the five participants still actively searching for work reported accepting any job offers.

**Relative contributions.** The survey used a series of slider bars to ask participants to indicate the extent to which career coaching contributed to their current job situation. The sliders enabled them to weigh the relative contributions of career coaching, internship (if they

participated in one) and other factors to their current job situation. Their responses had to total 100% among these three options. Only the participants who responded affirmatively that they accepted a job offer (n=5) had the opportunity to respond to regarding relative contributions. Participants indicated that between 42 and 60 percent of their current job situation could be attributed to career coaching. Three of them had also completed an internship and attributed either an equal percentage to that experience (e.g. one person balanced the percentages at 50-50) or a lower percentage. They were also able to attribute a portion of their current situation to other factors.

**Perceptions of the job.** As part of measuring overall ARCS (Keller, 2010) satisfaction, the survey asked the five participants who had attained jobs three questions about their job skills and expectations. Asked to what extent their coursework provided the necessary skills for the job, three participants selected the midpoint, indicating that they possessed some of the skills they needed. Two participants selected “4,” indicating that they possessed more than some but less than all necessary skills. As depicted in Table 7, participant responses ranged between 3 (*midpoint*) and 5 (*provided all necessary skills / can apply all skills / exceeds expectations*).

Asked about the extent to which their workplace allowed them to apply their skills on the job, 2 participants selected the midpoint, indicating they could apply some of the skills they learned to the workplace. Three participants selected “4,” indicating that they could apply more than some of their skills but less than all of them. Asked about the extent to which their job met their expectations, 3 participants selected the midpoint, indicating that their jobs met some of their expectations. One participant selected a “4,” and another selected a “5,” indicating that the job met more or all of their expectations.

Table 7

*Jobholder perceptions of skills and expectations*

<b>Item: To what extent:</b>	<b>Scale</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
did your OPWL coursework provide you with the necessary skills for your job?	1 - Not at all 2 3 4 5 – Provided all necessary skills	0 0 3 2 0	0 0 60 40 0
	Total	5	100
does your workplace allow you to apply your OPWL skills in your job?	1 - Not at all 2 3 4 5 – Can apply all my OPWL skills	0 0 2 3 0	0 0 40 60 0
	Total	5	100
does your job meet your expectations?	1 - Not at all 2 3 4 5 – Exceeds my expectations	0 0 3 1 1	0 0 60 20 20
	Total	5	100

## Discussion

The results of this formative evaluation support the following findings.

### Career Coaching Builds Participant Confidence

Participants in the OPWL program have already completed coursework in needs assessment, instructional design, and evaluation that required them to work in virtual teams to complete real projects for real clients. Others have completed elective coursework in workplace eLearning and performance support, and performance improvement. However, participants and recent graduates alike can still lack confidence in their overall career readiness, in addition to their abilities to identify appropriate job positions, pursue job opportunities, and reflect on their own development. Participants consistently reported greater confidence after completing the career-coaching course.



The results from the survey census align with other calls for providing career coaching to graduate students. Polson (2003) argues for the revision and extension of traditional student services to provide career services to both undergraduate and graduate students. She notes that increased specialization and frustration arising from delayed gratification increases the career concerns of graduate students. She mentions cover letter, resume writing, and interview preparation as specific areas of need, adding that in “many cases, additional services are needed” (p. 65). Lehker and Furlong (2006) argue that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to providing career services for graduate students, who will be drawn to resources and services they believe are designed specifically for them. The individualized nature of career counseling can address the more complex and specific issues that master’s students face. Conducting a survey of 220 master’s students, Bellows and Weissinger (2004) found that the most frequently requested academic and professional development topics were job market and interview strategies (57.8%) and curriculum vitae and cover letters (47.2%). We designed the experience to provide “career confidence, insight, encouragement, and inspiration” (Cheeks, 2013) to assist students in moving closer to their career development goals.

### **Participants Are Largely Satisfied with their Career Coaching Experience**

As we reflect on the ARCS framework (Keller, 2010) in our work, we note that the elements of attention, relevance and confidence, have helped build satisfaction. The one-on-one relationship between coach and participant supported attention and relevance. Relevance was also supported by participants establishing their own goals for the career coaching experience. The findings of our research demonstrate that participants consistently reported improved levels of confidence after completing the course. In addition to increased workplace readiness, they reported increased confidence in their ability to identify job positions, pursue a job opportunity,

and reflect on their own development. Further, they reported that the course achieved some (*midpoint*) or all their goals, which included building on their experiences, finding the right employment, and engaging in personal reflection—in ways that served ultimate goals of attaining employment or making decisions about their current jobs. All participants reported that they found value in the course ranging from some (*midpoint*) to extremely valuable – hence we conclude that this group of participants were satisfied with the experience.

### **Completion of the Career-Coaching Course Favorably Contributes to Workplace Performance**

While one participant reported remaining in the same position after completing the career-coaching course, 5 participants reported obtaining a new job, and 5 participants reported that they were still searching for a new job. Participants who had obtained new jobs reported that they had applied to 5 and 10+ jobs. Of the participants who had obtained new jobs, all reported that the career coaching course (sometimes in combination with internships and other factors) contributed to their current job situation. Participants who were still searching for work reported greater variability in the number of jobs they had applied for, ranging between 0 – 10+ jobs. These participants reported that their coaching coursework prepared them for their jobs, their workplaces allowed them to apply the skills they had learned in the program and met their expectations.

### **Collection of Formative Evaluation Data Can Shape Course Design Decisions**

Collecting data from career-coaching participants can provide valuable insights into their confidence and satisfaction. These data can also suggest revisions to course content and approach. Further, our data indicate that practitioners can link formative evaluation data to impact measures such as employment in the OPWL field and work satisfaction.

### **Limitations**

This study employed a small population of participants who completed different iterations of a career-coaching course between January 2016 and December 2017. While all 11 participants completing the course participated in the survey, the results of this census nonetheless comprise a case study with limited generalizability to other students in other programs in other universities. Further, the Foundations of Professional Development course represents but 1 credit of the 36 credits required to complete the OPWL department's Master of Science degree. While the course corresponds to 45 hours of student effort over a ten-week semester, the course can make a huge difference in students' abilities to synthesize and translate their master's coursework in ways that help them find a position in the OPWL workplace. That said, the possibility that previous coursework contributes to student confidence, goal attainment, and job situations remains an unknown limitation to the generalizability of this formative evaluation.

### **Implications and Future Research**

The census appearing in this formative evaluation provides preliminary indications that career coaching can benefit graduate-level OPWL participants. However, the intervention has specific implications for staffing and scheduling. For example, the traditional adjunct rate and instructor-student ratios need to be adjusted for the unique coaching approach to course delivery. In addition, students and coaches need to be prepared to meet via video chat regularly throughout the semester, which is different than most asynchronous online course offerings.

Based on our literature review, more research is needed to uncover the long-term outcomes of coaching interventions for graduate students in OPWL. Further, little previous

empirical research has been published to document the outcomes of this emerging intervention use with graduate students in other disciplines.

Future research could be useful to verify the barriers to employment a larger group of students report facing in face in terms of confidence, satisfaction, and job attainment. Also, this intervention has only been implemented with a small number of individuals. Further research could identify potential needs when scaling up the career-coaching program to serve additional participants—without sacrificing quality and while covering implementation costs. Lastly, further research is needed to continuously improve the career-coaching course, as well as the processes and infrastructure that support it.

### **Conclusions**

Career coaching can provide highly contextualized, personalized support that yields promising results for graduate OPWL participants. Our study shows there are benefits for learners' performance outcomes through a deliberate coaching intervention. These results include improved confidence, met development goals, and job employment.

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### **Appendix: Career Coaching Survey**

How many hours did you typically invest in the career-coaching course each week?

How many hours did you invest in completing the entire career-coaching course?

What job positions did you target?

Before career coaching, how confident were you in your ability to identify appropriate OPWL job positions?

Not applicable

1 - Not confident

2

3

4

5 - Extremely confident

After career coaching, how confident were you in your ability to identify appropriate OPWL job positions?

Not applicable

1 - Not confident

2

3

4

5 - Extremely confident

Before career coaching, how confident were you in your ability to pursue an OPWL job opportunity?

Not applicable

1 - Not confident

2

3

4

5 - Extremely confident

After career coaching, how confident were you in your ability to pursue an OPWL job opportunity?

Not applicable

1 - Not confident

2

3

4

5 - Extremely confident

Before career coaching, how confident were you in your ability to reflect on your own OPWL development?

1 - Not confident

2

3

4

5 - Extremely confident



After career coaching, how confident were you in your ability to reflect on your own OPWL development?

- 1 - Not confident
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 - Extremely confident

Before career coaching, how confident were you in your overall career readiness?

- 1 - Not confident
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 - Extremely confident

After career coaching, how confident were you in your overall career readiness?

- 1 - Not confident
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 - Extremely confident

What were your goals for this career-coaching experience?

To what extent did you achieve your goals after completing the career-coaching course?

- 1 - Achieved no goals
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 - Achieved all goals

To what extent did the career-coaching course help you build on what you learned in your OPWL coursework?

- 1 - Not at all
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 - To a great extent

How would you rate the overall value of your career-coaching experience?

- 1 - No value
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 - Extremely valuable

What was the best part of your career-coaching experience?

What was the most challenging part of your career-coaching experience?

Is there anything else that you want to tell us about your career-coaching experience?

Since you completed your career-coaching course and/or internship (select one):

- You are in the same position as you were prior to the course/internship.
- You have earned a promotion or made a lateral move within the same organization you work for now.
- You have obtained a new job with an organization that you haven't worked with before.
- You are actively searching for a new job but have yet to obtain one.

How many jobs have you applied for since completing your career coaching course and/or internship?

- 0
- 1-5
- 6-10
- More than 10

How many interviews have you landed since completing your career coaching course and/or internship?

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- More than 4

How many offers have you received since completing your career coaching course and/or internship?

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- More than 4

How many offers have you accepted since completing your career coaching course and/or internship?

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- More than 4

To what extent did the coaching and/or internship that you completed contribute to your current job situation? (Use the slider to indicate an appropriate percentage.) The percentages you select should equal 100%.

\_\_\_\_\_ Coaching  
\_\_\_\_\_ Internship  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other factors

If you chose other factors, what were they?

To what extent did your OPWL coursework provide you with the necessary skills for your job?

Not applicable or too early to tell

1 - Not at all

2

3

4

5 - Provided all necessary skills

To what extent does your workplace allow you to apply your OPWL skills in your job?

Not applicable or too early to tell

1 - Not at all

2

3

4

5 - Can apply all of my OPWL skills

To what extent does your job meet your expectations?

Not applicable or too early to tell

1 - Not at all

2

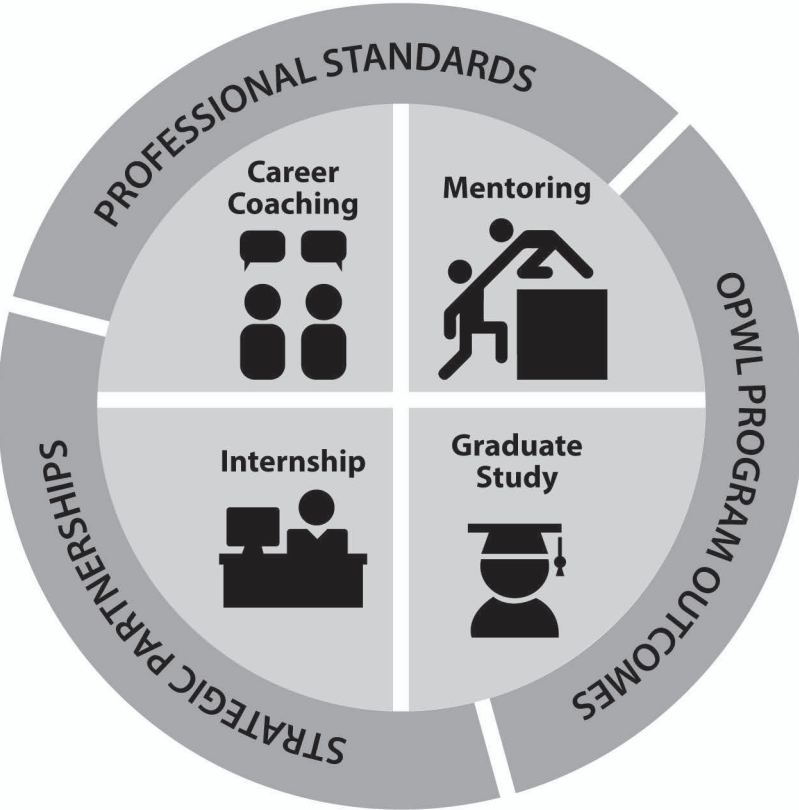
3

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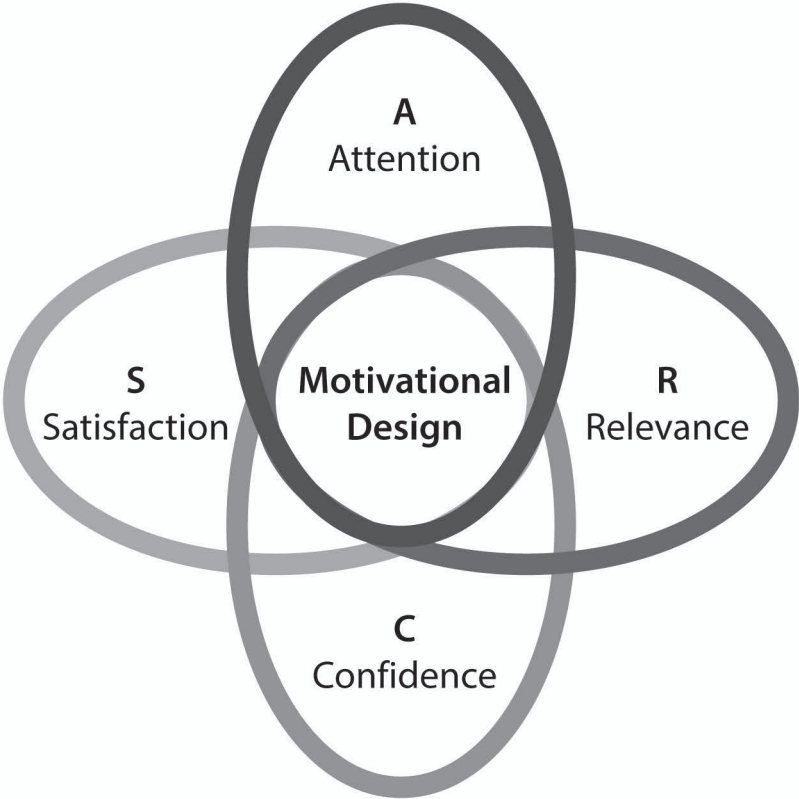
5 - Exceeds my expectations

Is there anything else you want to tell us about your job?

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## Jobs Sought

