Digital Education Engagement Initiatives Group Briefing Paper Series

Topic – Key Skills Sought by Employers Following the Global Pandemic

A collaboration between RMIT University's STEM College and the Enabling Impact Platforms, together with the Australian New Zealand Gynaecological Oncology Group (ANZGOG), Boeing Research & Technology and the Australian Council of Professions.
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Introduction

The workforce was heavily impacted with the onset and ongoing restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many industries moved to remote working due to the extensive lockdowns, while others changed their business arrangements to cater for the restrictions imposed by COVID-19. As we come out of the pandemic, it is important to evaluate any lasting effects the pandemic has had on the future of work and how the skills needed by graduates now entering the post-pandemic workforce may have changed.

This paper outlines some initiatives aimed at addressing the following questions:

- What long-term impacts has the COVID-19 pandemic had on the key skills and working arrangements?
- What kind of post-pandemic soft and professional skills are employers looking for?
- What advice would employers like to provide to RMIT to help prepare graduates to enter the workforce with the skills required now and into a rapidly changing future?
- What changes do you expect in the work-life balance in different sectors of human endeavour.

Key Initiatives/Potential Solutions

We have solicited input from 4 experts across diverse industry sectors, as to what they believe are the attributes and skills students need to be ready for work, and how the skill set of its people has been adapting to the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our experts include Meghan Leigh, Study Coordinators Committee Chair, Australian New Zealand Gynaecological Oncology group (ANZGOG), David Pook, Melbourne Centre Manager, Boeing Research & Technology, Mark Seddon, Solutions Architect at Amazon Web Services (AWS), and Professor Klaus Veil, President, Australian Council of Professions.

A key focus from ANZGOG's perspective relates to 'first impressions' and how they play a role in the hiring process. Everyone can agree that first impressions are important, however, students emerging from the recent global pandemic, who have largely been sheltered from in-person interactions, may not be aware of how quickly these impressions are made. Studies show that it can take a fraction of a second to evoke an impression and these lasting impressions are made before a person even speaks. In the digital world that we currently reside in, an employer's first impression begins

when they read the applicant's CV and cover letter. Ensuring these are both polished, specific to the role and organisation and toe the line between enough content but not be overwhelming, can make all the difference.

LinkedIn profiles and social media are often reviewed and new trends to include links or QR codes directly to a LinkedIn profile are becoming more widely expected. Without access to work experience during the pandemic, it is vital that students create a digital footprint to show interest and/or encounters in their field through following organisations, posting about webinar participation and commenting on articles published in their sector.

Interviews are still largely conducted through video conferencing and presenting a professional attitude can be challenging for students that are used to attending online lectures in their activewear. Such comfortable clothes are sadly not considered professional attire and students need to remember that any interaction with a potential employer needs to be treated as if they were visiting their corporate office, regardless of interview location. Ensuring video and sound quality, as well as minimising background noise and distractions can be instrumental on an employer taking a candidate seriously. The addition of pets to an interview, although endearing, isn't likely to add any tangible value.

Highlighting soft skills in graduate level interviews can be beneficial. For example, in the health care sector, where issues like compassion fatigue and work-life balance have been highlighted during the pandemic, candidates that are prepared for these situations can outrank their competition. Being able to set clear boundaries and excel in managing stress levels are key, and the most effective way to portray these in an interview setting is by providing examples of how you have handled specific situations.

In the aviation sector, Boeing puts an emphasis on having a fundamental knowledge base and digital skills that are used in an agile environment. Boeing graduates can expect that solid fundamental knowledge and academic achievement will be key criteria for initial selection, including 'clean' social media and similar profiles, but it is not singular. Depending on the role as a graduate or early career professional, Boeing works to provide visibility and knowledge of varying skill areas and functions for graduates and early career staff, depending on the site so cross-skilling is also possible.

Boeing's presence in Brisbane and Melbourne, at the University of Queensland and Boeing Aerostructure Australia, respectively are 'rich' in terms of people, culture, manufacturing and/or program exposure with a dynamic environment in which digital systems interactions play a crucial role. They increasingly use more complex 'real world' design and simulation tools to control the burndown risk that is expensive and time consuming at full scale. Employers need to use their fundamental skills to develop and utilise this, gaining experience by being immersed with Boeing's products. Boeing will increasingly use digital tools for research, design, manufacture and support our products across their life cycle, typical of other high technology business.

Boeing's R&D teams use an Agile framework suitably modified to address the 'fail fast' philosophy in early product development. They work on the cutting edge for several technologies and in some cases it's where those technologies intersect that step changes in progress are created. People working together to set short term goals, work a plan, share progress and then repeat based on learnings in short cycles requires strong team, communication and problem-solving skills. For the latter stages of new product development where hardware, lead times, scale and customer delivery are needed, traditional program management tools are used. Employers need to be comfortable with that because at the end of the day the company will make commitments to their customers and communities. This was also a common theme across the industry participants from the session.

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Balancing onsite teams is critical for Boeing, as physical development and support for complex hardware like aircraft production systems does not happen offsite. Some roles require full-time support for teams/products and some roles can be more flexible; it is important to be able to work and deliver in both cases. As a new employee, it is important to expect to move between teams as part of normal business in the early career stages. Clarity of the new employee role, deliverables and interactions with your team and leader are critical, as is always staying connected. For graduates, who learnt remotely during the recent COVID period, it can be hard to provide evidence of team experience. So how does a candidate show this? Boeing specifically has used a 'Boeing day in' where candidates are given the chance to work on projects in teams for the day, meet current employees, leaders, and tour applicable site areas. From these interactions Boeing can ascertain where candidates are comfortable, their strengths and likely fit for the teams and culture of the business.

Amazon Web Services seeks and values curiosity and initiative as two key behaviours in their employees.

The Australian Council of Professions (ACoP) notes that working and accessing resources remotely, as well as gaining and maintaining relationships, have become critical skills for professionals in all modes of employment. As the unifying alliance of professional organisations representing close to one million Australian professionals, including engineers, accountants, IT specialists, healthcare providers, veterinarians and architects. ACoP is acknowledged by the community, industry and government as thought leaders, advocating for professions, professionals and professionalism since 1971.

Our 'Creating Australia 2040 – Education & Employability' Summit held in August 2022 and many follow-on roundtables explored key questions and identified practical, inclusive, evidence-based approaches to address the post-pandemic education and employability challenges of the next two decades. These challenges included: working remotely; gaining new clients without person-to-person contacts; accessing resources remotely; maintaining professional peer relationships; maintaining continuing professional development (CPD) and continuing professional education (CPE); and work-life separation.

ACoP has also recently explored the changing nature of profession as digital technologies, in particular the recent advances in artificial intelligence (AI), transform the way professionals work as well as the possible demise of some professions, or parts, of professions as they are replaced by AI. ACoP has identified the astounding quality of professional advice provided by AI tools such as ChatGPT, the difficulties distinguishing between work done by AI versus by professional practices, the ability for anyone to use AI and the risks created by AI generating fake facts.

In summary, there is the need for universities and education providers, industry and professional associations to work more closely together to develop and practice effective ways of teaching and learning to ensure success of those entering different professions as future ways of working change.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the pandemic affected our workforce in many ways. While online learning meant that some of the soft skills, such as establishing interpersonal relationships, were difficult to attain, making and maintaining personal connections continue to be essential skills to have. Professions continue to look at employing graduates who have a strong foundation in their discipline area, but there is a growing need to be able to adapt to and use digital technologies and tools. An understanding of AI, its impact, benefits and pitfalls are also important skills that have become

essential with the recent rapid growth of this area. Overall, it is important for universities to recognise these changes occurring in the workforce and to adapt so students are prepared for an ever-changing workforce.

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