

Getting a Job in the Field of Instructional Design and Succeeding at it: Some Thoughts and Reactions

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Introduction

The papers in this special issue of the *Journal of Instructional Development* are a valuable resource to both students and practitioners of instructional design. They provide substantial insight as to the professional status of, and job opportunities in, instructional design in academia, business and industry. These papers have been prepared by seasoned practitioners, and acknowledged leaders from a variety of settings in the field of instructional design. Their observations, guidance, and counsel penetrate the very essence of how one initiates a career in instructional design and makes it an enjoyable and successful experience.

The authors have emphasized the importance of academic preparation as an essential ingredient for a career in instructional design. Practical skills in media production, computer-based instructional design, needs assessment techniques, and other applications acquired through coursework, practicum, workshops and internship experiences were accentuated as worthy compliments to a solid knowledge base of theories and principles underlying the techniques of designing instruction.

Major Points Presented in the Articles

There are some common threads throughout these papers as to how that first and, perhaps, succeeding job is obtained. Among the points worth noting are the following:

- Before you make phone calls, write letters and request interviews, you should segment that part of academia, business or industry in which you would like to obtain employment. Further stratification by geographical area is also a worthwhile process in taking into consideration personal lifestyle constraints that may limit where you want to work. A last layer of segmentation is suggested in evaluating the intellectual challenge, diversity of work assignments, and travel opportunities inherent in a potential position.

- Jobs are not always advertised. There are several methods that organizations use to identify qualified applicants. These include: college placement centers, advertisements in professional periodicals, newspaper advertisements, personal inquiries with faculty or practitioners, employment agencies, recruiting and search firms, and referrals from internal staff members.

- The interview process begins as you establish contact with key personnel in the networking scheme or within the organization where you are seeking employment. It then proceeds through the resume, telephone contact, personal interview and continues through the follow-up contacts that lead to the job offer, negotiations, and acceptance.

- There is wide variation in salary, benefits, career advancement opportunities and other prerequisites in the

different types of organizations employing instructional designers. Differences in these aspects of employment may themselves be a determining factor in choosing the type of organization and geographical location where you seek employment.

- Signs and symbols of career success have both personal and societal referents for success. Included in the personal list is the ability to control your working environment, publishing and consulting opportunities, social environment and the level of professional recognition both within and outside the organization. Societal rewards in the field of instructional design are, in reality, no different than for other professions. These rewards include increased job responsibility, level of compensation, office space and appointments, size of budget, expense approval authority, and opportunities to continue professional activities under organizational sponsorship.

- Career success may be enhanced by joining and maintaining memberships in professional societies, staying current in the field of instructional design, making and maintaining contacts with other professionals who may serve as mentors or personal counselors throughout your career, and making sure others learn about the quality of your work.

Some Additional Thoughts

My thoughts on these papers are, of course, influenced by my experience, and therefore reflect some of my opinions about current issues in the field. For instance, there seems to me to be too much concern over compensation, benefits and prerequisites. Those authors advocating a career in academia lament underpayment for their services. Those

encouraging a career in business or industry lament the loss of personal and perhaps intellectual freedom found in academia. As a society we need the most capable faculty we can find to staff our colleges and universities. I would discourage anyone from seeking a job outside of an educational institution solely on the basis of financial rewards. Conversely, I would be among the first to discourage those seeking academic and "intellectual freedom" from seeking employment in organizations where such behavior is not rewarded and may, in fact, be punished.

In either case, the choice of where and in what setting to pursue a career is a personal one. It involves both personal and professional trade-offs. I firmly believe the best service we experts can provide job-seekers is timely and accurate information from which they can make their own career decisions; when required, we can also provide objective counsel, support, and encouragement.

The advice to gain the proper educational background was well-intended. The reality, however, is that instructional design requires no license, is unregulated, and is practiced both inside and outside of academia by individuals with educational preparation for careers in other fields. In fact, many of us currently employed in the profession of instructional design began in jobs unlikely to follow a career path leading to our present positions. Instructional design both as a course of study and profession is a technology based on a solid basis of research but still very much in its infancy with regard to wide-spread application. I believe it to be a specialized technology that remains largely unrecognized as such by many persons in other professions. Its very future is being formed by those who teach and practice in it. It may be a surprise to some that not all who practice it were, or are, prepared to do so. Many who do practice it are ill-prepared, and through their supervisory prerogatives they may hinder the progress of its application by the qualified practitioners they manage. This situation is unfortunate because the clients' judgments of the work done by people in the field will be the determinants of the long-term career opportunities in instructional design. If that work is judged to be unsatisfactory, then the profession is bound to suffer.

The journey toward a successful career in instructional design has many obstacles along the way. Tenure has a new meaning in today's academic set-

ting, job security in business and industry is not what it once was, budgets change from time to time, organizational priorities do not always support our individual aspirations, and career paths are irregular and unpredictable.

I believe that a person who desires a long-term career in instructional design might be better served beginning his or her career in another field. While not always the best advice, and as contrary as this observation may seem on its surface, it is one that holds empirical validity in the careers of those who are now tenured experts in instructional design. While taught as a science, it is practiced as an art. Therefore, it may be worthwhile to begin a working career in a job where you can learn another, perhaps more widely-recognized, skill and identify ways in which the applications of instructional design can benefit the organization. It is a path that will lend you some credibility with those in key management positions, upon whom your future success and career opportunities may very well depend. This unlikely career path may, in fact, lead you to enter the profession of instructional design in a management position rather than as an entry-level technician with less opportunity to gain the organizational support necessary to obtain a supervisory job.

It may be news to some readers that instructional designers in most organizations are considered as support staff. They make few "bottom line" organizational decisions and very often don't even have a voice in them. Frequently, they and their departments are subject to the earliest of budget reductions during times of limited fiscal resources. Their contributions to the organization's improvements are rarely recognized. At the same time, organizational performance deficiencies are nearly always training-related in the eyes and minds of time management. And, sadly enough, in this world where management laments for the want of a "qualified" and "skilled" workforce, it is not at all uncommon for instructional designers and their departments to be considered a luxury rather than an absolute necessity.

Another eye-opener for some is the sobering realization that in business and industry, graduate degrees in instructional design often do not have the leverage provided by other advanced degrees. As a result, there may be less initial, and perhaps long-term, potential for high compensation levels and other individual financial incentives than

found for MBAs and other more "technical" degrees. In instances where this observation is found to be erroneous, we are most likely to find that it has been overcome via effective networks and personal relationships with key decision makers within the organization.

In conclusion, in spite of the present realities of the profession, I strongly believe instructional design as a career field is one with an exciting future and will be one of many opportunities and rewards. This is particularly evident in the need for more technically qualified and skilled personnel in an increasingly sophisticated market place.

Gaining a job in this field requires planning, flexibility, adaptability, making a few short-term sacrifices to achieve desired long-term outcomes, determination, and tenacity in facing the challenges ever present in any profession or career.

Readers of these papers should find themselves enriched by the robustness and diversity of the opinions that are expressed. By following the advice expressed in the papers, readers should be better prepared to enter or continue in the profession of instructional design. In addition, I believe readers will gain an understanding that career success in instructional design is an individual measure of satisfaction, based upon personal values and the knowledge that you did your best with every opportunity along the way. For, in the end, the pursuit of the prize is the most exciting and challenging phase of any career.