Liberal Arts Degrees: An Asset At Some Companies

by CLAY MASTERS

January 16, 2012 from WOI

Technology training and know-how only get you so far in this economy. It turns out many employers now are looking for workers with a broader set of skills. Packaged food giant ConAgra's IT internship program, for example, values a degree in journalism or biology as much as one in computer science. The trend is putting a crimp in the conventional theory that specialization in higher education pays.

ROBERT SIEGEL, HOST:

To a new trend now in high tech hiring. Hands-on computer skills are an important assets for many, but not most jobseekers in today's economy.

But Harvest Public Media's Clay Masters reports that some companies are starting to look a bit broader, filling IT jobs with some unlikely college grads.

CLAY MASTERS, BYLINE: Remember that old joke about how a liberal arts major says hello? You know, you want fries with that? Well, that joke might be turning on those who still use it.

Consider that Healthy Choice frozen meal you toss into the microwave. There's a lot that goes on behind it. I'm not talking about the physical production of that convenient lunch, but just the way you even know about it, how it gets to the aisle of your local grocery store in the first place.

GERRIT SCHUTTE: Think of what it takes to produce a product, what it takes to run a factory, what it takes to run a payroll. All of these business processes ultimately are reduced to some form of computer logic.

MASTERS: That's Gerrit Schutte. He's chief information officer at Omaha-based food company ConAgra. It's the giant behind brands like Healthy Choice and Slim Jim. And like in any company, behind all of its business operations, is its information technology department, which is recruiting more employees off the beaten path.

The IT department here is huge, about 700 employees. There are no assigned workspaces. One day a week, employees work remotely from home. In 2008, the company revamped its IT internship program to include those who didn't climb the traditional techie ladder, like Eric Fasse who majored in communications studies.

ERIC FASSE: That initial interview that I had was just going over the skills. And so, you know, they're trying to get a bead on what is your IT background. So they're asking me do you know how to do JavaScript. Do you know how to - and I had to say no to everything.

(SOUNDBITE OF LAUGHTER)

FASSE: I thought I'm sunk, like there's no way. I was like, I'm not going to get a call back.

MASTERS: Fasse didn't just get a call back, he eventually got an IT job at ConAgra. So did Holly Barber, even though on paper her resume may have seemed a bit thin.

HOLLY BARBER: So, all throughout high school, I was definitely kind of a geek and a gamer. So, I was kind of naturally leaning towards computer science. But I didn't like math, so that was kind of the stumbling block for me, eventually. So I became a computer science major but then switched to journalism.

MASTERS: The company partners with nearby colleges to grow their own local talent - like Fasse and Barber, right here in Omaha - while still hiring those students who take the normal computer science route.

Again, ConAgra chief information officer Gerrit Schutte.

SCHUTTE: We look for them to have more than a single dimension in terms of what they bring to the table. Just technical talent is not enough.
MASTERS: Debra Humphreys is with the Association of American Colleges and Universities, an organization that acts as an intermediary between colleges and businesses, making sure graduates are prepared for the demands of the rapidly changing workplace. Humphreys also names Siemens and Hewlett Packard as companies open to nontraditional hiring.

DEBRA HUMPHREYS: The big message for today's college students is to remember that they're preparing now for a lifetime of work, not just for that first job they're going to get right as they graduate.

And what we're hearing from employers over and over again is that students really need a combination of broad skills and abilities that you get from a really good college education.

MASTERS: So, while no one is saying computer science majors won't still be in high demand, it does appear that having some - dare I say - liberal arts training while embracing your inner computer geek, might just be the key to getting your foot in the door.

For NPR News, I'm Clay Masters in Omaha.