TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY INTERVIEWING FOR TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY JOBS. ARE WE PREPARING OUR STUDENTS FOR TODAY'S JOB MARKET?

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ABSTRACT

One of the challenges that many undergraduate students face when they start their lives after college is that there is no clear career path. The nature of each job in today's fast-changing economic and technological environment is fluid, and students should be prepared to reinvent themselves and adjust their career paths more than once during their working years. Based on these observations, we present a framework to help students market themselves during their interviews, and we explain how these interviewing skills can be included and practiced not only in a traditional classroom but also in an online teaching environment. Particular attention is devoted to the introduction of virtual avatar technology under development at Saint Leo University.

KEYWORDS

Interviewing, Avatars, Experiential, Student Job Preparation

1. INTRODUCTION

While the greater issue of how to develop pedagogies and curriculum content to address the need for soft skill development in undergraduates remains a topic of considerable interest to academia, this article examines how those skills are manifested in the final stages of business education. Specifically, how do we train students to demonstrate these skills in the recruitment and interview process? Our position is that not only are soft skills fundamental to entry-level job success and thus deserve a central role in business education, but that business schools need to teach soon to be graduates how to conduct interviews that demonstrate those skills. Rather than a "shotgun" approach addressing broad curriculum issues, we discuss a specific initiative at Saint Leo University in Florida employing high-level interview simulations utilizing intelligent avatars.

This paper first provides a brief discussion of the state of the business environment in the context of preparing students for job interviews and transition into the workforce. This is followed by a short literature review of the relationship between avatars and experiential learning. We then provide a discussion of the avatar project at our university. We conclude with closing thoughts and the implications for faculty and administrators at business schools.

2. THE STATE OF STUDENT INTERVIEWS

The world of business has changed a lot during the last quarter century. It provides unprecedented opportunities, as well as challenges both to businesses and individuals. In this paper we look at the driving forces that shape employment preferences in the 21st century, and we provide some key tips on how business students should prepare for their interviews if they want to succeed.

In the early 1990s two things changed the practice of business globally. The first one was geopolitical. The collapse of the Soviet Union and China's opening to the global economy turbocharged globalization and created a global network of supply chains that spanned the globe.

The second thing was technology. The integration of the global marketplace opened up opportunities for businesses too. Although competition became tougher, it also allowed easier access to markets far away, and opportunities to expand the customer base. Essentially the environment for businesses became more lucrative if they planned and executed well, but less forgiving when they slacked off or made mistakes.

By now these effects are being magnified even more with the use of big data analytics, expert systems based on artificial intelligence, and faster global logistics networks. It is hard to hide mistakes, and the reaction of customers, financial markets, government regulators, and other stakeholders put pressure on companies to be vigilant, fast, and proactive.

In this environment, where everyone has access to similar technology the key question is: What are the key traits that employers are looking for, and what should the students do during interviews to position themselves as having these traits? The latest research identifies the following key attitudes and traits (Selingo, 2017; Borzt 2018):

- (1) Communication skills, both verbal and written. Communication is critical because in today's technological environment just about all business employees are the company's ambassadors every time they interact with any stakeholder. Being able to communicate effectively with stakeholders is essential. One has to deal with diverse audiences with different habits of communication, different cultural norms and traditions, and different agendas. Today one must be able to go beyond basic communication skills and be able to adjust the content, style, and code of the message as well as the timing and type of medium to send it, in order to adapt to each different audience.
- (2) Teamwork. Business is a team sport. Employees must work well in teams, being able to present their ideas, be open to ideas of other team members, avoid groupthink, avoid unnecessary and personal conflict, stay professional regardless of how enjoyable the task is (or is not) or if one likes or dislikes the other team members.
- (3) Creativity, critical thinking and originality. In a fast-changing environment, clinging to the past can be a major obstacle to adaptation. Many companies come up with a winning formula, but then stick with it for too long, way past its expiration date. The history of business is full of examples like Kodak that became the victims of their previous successes. Over time management becomes conservative, they succumb to the status quo and endowment biases, and become oblivious to new opportunities. One of the reasons companies want creative new employees is to bring in people with new ideas and people who will be willing to challenge the existing business paradigm.
- (4) Ability to learn new skills quickly and with minimum help. Companies need employees with initiative and drive, people who will try to stay up-to-date with new technologies and developments regardless of the formal support of the company. The more an employee can learn on his or her own, and the faster he or she can acquire new skills, the more valuable this person is. This is part of general leadership skills, where you become the leader and driving force in your own education. It also fits in with having a strong work ethic, which is another trait employers are looking for. Learning on an ongoing basis has become a necessity for people who want to have successful careers (Weber 2019).

The key to getting, and keeping, a job is to demonstrate high competence in the above criteria. At Saint Leo University we try to prepare our students to be successful on the job in many ways, and helping them with improving on the four criteria is an integral aspect of the training. Since we both teach marketing majors, we will focus on how we train them, but the ideas and approach can be adjusted to any business major.

Active learning, involving group projects with hands-on applications, both in the classroom as well as online are the foundations of our teaching. In addition, all marketing majors have to design a personal website to promote their careers. The website will be about their professional brand – it includes their CV, a short video of them explaining their business and marketing philosophy, as well as their career goals, pictures and links to stories and activities that highlight their skills and attitudes, and a section where they have a portfolio of accomplishments and projects.

Such a website, when done properly sends powerful signals about all four key criteria. By itself it is a tool of communication, and the different ways it presents the information demonstrates the student's proficiency in them. The portfolio of accomplishments includes team projects and thus shows how the student has worked in teams in the past and accomplished significant results. The creativity aspect is the design of the website and the way the information is presented. Finally, the website design, style, and innovative graphics show that the student is comfortable with technology and is willing to learn it on his or her own.

The website and portfolio we use to prepare our students have proven to provide them an advantage in competing for entry-level jobs. However, we discovered we were still missing a piece of the job preparation “puzzle” which brings us to a new emerging technology – avatars.

2.1 Literature Review

Experiential education has been perceived through a number of lenses, both theoretical and applied. While there is considerable consensus in both domains of the value of experiential learning in business curriculums, there is far less agreement on how best to implement and apply the many tools and pedagogies technology has made available to contemporary business programs. Mandel and Noyes (2014), in their survey of entrepreneurial-focused experiential programs note that while the effectiveness of such education is “practically beyond debate” (p. 164) the extant literature is far less revealing regarding what constitutes an academic best practice.

While the use of avatars in the classroom is in its infancy, especially in business and job preparation, we can draw on similar works in higher education to assess the potential impact on our students. The technology employed in this article was originally developed for use in elementary education and research in that domain suggests undergraduates benefit from the pedagogy. Results, both in the classroom and in research, suggests that the use of avatars has contributed to not only learning theory but also to improved student outcomes. (Chini, Straub & Thomas, 2016; Dawson & Lignugaris, 2017).

Consistent with the emphasis on soft skill development which is the theme of this article, DeSimone and Buzza (2013) examined the value of critical thinking and abstract decision making in business school curriculums. Not surprisingly they found that not only were these skills important in developing successful students, but that experiential learning can be a key component in curriculums focused on those outcomes. Eckhaus, Klein and Kantor (2017) reached similar conclusions finding that although business schools tended to under-utilize experiential tools in the curriculum, students that participated in a cost accounting board game demonstrated a higher mastery of the skills important to their success. While both empirical research on the efficacy of avatars and the application of the pedagogy in experiential education remain largely unexplored, our work with the technology suggests considerable promise for enhancing the soft skills students require for successful interviews and transition to their new positions in the workforce

2.2 The Role of Avatars

Projects external to the classroom offer what is arguably the pinnacle of experiential education, allowing students to interact with practitioners and gain first-hand real-world experience. For example, at Saint Leo University our students offer consulting services to both small businesses on a fee for service model and pro-bono to local non-profits, emulating what they might experience with a progressive, community-minded firm. Inside the classroom, a recent marketing class provided area non-profits with projects to promote fundraisers for meal backpacks for elementary school children and efforts to combat rural homelessness while another worked with the local city government to develop a cooperative project between the university and city to serve local children.

While these projects provide students with an exceptional hands-on experience we found two shortcomings. First, like many schools, we were constrained by both budget and the time available to faculty to sponsor the programs, thus limiting the number of students that could participate. Second, we needed a vehicle for students to practice sharing with a potential employer what they had learned from the experiential learning and “closing the sale” on securing a post-graduation position. While the extant research in experiential education provides considerable guidance to course developers and teaching faculty (Mandel & Noyes, 2016) we discovered that the literature was virtually silent with regards to meaningful equivalents in experiential interview preparation. However, once again, many of these techniques require considerable time, money and resources which may in short supply in today’s academic environment. We needed an interactive solution for teaching the soft skills, and by extension interviewing skills, we believed to be the missing component to our students securing the best opportunities.

Prior to selecting the avatar technology to address this need, we attempted to use some of the training and interviewing techniques that are common to many campuses. Two of the more common are peer to peer role-playing and mock interviews conducted by staff members in our career development office. While helpful,

both lacked the dynamic real-life experience we believed we needed to produce a superior student. Very similar constraints applied to teaching sales and customer service, which were the genesis for the interview pilot. The mock interviews, peer to peer selling or interviewing worked just fine, provided that the student only interviewed with faculty members or peers in a controlled, predictable and friendly environment. However, the practice transferred poorly to the real world, which is far less predictable and friendly. Avatars proved to address these shortcomings.

Avatars provided the bridge between classroom training and the students' first internship or practicum. Unlike the limited avatars used in other games or online simulations, such as Second Life, our avatars are driven by behind-the-scenes actors that allow the characters to not only move and physically react to our students, but also allows their verbal responses to be real-time and adapt instantly to what the college students do, or fail to do. Our student will not be forewarned going into the classroom exercise, but the avatar hiring manager is about to challenge the student's ability to think on their feet, much like what might be experienced by a student in a real interview. This allows the student training for a top tier position to be tested much as they would in a real interview.

Chine, Straub & Thomas (2016) who conducted some of the early work with the avatar technology liken it to the flight simulators used by student pilots. Rather than fly the aircraft for the first time in a real meeting room with a real hiring manager, the avatar simulators allow the student to get the aircraft safely on the ground with no risk to the "passengers". In the business school we enabled the avatar managers to exhibit many of the same traits as business-to-business customers in a sales environment or interviewers in a hiring situation. Both were unpredictable and the environment in which they operated was dynamic and required real-time and real-world unstructured responses.

How Avatars Work: Many readers will be familiar with avatars from their experiences with Second Life, online shopping or advanced video games. The medical community has employed avatars for clinic and surgery training, reducing the need for cadavers ((Fowler, Phillips, Patel, Ruggiero, Ragucci, Kern & Stuart, 2018). Manufacturing and heavy industry have employed avatars for simulated training in engineering, plant operations and in reducing expensive hands-on education. (Wu, Wu, Liang, Ching-Mei & Shih-Chung, 2017). Shopping aficionados may have encountered online avatars that allow retailers to enhance the buying experience and promote customer engagement (Peng & Ke, 2015). While all of these applications of avatar technology serve the purposes for which they were designed, none met the requirements we need for sales, service and interview training.

The primary distinction between the avatars described above and those used for our projects, is the use of real actors that drive the interactivity between the student and the avatar. Unlike most, our avatars operate in real time and provide dynamic responses to the students. A far more accurate analogy than the avatars used in retailing or most online simulations, would be those portrayed in the hit film, Avatar. In the movie, the avatar that interacted with the locals was an extension of the character Jake Scully, played by actor Sam Worthington. Rather than rely on computerized scripting or limited artificial intelligence, the Scully avatar interacted in real-time with the planet's natives. Our avatars operate in a similar fashion.

While the computer provides the visual images of the interviewers or customers, the actual voices and conversations are provided by a Scully-like actor who never speaks to the students out of character. The faculty developer provides the actor, known as a Simulation Specialist, a written scenario and the outline of a script. The student is provided with a modified version of the scenario. Thus, each sales, service or interview training session is individualized for the type of training and each adapts to the student's responses, mistakes, and successes. In a typical training scenario, the faculty designer might create the Nice Marketing Lady, the Raging Nut Case CEO and the Mellow Millennial as these are the very characters a student might meet in any given interview. The scenario might be a high-tech firm hiring a new graduate for an entry-level management program or selecting a student for their first international assignment. Each of the characters is described by the faculty developer and shared with the Simulation Specialist. The faculty developer rehearses with the Specialist (this is the fun part) to refine the characters and scenario.

As the Simulation Specialist reacts and adapts in real time, each student's experience is unique to them. These meetings may be individual or in small teams. The latter allows the students to debrief and critique one another, as well as receiving feedback from the instructor and from the Specialist in the guise of their character. The Specialist might be coached to suggest that the student advance to the next round of interviews or chastise them for being unprepared and wasting the CEO's time. Once the student has completed the sales pitch or interview, the avatar disappears to Avatar Neverland and a new set of avatars and characters take their place. Much like the interviews in the real world, each experience is new and different. As the Specialist is physically isolated from the student, the experience in an online course is very similar and efficacious. This resolves the on-going issue of bringing experiential training to online students preparing for the job market.

3. CONCLUSION

As some readers may note, parts of this paper are somewhat less formal than the traditional academic article. This was by intent and in keeping with one of the more valuable traits we discovered in transitioning into the experiential world of avatars in the university setting. Unlike traditional role-playing and simulations, and much more similar to real-life, the avatar experience can be unpredictable, informal and at times, amusing. We are reminded of the pitch from one student that discovered the avatar had a scripted fondness for cats. She told the interviewer of her experience in volunteering at a shelter and how it allowed her to develop her interpersonal communication skills when chatting with prospective pet parents. The avatar hired her. We share this story as it is emblematic of the potential the avatar technology offers not only for interviewing, but also for sales and customer training, human resources and other interactive business skills. We have only begun to explore the avatar universe. As the technology crosses language and cultural boundaries, we look forward to readers across disciplines and oceans to contribute to this stream of research both academically and to the practical applications of training our students to enter a global employment market.

At Saint Leo University, our next steps are to develop a library of scenarios and characters that can be applied to multiple student outcomes, disciplines and cultures. Additional empirical research is warranted to compare student and employer perceptions as well as longitudinal studies of the efficacy of avatar-based training. We hope to see other faculty join us in developing this largely unexplored stream of research and experiential application.

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