

JOBS/CAREERS

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High Tech World Welcomes Liberal Arts Grads

By Sheryl Silver, Career Source

Are you a liberal arts grad wondering if there's any way short of returning to college for a computer science degree—to jump on the high tech bandwagon?

Hiring managers and recruiters say there myriad opportunities in the world of technology for liberal arts graduates and, indeed, a wide variety of individuals who didn't major in computer science while in college.

Marketing communications, for example, is one career area where experience in the field, coupled with computer and Internet skills acquired on the job or at home, is sufficient to garner positions in firms that serve technology clientele.

Jenny Morgan, vice president of public relations for KSK Communications Ltd., a full service marketing communications firm in Vienna, Virginia, says that even for her firm, which primarily services high tech clients, a technical degree is not a high priority for staff members. For positions ranging from account executive to copywriter, Morgan says, "Understanding marketing is the top priority. I look first for someone with business to business marketing communications experience. Writing and editing skills are also critical."

As to the degrees Morgan looks for in new recruits, she says, "Typically, the people we hire have journalism, marketing communications, or liberal arts degrees, not technical degrees."

Suzi Lathrop, director of client services in Los Angeles for Bernard Hodes, a New York headquartered recruitment advertising firm with 47 offices nationwide, says she too places a high priority on marketing background than technical credentials when hiring people to work as account coordinators with technology clients. Like Morgan, Lathrop says communications, business and marketing degrees are most common among those hired.

This focus on non-technical skills doesn't mean computer skills aren't important. In fact, Morgan says, "If people want to get a job in marketing communications today, they better be comfortable with technology."

How "comfortable"? "Someone must be able to use the basic business packages like Microsoft Word and Excel that are out there," says Morgan. "We're also looking for people who understand technology trends such as Year 2000 issues and what's happening on the World Wide Web. It's also important to have

an understanding of the benefits garnered from technology by certain types of businesses."

Lathrop says she too looks for people to be computer literate. Since staff assigned to work with high tech companies typically have to deal with a lot of technical jargon, she also looks for people with good listening and communication skills, who are quick learners.

Increasingly, say both Lathrop and Morgan, it's essential for people in marketing communications to be comfortable navigating and utilizing the Web. "A good understanding of the Internet is key," says Lathrop. "It's an important research tool for us. We can use it to gather statistics. We can look at the Web sites of our clients' competitors and identify how other companies are using the Web."

"The key is to be able to use the Web as one of the many tools in your marketing arsenal," adds Morgan. "We also need to be able to use the Web for research and for sending and receiving e-mail."

Is it important that someone's computer or Internet skills are acquired in a classroom setting? Not for Morgan. "We actually prefer people who have picked up their technical knowledge and expertise in a business set-

ting," says Morgan. "Classroom knowledge alone isn't usually adequate."

The customer support and help desk function is another area of expanding opportunity related to technology that doesn't require a technical degree. As more companies computerize and populate the desks of their employees with PCs, the demand for staff in this area has grown dramatically.

According to a number of recruiters who place and hire people for these jobs, technical expertise is important, but customer service skills can be even more critical when hiring decisions are made. This can be particularly true for internal help desk positions because companies often offer computer-based training to teach new help desk staff how to assist users of their particular software. What can't be taught so easily, say these hiring, is patience and the type of interpersonal skills needed to be effective in a customer support role. That's why those are among the traits employers look for when screening candidates for these jobs.

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WORKING LIFE: How to Avoid Having to Sue Your Lawyer

By Deborah L. Jacobs, Chronicle Features

With the recent rash of workplace lawsuits, more people are becoming disillusioned with lawyers. Some who start out suing the boss wind up in court confronting the very lawyers who handled their case.

There are many reasons why that can happen. Occasionally, the case starts with an unscrupulous lawyer who promises the moon, or a client who can't accept the disappointment of losing. For more often, the attorney isn't knowledgeable enough about employment law and makes a major mistake.

One common source of errors is not submitting a claim with the appropriate state or federal agency, says Tanya Starnes, a malpractice lawyer in Emeryville, Calif., and author of the book, "Mad as Your Lawyer" (Holt Press, 1996). Before bringing a federal age-discrimination case, for instance, workers must file a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Deadlines are short (depending where you live, they may be as little as 180 days after the discrimination). A sloppy lawyer can easily miss the cutoff.

Another recurring blunder is not pursuing all the obvious allegations, Starnes says. For example, a 55-year-old African American woman who claims she was fired based on age, race, sex or disability. A lawyer who mentions only one of these in court papers might be negligent.

Even seasoned lawyers can make fatal slips, though—as William Petrusky found out. After getting laid off from his management job at American Cyanamid, Petrusky hired a reputable New Jersey lawyer (but not an employment law pro) to handle his federal age-discrimination suit against the company. When Petrusky lost that case in 1988, his lawyer sued him for \$120,000 in unpaid legal bills.

Petrusky consulted two more lawyers, then fired back with a state court malpractice claim against the first one. The essence: Lawyer No. 1 didn't take the necessary steps to call a key witness—one of Petrusky's former superiors—at the trial. As a result, Petrusky argued, he lost the chance to refute some of the company's complaints about his performance.

This time, a jury sided with Petrusky. It said he was entitled to \$250,000—what the state jury thought a federal jury would have awarded Petrusky if his original lawyer had done the right thing. With interest going back to 1984, when the age-discrimination case was filed, the total came to \$494,212.

But the story isn't over, since his case is now on appeal. Petrusky, who took out a second mortgage on his house to raise the \$45,000 he'd shelled out for legal expenses, so far hasn't collected a cent. Since leaving American Cyanamid 14 years ago, he's been a marketing consultant, but never made his way back into the corporate workplace.

What can other workers learn from Petrusky's experience? Interview former clients and watch lawyers in the courtroom before you hire them, advises Petrusky now 67. "Just because they're smart, doesn't mean they know how to try a case."

While a clever, conspicuous lawyer could conceivably tackle workplace issues, my own preference would be for an employment law specialist. Too often, attorneys with no expertise in the field think they can cash in on this sometimes lucrative pursuit. There's a risk, then, that they'll accept cases they're not qualified to handle.

Whoever you hire, it's best not to take a backseat in the case. Hilson Stiles, of Morton, N.J., who represents Petrusky in his malpractice suit, encourages clients to keep abreast of everything that's going on (including deadlines), ask to see copies of court papers before they're filed, and be an "active participant" in all decisions.

One of the most important is whether or not to accept a substantial settlement offer. Lawyers gambling on a huge verdict (and the publicity that goes with it) might be tempted to turn the offer down. But a worker who rejects it "may never have another opportunity to recover his or her losses," Stiles says. Given the risks—and the lawyer's vested interest—it's a good idea to get a second opinion.

Though most lawyers will gladly give a consultation at this late stage, it's a rare breed of lawyer who'll represent you in a suit against a fellow attorney. You'd find one of malpractice specialists in the book, "If You Want to Sue a Lawyer" by Kay Oetberg. It's available for \$10 from HALT, an organization of Americans for legal reform, at (202) 347-0000.

Deborah Jacobs welcomes letters from readers and will address topics of general interest in this column. Contact her by e-mail (DJ@WorkingLife.com) or by letter at Chronicle Features, 870 Market Street, Suite 1011, San Francisco, Calif. 94102. Please include your name, address and telephone number.

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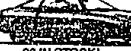
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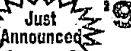
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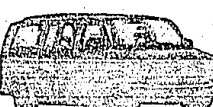
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