

## Working the arts

Arts grads tend to be more well rounded

**Denise Deveau, Financial Post** Published: Wednesday, September 02, 2009



Peter J. Thompson, National Post Katie Schleifer has a PhD in archeology, has managed international projects and is bilingual, yet she worries not having an MBA will sideline her career.

Katie Schleifer of Waterdown, Ont., has a resume most 26-year-olds would envy. She has managed projects internationally, done research and teaching, led conference presentations, knows her way around database programs and technology tools, is fluent in English and French and can write a letter-perfect report.

What she doesn't have on her resume is a business degree. And she thinks that might keep her off of the top interview lists of prospective employers. "It's a terrible misconception that an arts degree doesn't translate into the business world," says the PhD student in archeology.

"Most employers want a degree in communications, commerce or marketing, but an arts degree student can have business sense -- one doesn't negate the other."

Ms. Schleifer and other arts grads needn't worry, says Greg Arbitman, president of ReCareer, a Toronto-based recruitment specialist. "We've noticed a general shift with our clients because they feel arts grads are more well-rounded and have the ability to think outside the box."

They also realize many arts degree students can present, do research, interact with peers, articulate messaging and tend to fit in well with corporate communities, he adds. "With the push to social media especially, it's the variety of skills and exposure to different disciplines that prepare you for a business career."

Gene Lewis, director of sales and marketing for Intuit Global Business Division, a business solutions provider based in Edmonton, confirms that. "When we look for individuals, it's less about the degree and more about their capabilities and potential," he says. "Thinking is the critical component, and the ability to clearly communicate is at a premium -- whether that's in person or through e-mail."

When you have an arts degree however, a lot rides on how you sell yourself. Unfortunately, arts grads don't always get it right, because what sells in the academic world won't cut it in the business one, Ms. Schleifer says. "People in the arts tend to put our academic smarts first on our resumes. That doesn't work for the business world, because it doesn't communicate what kind of worker you could be."

It is important to show what you can bring to the table, Mr. Lewis says. "You should be able to say, 'Here's how my schooling/experience applies in your area.' Talk to us about how we can use our software, how you can understand behaviour and articulate pain points, how you are able to communicate images, and all the pieces that show how your expertise fits our world."

Paisley McNair, who graduated with a double major in history and social anthropology, realized selling her degree and related experience was an important part of making the grade during her job interview.

She works as an office manager with Blue Banana Market, a Toronto-based wholesaler and retailer of its own line of giftware and home accessories. "I think my degree came into play in explaining how I could be good at a job," she says. "It showed I had the breadth and depth to be versatile and was able to multi-task."

Warren Horwitz, owner of the company, says in the practical world, "an arts degree generally means you can listen and follow instructions, you have the attention span to stick to your work, you can view things from different angles -- and those are the things we look for."

Mauro Lollo, founder and chief technology officer of Unis Lumin in Oakville, Ont., couldn't agree more. Despite the fact he runs a technology company, there is always a good mix of technical and arts skills on board. "At first blush it seems unusual to have people with philosophy or English degrees in the tech business. But the reality is we're looking for critical thinkers with creativity, despite what their educational background and experience might portray. We want people who can fit inside a box, then get outside it and be masters of multiple things."

Alex Marshall, who runs managed services for Unis Lumin, is a classic example. He went to his interview in 1999 with a graduate degree in philosophy and four months of network analyst training at Centennial College. Now involved in the hiring process he says, "I look for [a person's] ability to communicate, figure out problems and determine next steps. Communications skills and the ability to get around a problem are especially important, because at the end of the day, nine out of 10 customers want to talk to our people directly. We can teach anybody to do the technical side, but if you can't talk to the customer, you're not much use."

In technology, it's the integration of disciplines that works, Mr. Lewis says. "You still need computer science grads to understand the why of technology. But in concert with that, you need to understand the how [or behavioural] part of it. Computer engineers need to work with others to understand customer problems and create a solution in a language the customer understands. Technology is the background, not the foreground."

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