

PROFESSIONAL AND TECHNICAL COMMUNICATIONS: A PERSPECTIVE ON TODAY'S CAREER CHALLENGES

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*NOTE: Sam Felice wrote this comment for USFSM students and alumni on Nov. 1, 2010.
T. E. Roberts, USFSM Instructor, has edited it for format and space considerations.*

I'm writing today with a few words that may be of help to some of you who are about to enter the professional realm and aren't exactly sure how to go about establishing yourself as a professional writer or editor.

For many of you, it's likely that your real-world professional and technical writing experience, beyond the academic arena, may appear to be lacking in the eyes of potential employers and hiring managers. Others of you may have taken advantage of the internships and other opportunities that USFSM provides to current and former students, and you will potentially have a better chance of landing a position as a result.

I was one of the students who failed to take advantage of these opportunities and, as a result, struggled immensely after graduation to establish any sort of credible experience that would present me as an appealing candidate for employment. In the first three or four months after receiving my degree, I submitted well over 1,700 resumes to various prospective employers (without preference regarding location, salary, or similar criteria; I was willing to move anywhere for any sum!). I received only five valid responses, went through the interview process in several states, and always received the same verdict: despite my high grades, strong writing samples, and other advantages, I just didn't have enough real-world experience. (I soon learned that when you're trying to establish your career in the midst of a major recession where demand is low and competition abounds, that is truly a "real-world experience"! It's training under fire, I can assure you.)

So what did I do? I consulted Professor Roberts, who advised me to look into providing services to nonprofit organizations to boost my portfolio and to establish a method of, in essence, "cold-calling" various businesses by reviewing their web sites and business publications, finding ways in which I could improve these communications, and submitting my recommended revisions to business owners or managers. Nine times out of ten, as Mr. Roberts noted, the business might take offense at my audacity in thinking that they would benefit from my advice, but that tenth time might just land me a job. If nothing else, he said, it will keep my skills fresh.

I took this advice and started doing small, unpaid jobs for various nonprofits and charity events and visiting web sites to see how I might improve them. My skill set began to expand. I moved further into integrating more graphic and web design, and my portfolio began to grow. The "Employment History" section of my resume, however, still seemed weak. So what next?

I decided, in a grand scheme, to create my own "work experience." I started my own company -- a business solutions firm specializing in technical writing, web and graphic design, and referrals to fellow professionals for any work I couldn't do myself. Initially, it was just supposed to be something that looked good on paper. I knew I had the skills (and, at this point, the real-world experience) to succeed if someone would just give me the chance but, on paper, I just didn't have the stuff.

Little did I know that my business would take off as a result of the reputation I'd gained through my work with the nonprofits, and actually become a legitimate business entity. I now live in Raleigh, North Carolina, where I'm working on my company full-time and am about to enter North Carolina State's MS in Technical Communications program.

The moral of my story is this: Navigating through the mess that is our economy is anything but easy right now for new graduates. There is a great deal of competition and you have to be diligent in your efforts to find the position that is right for you. Employers will not give jobs away easily and are very choosy at this time in their efforts to hire those who appear to be the best candidates on paper while protecting their bottom line. More often than not you won't even have the opportunity to meet face-to-face or to get past the impression that they establish of you based on your employment portfolio, but if you make every effort to establish your own credibility, take advantage of the opportunities the school provides for you, and think creatively, you'll do just fine.

Some of the tips you may receive while in school may seem a little unorthodox, but in my experience, they work the best. I wish all of you much success. If any of you has a question or comment, please send me an email in care of Mr. Roberts (robertst@sar.usf.edu), and he will forward it to me.