

Process Evaluation of an Internet Career Fair

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1 September 2001

Abstract

This evaluation describes the development of an internet version of a career fair. The 'internet career fair' was developed in response to the growing demand for e-recruitment in the graduate employment market, and the need to provide employment-related career services to external university students. In order to conserve resources and to assess what could be achieved with limited resources, the development process took a 'minimalist' approach based on static web pages, rather than a virtual chat-room approach. Twenty major employers registered with the internet career fair. The site attracted over 61000 hits from the student body. It was recommended that the minimalist approach be retained for future internet career fairs.

Internet Recruitment

Recruitment via the internet is a relatively new phenomenon and the orientation toward this technology has been sudden (Bartram, 2000; Frankis, 2000). Corporate research by IBN (2001a) indicated an incredible growth in electronic recruitment business throughout the industrial world. Their Electronic Recruitment Index has forecast international investment of over \$US20 billion on electronic recruitment by the year 2005. This contrasts sharply to the investment figure for 2000, at just under \$US5 billion. IBN estimates suggest that there were approximately 110 million job postings on the internet in 2000 (IBN, 2001b).

Australia contributed to this trend and has itself experienced a rapid inclusion of internet methods into domestic recruitment processes. In their review of Australian recruitment and selection trends, Wooden and Harding (1997) made no mention of internet being a major tool used by employers. Australian internet recruitment has proliferated since that time. At the time of writing this report, there were 453 internet employment services listed in Australia under the search term “employment” using the search engine Top100 (Sinewave Interactive, 2001). A more refined search using the terms “employment graduate” revealed 249 matches.

Internet technology in Australia is making a significant impact upon the employment market of university graduates. This is particularly true given that some internet recruitment companies directly target university graduates (eg, Seek Communications). It is pertinent therefore, to consider what pragmatic implications the internet zeitgeist has for campus career services of Australian universities.

Moreover, it is important to consider how career services can maintain and enhance their role within the university infrastructure.

Background

The University of Southern Queensland is a major provider of distance education. Its main Australian centre is located at the Toowoomba campus. It also has a smaller Wide Bay campus located in Hervey Bay and a Learning Centre based in Brisbane. Approximately 75% of students enrolments in 2001 were in the off-campus, external mode. The Careers and Employment Service is a division of the Student Services of the University of Southern Queensland. The Service provides counselling on matters of career direction, change, and development. It also provides support in the process of seeking and securing employment through its training, employment advertising, facilitating employer visits to the main campus, and a career fair. Equitable provision of services to external students is major challenge for the Service.

Information technology has been used by the Careers and Employment Service to provide external students with equivalent employment information that is available to students located at the Toowoomba campus. Each student of the University has a free internet account within USQconnect. This account provides access to their academic records, study groups, tutorial information, links to services and a range of other resources that support study, particularly study in the external mode. Student Services has supported an internet site for the past four years in attempt to reach external students (<http://www.usq.edu.au/studentsservices>). The Careers and Employment Service has provided a broad base of information that

relates to career education. This includes information on job search, resume and application writing, selection criteria, interview performance, and links to employment opportunities. The Service also provides an email employment newsgroup that lists employment opportunities and application information. This mostly includes graduate programs. Despite these innovations, external students have been unable to attend employer visits to campus.

Development of the Internet Career Fair

The first Career Fair was held in 2000. Twenty employers presented their graduate programs in a busy market atmosphere in the University Mall. Evaluation of the Fair was very positive from the perspective of students and employers. Estimates indicated that over 60% of final year on-campus students attended the fair. The central deficiency of the Career Fair 2000 was that external students were unable to attend. For this reason, the Service decided to utilise internet technology to take the Career Fair to off-campus students studying externally and at the Wide Bay campus and Brisbane centre. Internal students at the Toowoomba campus would have access to the real career fair.

Phase One: Securing Technological Infrastructure

Hardware/Network. The existing USQconnect system would provide the essential internet framework. The only hardware the student need supply is a computer and modem. Those students without this equipment were able to make access to the public computing services provided by the University.

Staff. It was decided that the time needed to develop an additional component for the website exceeded the time resources and technical skills of the Service's staff. The Information Technology Services staff at Wide Bay campus could appropriately subsume the work under the rationale of their cost centre (ie, services for external students). Hence, an Information Technology Services staff member at the Wide Bay campus adopted the project in December 2000. Fortunately, there was no charge to the Service's cost centre for the work.

Portal. The portal to the internet career fair was positioned within the Student Services website¹ at

www.usq.edu.au/Studentservices/services/careers/Employment/careerRV/index.htm

Phase Two: Selecting an Appropriate Format - Minimalist

In conceiving the internet Career Fair it was decided that the site should be 'minimalist'; that is, it should consume the least amount of resources and present proportionally the most amount of *useful* information. Complex sites take considerable time to feed data through a 56K modem and they are expensive to construct. A minimalist design would ensure efficient data flow for students and use the least amount of ITS resources.

Static Information or Chat? An important problem to solve was whether to use an interactive 'chat-room' system or to utilise a static, paged-based system. External opinion was sought on how to conduct an internet career fair. Discussions were held with colleagues from other career services (eg, Sweet, 2000). Some took a 'virtual' approach in that a student could pose questions and receive speedy answers through chat-rooms stationed by employer delegates. Five employers from the 2000

¹ This site has been left open, but is inactive.

Career Fair were contacted. The concepts of a static or chat based internet career fair was proposed to them. All recognised the benefit of an electronic service. However, they all preferred a static system because it consumed less of their labour resources. Hence, the decision to utilise a static information system was based upon limitations of cost and efficiency. A static version fell within the resources of the project and would satisfy the majority of information needs a student may have.

Three Layers. The site used three layers of information display. Page 1 was an introduction welcoming students to the Fair. Page 2 displayed the employers' logos. Page 3 presented a paragraph on the organisation, their graduate program, links to the employer's website, recruitment information, and contact details for application forms.

Point of Contact. The Service's Administrative Officer was made the point of contact. Students who were interested in a program would be able to email a message asking for information via an Enquiry Form. The email would be automatically sent to the Administrative Officer. The Administrative Officer would forward the request onto the organisation.

Access. To ensure that only students of the University of Southern Queensland had access to the service, a username and password was required for entrance. The username and password was the same as required for entrance into USQconnect.

Feedback Form. A feedback form was included to seek evaluative comments from users.

Phase Three: Attracting Exhibitors

Given that some employers were unable to, or unwilling to attend the real Career Fair, there was considerable discussion on offering organisations a booth at the electronic Fair only. The primary rationale for offering an ‘electronic booth’ only, was to attract more employers to the Fair. However, it was decided that in its first year of operation the electronic Fair was not to be promoted to organisations that were not registered at the real Fair. For better or worse, this decision was made to keep evaluation of the first Fair as simple as possible.

All employers who had registered for the real Career Fair in March 2001 were sent a letter explaining the concept and methods of the internet site. There was no additional cost for employers to register at an ‘internet booth’. Employers were asked to submit information and files (e.g., gif files of their logos) no later than one week prior to the Fair.

Of the 30 organisations registered at the real Fair, 20 participated in the internet Fair. Each organisation has been presented in Table 1 with respect to the location of their employing office, graduate disciplines they were seeking, and whether they were private or public sector organisations.

Insert Table 1

Phase 4: Going Live

Promotion. The internet Career Fair was promoted in parallel to the real Fair.

Promotion activities involved:

- distribution of posters;
- five minute presentations at the beginning of major lectures over two weeks prior to the fair (26 lectures in total);
- one global email to all users of the University of Southern Queensland computing network;
- two emails via the Careers and Employment email newsgroup;
- one promotional story in the University's newspaper; and a
- a flashing button on the Student Services website.

Launch Date. The launch date of the website was two days before the real Career Fair. The two days gave time to eliminate any glitches in the system while in live operation. This time was considered a test period only.

Outcomes: Assessing Utilisation

The impact of the internet Fair was assessed using qualitative data (student feedback and employer feedback) and quantitative data (utilisation statistics).

Feedback Form. There were only three responses to the feedback form provided on the site. The comments were positive and supportive of the site. One offered a correction to spelling.

Employer Meeting. At a reception after the real Career Fair, there was discussion with employers about the concept and methods of the internet Fair. All participants were pleased to have taken the opportunity. Some delegates from the ten organisations that did not participate, expressed regret at not doing so, and offered their commitment to collaborate in the following year. There was some discussion

about the use of static information, rather than chat rooms. Most of the delegates favoured a static system because a chat-room system would consume more of their organisation's time. However, there was strong interest in the concept of chat rooms and their use in the future.

Hits. Within 48 hours of operation the Fair had received over 33 000 hits. At the end of two weeks the site had received 61677 hits. Visitors to website came from 18 different international internet server domains. The logos for all 20 organisations were hit. There was no way of determining who made the hits, and neither their year of study.

Requests. The Service received 192 unique requests for application forms via the Enquiry Form. Some students wanted information on more than one organisation. Their contact was counted only once. The requests for information were directed to all participating organisations².

Student Characteristics. The contact details of students making requests were inspected to determine the status of their enrolment. Eighty-one percent (81%) of the students were studying in the external mode. Fifteen percent (15%) were international students.

Discussion

With over 50 000 hits upon the internet Career Fair, it is clear that the site drew considerable interest from students. Given that the University has 20 000 students, it is reasonable to assume that the large number of hits was due to repeat visitors and students from lower years entering the site. Despite the large number of

² The number of requests for information on individual organisations will not be reported in this document as a measure of confidentiality.

hits, there were only 192 unique requests for information via the Enquiry Form. Nevertheless, it was possible to sort requests by mode of study (ie, internal or external) and national status. The percentage of external students submitting requests is consistent with the proportion of external students studying at the University (ie: 75%). Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the Internet Career Fair was tapping into its primary client base – external students. On this measure, the internet Fair was successful.

The most likely explanation for the relatively low number of requests via the Enquiry Form is that the students used a direct route to application information (ie, via the organisations' website links). It has always been the advice of the Service that students should directly contact an employer and learn as much as possible about them. Most organizations listed in the Fair had their own website link clearly marked on the page of their booth. It is quite possible that students visited the site links of organizations and sought application information from that point and rather than indirectly from the Services' Enquiry Form. There is no way of testing this suggestion without the organizations providing contact data to the Service and this information is unavailable.

There is a need to determine the variables that make graduate programs relevant or salient for external students. Understanding their employment status, mode of study, income and interest level would contribute significantly to understanding their commitment to the prospect of graduate programs. For future electronic fairs, it would be useful to include some mechanism to determine the following characteristics of visitors:

- Degree/Major/Minor
- Year of study (penultimate or final)

- Current employment status (full-time, part-time, casual)
- Income
- Mode of study (external, internal)
- Interest level ('just looking' or 'genuinely wanting to apply for graduate programs')

There should also be negotiations with employers to ensure that the number of requests for applications they receive via their website be recorded and reported back to the service. This data would allow investigation of the employment outcomes of the fair. Nevertheless, there should be firm restraint upon the type of data collected. The privacy of individuals using the Service needs to be preserved. The variables listed above would provide useful information without threatening the integrity of client confidentiality.

The expense of developing multimedia and websites can be a burden for any Careers and Employment Service. This website was created at minimal costs and generated a large amount of service contact and delivery. It is reasonable to argue therefore, that a minimalist approach to design is appropriate in context of limited resources. The 'whistles and bells' approach with chat-rooms and extensive interactive elements would require serious consideration with reference to additional resources.

This pilot project of developing an internet career fair at the University of Southern Queensland was conceived in context of an emerging demand for electronic recruitment services. Moreover, the project represented a partial answer to serious questions facing the campus career services of Australia. How can career services retain their potency as an important component of the overall university infrastructure? How can career services enter into the market of electronic service

delivery? The internet Career Fair 2001 has gone some way in achieving its goals of communicating employment information to external students.

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Table 1
Characteristics of Organisations Participating in the Internet Career Fair

Organisation	Office	Discipline	Sector
KPMG	Brisbane, Sydney	Accounting	Private
Seek Campus*	Australia wide	All	Private and Public
Commonwealth Bank	Brisbane	Business, Commerce, Information Technology	Private
Queensland Police	State wide	All	Public
Incitec	Brisbane, some regional centres of Qld	Engineering	Private
Main Roads	Brisbane, some regional Centres of Qld	Engineering, Surveying	Public
Queensland Audit Office	Brisbane	Accounting	Public
Stockford	Brisbane, Sydney	Accounting	Private
Laverty, Roche, Kelly	Toowoomba, regional centres	Accounting, Finance	Private
British American Tobacco	Sydney, international	Accounting, Business, Commerce	Private
Queensland Treasury	Brisbane	Accounting	Public
CITEC	Brisbane	Information Technology	Public/Private
WPA Career Media*	Australia wide	Business, Commerce, Information Technology, Engineering	Private
Mycareer*	Australia wide	All	Private and Public
The Good Guides Group*	Australia wide, international	All	Private
Nova Group	Japan	All, especially Arts	Private
Defence	Australia wide	All	Public
Hobsons*	Australia wide, international	All	Private
Walker Partners	Toowoomba	Accounting	Private
Education Qld	Brisbane	All	Public

* These organisations were representing a range of employer organisations.