

# Identify, articulate your transferable skills

By Rodney Wilson

For some students, choosing a major is easy — doctors go to medical school, lawyers go to law school, and so on. Many college students, however, don't have quite so defined career aspirations, and these students often have a hard time picking a major.

Higher education is intended to train people for the work force, and students should consider both career trends and skills that college can help them develop when deciding on a major in a certain field.

Linda Parker, director of the University of Cincinnati Career Center, points out that the six hottest career prospects in today's economy are technical positions, government service, financial services, social services ("especially to the elderly"), health services ("especially nursing") and entrepreneurial opportunities.

Marcia Miller, career development coordinator at Northern Kentucky University's Career Development Center, cites similar data, but cautions that current employment statistics may not be the best way to choose a major.

"The fastest growing occupations are still predicted to be in the computer industry," Miller said,

"but, I have to be honest, I don't see it. There has been, in my opinion, a rapid drop-off in employers contacting our office seeking these majors. Many students who had chosen Computer Science or Information Systems majors when it was 'hot' were shocked to find that the demand had died off."

In an economy that can see employment interest in a certain field go from bang to bust overnight, it is crucial that college students build skills that will make them attractive to potential employers, rather than just absorb information about how to do a certain job. Acquiring these skills has as much, if not more, to do with the student as it does with the particular area of study.

"The important thing is the development and presentation of (the student's) skills," says NKU's Miller. "All majors have something to contribute, be it hard or soft skills. A liberal arts major often provides students with great foundations in critical analysis and writing skill. A business major provides a core understanding of economic concepts. The sciences, technical problem solving skills. They all have something to offer. It is how the student takes advantage of them that matters."

In previous economies, workers could plan on building a lifelong career with a company, but now students have to consider the fact that, at some point in their working lives, they will probably end up searching for another job. For this reason, students should concentrate on developing skills that can be transferred to another job, or even a different line of work.

"Despite a down economy and increased competition for any available jobs," Parker says, "employers are proving to be much more accommodating of individuals changing careers, if the job seeker can effectively articulate their transferable skills, relevant education and experience."

James E. Challenger, president of outplacement specialists Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc., calls the concept "transferring a function." That means "assessing the knowledge and skills you possess that enable you to provide a service and then expanding upon the outlets for that service," Challenger said. According to Challenger, "Individuals who travel a function, enhance their value and marketability by building upon past job experience and expertise."

Challenger, author of books on job-hunting success, recommends an ongoing assessment of skills, to decide how to transfer those skills, if necessary, to another position. For example, Challenger says, an accountant could become a math teacher because both jobs involve many of the same skills. The same is true for a salesperson who becomes a stockbroker or a journalist who goes into public relations. Here, the function of the first and second jobs are basically the same.

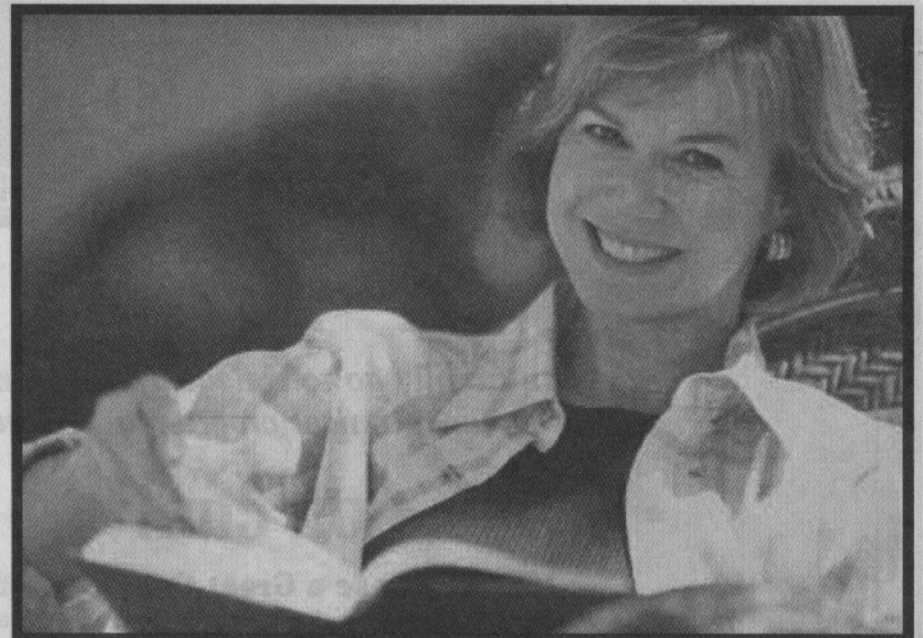
"Conversely," Challenger said, "it would not make sense for an engineer to look at nursing as a second career, or for a computer software designer to jump into a new career as a clothing retailer. The whole idea of traveling a function is to use the skills learned from the first job as an immediate springboard to another well-paying position."

Regardless of the type of work you do, employers also expect you to have "soft skills. Some skills and traits that Parker says employers look for: leadership; strong communication; computational, analytical, innovative and problem solving skills; and entrepreneurial ability. Add to these flexibility, accountability, open-mindedness and the steady pursuit of knowledge and development. Experts say the "soft" traits are often the tie-breaker in an employer's choice between two candidates who are otherwise comparable in job-related abilities and experience.

So, if you're a current or incoming college student scratching your head over what major to declare, take into consideration the impact the decision has on your career options in the years following graduation.

"In today's job market, entry-level positions are not growing on trees," says Miller. "Students need to plan for the future by developing transferable skills and exploring employment options."

Sources: James E. Challenger, *The Challenger Guide* (McGraw-Hill Trade, 2000, \$14.95); Northern Kentucky University, <http://access.nku.edu/cdc> (859) 572-5709; University of Cincinnati, <http://www.uc.edu/career/index.htm> (513) 556-3471



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