

Technology and Job Searching: A Marriage in Need of Counseling

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As I embarked on a job search this spring, I did not realize how much had changed in five years (since searching out of grad school). As I perused job listings online at the usual spots, the chronicle, studentaffairs.com, higheredjobs.com, etc., I found more and more positions had links to follow in order to apply. As recently as 2 years ago, when I conducted a very limited search, the bulk of applications were either emailed to a departmental contact or mailed in to the department or Human Resources office. Imagine my surprise to be filling out an extensive web form with all of my educational and work experiences, references, and blood type, to find at the end of the process...a place for my resume, cover letter, and references. This was only the beginning of what I was to discover – that technology, student affairs, and being a candidate are relationships that can use some work.

I spent hours filling out web forms at different institutions (the same form – since it appears that most institutions are using the same HR software), uploading documents, and frantically writing down my confirmation numbers to make sure I had appropriately applied for each position. I would then wait for the handy auto-generated email to come from the HR software thanking me for applying to job #54098059685096. In my prior experience of emailing my documents to a departmental contact (sometimes a search chair, sometimes the department's HR person), I would receive confirmation that my application was in and that it would be reviewed according to whomever's timeline. This was usually email correspondence, and was helpful as I would then have knowledge of the departmental person that I could contact to inquire further about the search. This new process with these automated websites meant I sat around hoping that I would hear from someone in the department to which I had applied. In some cases, I applied in April and am still waiting to hear (it's October – I'm guessing someone else has the job).

In fact, at this point, I am convinced that my application has been lost at multiple institutions. What else could explain the fact that I followed all instructions, applied as I was told, and five months later, have not heard a word – not even a “thank you but no thank you.” In the age we are in now, where almost everything we do is web-based, from room re-assignment processes, to changing meal plans, to registering for classes and posting grades, why is communication so difficult? Is it so challenging to draft an email that can be sent to all candidates for a position that includes a thank you for applying, basic timeline, and contact information should the candidate have questions? It would merely require copying and pasting said email, and sending it to the email address listed on each candidate's resume – a job that a student worker could easily do. Instead, for many positions, the only communication I received was from the HR software program – auto-generated responses to thank me for my application, and then later auto-generated notes saying the position had been filled. At what point is it fair to actually speak to a candidate? (and I don't mean the phone even – a simple email from a person would be great). Have we gotten so technological we have lost our ability to actually communicate with people? Do we not pull our hair out over roommate conflicts in which the roommates have never spoken to each other? Do we not get jobs in student affairs to help students learn and grow as people, and hopefully impart some civility and critical thinking?

Often we talk about our students not wanting to talk to people, instead communicating with instant messaging, facebook, text messages, or <gasp> having their parents do it for them. In what way are

we any different if our search committees do not contact candidates, instead letting the HR software program do it for us? I am a professional and therefore am not deeply offended if you do not want to hire me for your position, or even grant me an interview. I am offended when it feels like your search process does not even have the time or common courtesy to contact me to tell me you are not interested. In fact, it's offensive for me to put the time and energy into applying for your position only to wait around for three months to either get a form letter rejection, or an auto-response from a software program. Once you've reviewed my resume, please let me know where I stand – I believe we do this for students with judicial cases, or when they apply for paraprofessional positions. Let us have the same common courtesy for each other that we try to foster in our students towards their communities.

To bring this back around to technology – we clearly have access to resources now that should make the job search process significantly more streamlined for both search committees and departments, and candidates. With fancy uploading software, departments can receive cover letters and resumes more quickly, and can share search files on secure online servers (so resume review can be done from individual offices and files aren't removed from central offices). Email programs can save pre-written letters that can be sent to candidates, and departments can post general search updates on websites. Candidates no longer have to spend a fortune on resume paper or stamps, and with a handy free online pdf converter, can worry no longer about formatting strangeness happening when uploading documents. For a profession that works to assist students in developing community, developing communication skills, and facilitating their academic progress, we seem to have forgotten the stress associated with a job search. How would an aspiring RA feel to apply for a position and then never hear anything again? Or perhaps, to wait, hear that other applicants have gotten jobs, and then later on get an auto-generated email that says “sorry the position has been filled.” We would never allow that to happen to an aspiring RA, or an intern applicant in Student Activities, or to any student that applied for a position in Student Affairs, yet we seemingly have no problem in not communicating with professional applicants. While it isn't every university that does this, I have applied all over the country, large and small, public and private, and in the last 5 months, had more email from HR website software than people. We need to re-think our search processes and communication paradigms, or the next generation of student affairs professionals will be socialized to believe that job searching is impersonal and that it's ok to not communicate – after all, we have a software program to do it for us.