

A Framework for Students' Professional Development When Meeting with Employers in a Microelectronics Workforce Development Program

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Abstract

A national shortage of skilled engineering employees in the microelectronics workforce has led to difficulties in hiring talented, qualified employees in the microelectronics industry, leading the U.S. government to emphasize workforce development in universities nationwide. However, as students approach employers looking for employment opportunities, many are unprepared to discuss how their skills and experiences translate to real-world experiences. These challenges have created a need to provide students with excellent professional development resources that help them prepare to meet with employers. The purpose of this paper is to share a framework, methods, criteria, and results for determining the best professional development resources that help multidisciplinary engineering students in large, multi-institutional microelectronics workforce development center that encompasses over 20 universities prepare for meeting with employers to discuss employment opportunities. The research question that drove this work is how do we determine which professional development materials are the most beneficial for engineering students to prepare when meeting with employers about job opportunities? A team of faculty and undergraduate researchers developed a framework of topic areas for which professional development activities were needed for students when preparing to meet with employers. The framework of essential topic areas was then used to find professional development resources from institutional career services, literature, and professional development articles. Based on the located resources, a grounded theory approach was used to develop criteria applied to the gathered resources to determine the “best” to share as exemplars with students as they prepare to meet with employers. For each topic area, a content analysis was performed on over 20 institutional resources and over 20 professional development articles and literature resources. The four criteria that emerged from the data using the grounded theory approach were used to split the resources into categories and allow for comparison between the articles for which ones were the “best” and shared as exemplars. The evaluated exemplars can also serve as a model and reference for others to create beneficial resources to help students. For those starting up a workforce development initiative or evaluating similar materials, these results can be used to assess the “best” and most beneficial resources, and similarly find resources that are exemplars.

Tags: students, professional development, grounded theory, microelectronics, employment, workforce development

1. Introduction

With the national shortage of skilled, qualified engineering employees in the microelectronics workforce, employers have had difficulties in hiring talented, prepared engineering employees in the microelectronics industry. Coupled with the U.S. semiconductor manufacturing market share dropping significantly over the past two decades [1], the U.S. government has passed the CHIPS and Science Act [2], dedicating \$52.7 billion to U.S. semiconductor research, manufacturing, development, and workforce development. Included in the \$52.7 billion allocated in the CHIPS and Science Act is \$13.2 billion dedicated toward research and development and workforce development in universities across the nation [2]. Although many students have valuable technical skills and experiences when approaching employers looking for employment

opportunities [3], many students still struggle to properly communicate and relate their skills and experiences to real-world experiences when meeting with employers. When students approach employers about employment opportunities, previous work indicates that over two-thirds of employers think that graduates need to work on their interviewing skills, [4] suggesting that employers view most students as unprepared to communicate their preparedness. In contrast, other previous work shows that over three-quarters of new graduates are using career services in their final year to prepare [5], indicating that most students are doing some preparation before meeting with employers. Given this large gap between employers' expectations and students' performance when meeting with employers, there is a need to improve how students prepare to meet with employers about employment opportunities. As a first step toward addressing that need, we sought to determine what professional development resources are most beneficial for students to help prepare them for meeting with employers about employment opportunities, including internship and full-time positions.

The purpose of this paper is to share a framework, methods, criteria, and results for determining the best professional development resources that help multidisciplinary undergraduate engineering students prepare for meeting with employers to discuss employment opportunities. These results, including exemplars in professional development resources from university career services and online professional development articles, were developed for multidisciplinary engineering in a large, multi-institutional microelectronics workforce development center encompassing 20 universities called [SCALE](#), funded by the DoD. In addition, the results were triangulated with employers' input from a virtual panel between students and employers where employers discussed with students how to improve their skills in these areas. The research question that drove this study is how do we determine which professional development materials are the most beneficial for microelectronic undergraduate engineering students to prepare and improve their skills when meeting with employers about employment opportunities?

2. Background Literature on Skills Students Need to Talk with Employers

Career Services

Due to the national shortage of skilled, qualified engineering employees in the microelectronics workforce, it is vital that engineering students develop not only technical skills, but also professional skills before meeting with employers about employment opportunities. Effective communication with employers and developing professional skills to be more employable are typically two of a student's primary concerns while attending college [6]. Visiting career services' resources and attending career services workshops can also help students increase their employability [6]. Career services' role in developing students' professional skills has continued to grow as career services evolve. Since its inception, career services have evolved and shifted their focus on different facets to the needs of students. With the initial focus on mentoring students, career services have continued to value guidance and mentoring of students. After the Second World War, career services emphasized job placement, allowing students to contact employers more easily and find employment [5]. As the economic landscape changed in the 1970s, career services began implementing career counseling, allowing students to take charge and be accountable for their careers [6]. Professional networking and the involvement of connected communities have allowed students to prepare themselves for the professional world better and become members of more specific communities to help them grow [7].

With student success being one of the main priorities for career services, the role of employers has continued to emerge. In order to give students the best chance to succeed, career services emphasize for students to meet with employers [8]. With career fairs being a vital asset not only to students but also to employers and career services [7], they allow for mutual benefit from all parties. For students, career fairs are often the start of professional networking, on-campus interviewing, and even opportunities for full-time employment or part-time employment, with the likes of internships and cooperative education programs [8]. As the awareness of career services is relatively high among students, students also utilize the various facets of career services, such as professional development services, which seem to benefit students the most [9]. Overall, students view university career services positively and believe that those services will help prepare them to find employment [9]. Clearly, the career services' many facets have benefited students. However, some employers have not seen the benefits career services have had on students, as they find that most graduates need improvement in their interview performances [10]. This result suggests that although career services have generally benefited students, there are still more things career services can do to help students prepare to meet with employers.

Student Professional Skills Needed When Meeting with Employers

After studying many career services websites, we focused on a "suite" of skills students need to develop and prepare for when meeting with employers. Often, students will seek help from career services for help with these skills: (1) resume development and review, (2) cover letter help and review, (3) mock interviews and interview preparation, (4) elevator pitch, (5) follow-up with prospective employers, (6) job offer negotiations. This "suite" of skills is briefly reviewed below.

Having the skills necessary to develop a sound resume is vital for students, as it is usually one of the first things an employer sees and is often used as a filter [11]. Further, a resume allows employers to determine a student's efficacy and experience in areas relevant to an employer's needs [12]. In order for students to ensure their resumes effectively communicate their skills and experience, they heavily rely on career services to help them review and make necessary changes to their resumes [13]. Cover letters help students communicate why they are interested in the job and who they are as a person. Despite a cover letter not always being necessary for the job application process, it is important as it can help an employer better understand and know the applicant, while also serving as a tool that can help separate one application from others [14]. Mock interviews and interview preparation are typically provided by career services or mentors, such as professors, and help students simulate the real-life interview experience. Being well-prepared for interviews is crucial for students when looking for employment, as many employers have suggested that students need to improve their interview performance [10]. The elevator pitch is often used as an introduction to employers. The elevator pitch is a vital, prominent tool for students at career fairs and in interviews, as it serves as a first impression to prospective employers, while also communicating a student's goals and highlighting their relevant experiences [15]. In order to follow up with a prospective employer, a follow-up letter or email from a student is a courteous way to thank employers for their time while also showing prospective employers beneficial characteristics in a candidate. While a follow-up letter or email is not a requirement in the job application process, it ensures employers that students are

interested in the position discussed previously [16]. Job offer negotiation is vital for students to develop so they can make proper, informed decisions on employment. Being able to negotiate a salary and benefits can prevent students from having lower perceptions of satisfaction and fairness [17].

3. Methods

In order to determine the most beneficial professional development resources that could help multidisciplinary engineering students (all of whom are U.S. citizens per DoD requirements) in the 20 partner universities that make up the [SCALE](#) microelectronics workforce development center, a framework was created to investigate the career services websites at University Partners for the professional skills students need to prepare themselves better when meeting with employers. The over-arching framework includes six important topic areas that focus on developing students' professional skills. These six areas were reviewed briefly in the literature review and include: (1) resume development and review, (2) cover letter help and review, (3) mock interviews and interview preparation, (4) elevator pitch, (5) follow-up with prospective employers, (6) job offer negotiations.

The framework created to help determine the most beneficial resources for SCALE students to develop their professional skills was then used to find and analyze professional development resources. In order to find the most beneficial professional development resources, each SCALE University Partners' career services websites were searched to find the proper professional development resources for each of the six framework topic areas. The same framework was also applied to academic literature and online professional development articles.

Two types of professional development resources were located and analyzed for materials that could help students: (1) SCALE University Partners' career services websites, and (2) academic literature and online professional development articles. From these two sets of materials, a set of criteria was developed using a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory is qualitative approach where one uses data to explain an action or process that is "grounded" in the data [18]. In our case, the data are the professional development materials. The criteria "emerged" as part of the output from the data as part of the grounded theory process when the guiding question was asked, "what criteria can be used to find the "best" professional development resources for each topic area?" The process was iterative, as each article was analyzed for what its strengths and weaknesses were, until consistent themes began to emerge about what made an article "good". The professional development resources were then separated and analyzed, containing a list of qualitative criteria and features. The "emerged" criteria were then used to determine the two "best" professional development resources for each topic area in SCALE University Partners' career services websites, and the two "best" academic literature and online professional development articles. "Best" emerged as an article that consistently met all of the defined criteria for an article.

In order for students to hear employers' thoughts and advice on some of the most important topic areas to improve students' professional skills, a virtual Industry/Government Panel with students was hosted and recorded for the SCALE students' benefit. The six topic areas discussed during the panel included improving students' professional skills, resume development and review, cover letter help and review, elevator pitch, mock interviews, and interview preparation. In order

to verify that the “best” professional development resources found on university partners’ career services websites remained consistent with thoughts from employers, the transcript from the Industry/Government Panel with students was reviewed and analyzed. From that analysis, the main points and advice from each topic area that the employers discussed were summarized and triangulated with the findings of the respective “best” professional development resources. Triangulating these results provides validity and verifies that the professional development resources were consistent with employers’ thoughts and advice on the topic areas that were discussed.

4. Results

4.1 Framework and Criteria Results

In order to properly evaluate professional development resources, a set of criteria was created using the grounded theory approach. The criteria used were mainly focused on the students’ usability of the professional development resources for each topic area.

After finding the professional development resources for each topic area on each SCALE University Partners’ career services websites, a content analysis was performed to determine a set of criteria using the grounded theory approach. The criteria used were primarily focused on the students’ usability of the professional development resources for each topic area. Based on the located resources, the set of criteria was then split into four sections: 1) easy to read, 2) descriptive, 3) accurate, and 4) engaging. The professional development resources were evaluated by each of the four sections, which contained a list of qualitative criteria and features. Table 1 below displays the list of qualitative criteria and features for each section used to evaluate the professional development resources. The criteria were then applied to each professional development resource to find the two exemplars for each topic area. Table 2 below displays the SCALE University Partners whose professional development resources were the “best” for each topic area. The exemplar professional development resources found from SCALE University Partners’ career services website were then disseminated to the SCALE consortium via nanoHUB.org ([nanoHUB](https://nanohub.org)) to be viewed by the SCALE student members. Subsequently, the exemplar professional development resources found in online professional articles can be found in Table 3 below.

Table 1*Criteria “emerged” from grounded theory*

Criteria	Easy to read	Descriptive	Accurate	Engaging
Qualitative criteria and features	Bold headers, numbered list, small tips, shorter read time, and free to access	Shows examples, covers multiple areas, caters to all types of students, explains tips, contains templates, and has answers to frequently asked questions	Information agrees with other sources, good reviews, quotes of respected figures, shows research findings, up to date, and known, credible source	Type of resource, contains a walkthrough, includes personal anecdotes, interactive experience, and intended audience is for students

Table 2*Exemplar professional development resources from SCALE University Partners*

Topic Area	Resume development and review	Cover letter help and review	Mock interviews and interview preparation	Elevator pitch	Follow-up with prospective employers	Job offer negotiation
SCALE University Partners' Exemplars	<u>Indiana University</u>	<u>Indiana University</u>	<u>Notre Dame University</u>	<u>Notre Dame University</u>	<u>Indiana University</u>	<u>University of California-Berkeley</u>
	<u>Purdue University</u>	<u>University of Florida</u>	<u>Purdue University</u>	<u>Texas A&M University</u>	<u>Purdue University</u>	<u>University of Florida</u>

Table 3*Exemplar online professional development professional articles*

Topic Area	Resume development and review	Cover letter help and review	Mock interviews and interview preparation	Elevator pitch	Follow-up with prospective employers	Job offer negotiation
Online Professional Development Articles	<u>Proven Tips for Writing a Winning Resume</u>	<u>How to Write an Effective Cover Letter (with Samples)</u>	<u>10 Best Job Interview Tips</u>	<u>Elevator Pitch</u>	<u>How To Follow Up on a Job Application</u>	<u>How To Negotiate Salary After a Job Offer (With 13 Tips)</u>
	<u>What Makes a Great Resume?</u>	<u>How To Write a Cover Letter (with Examples and Tips)</u>	<u>Tips for Acing Your First Job Interview</u>	<u>5 Elevator Pitch Examples for Students + Quick Tips</u>	<u>The Right Way to Follow Up After an Interview</u>	<u>How to Negotiate and Counter a Job Offer</u>

After analyzing each SCALE University Partners’ professional development resources for each topic area, there were specific criteria and features that separated the exemplar professional development resources from the others. In the “Easy to read” subset of criteria, many of the exemplar professional development resources contained small tips to help separate students from their competition. Most of the exemplar professional development resources also had a shorter read time, as they focused on usability for students and allowed students to gather information on the respective resources efficiently. Most exemplar professional development resources contain examples or templates for students to follow, which separated exemplars in the “Descriptive” subset of criteria. While most professional development resources included small tips, the exemplars explained the tips. While most SCALE University Partners’ professional development resources included similar ideas and advice, the exemplar resources were also up to date, which helped separate the exemplars in the “Accurate” subset of criteria. In the “Engaging” subset of criteria, the professional development resources that contained walkthroughs and interactive experiences for students were found to be exemplars.

While the same content analysis and criteria were applied to academic literature and online professional development articles, there were innate differences between the professional development resources provided by the SCALE University Partners’ career services websites and the professional development resources found in academic literature and online professional development articles. The main focus of the SCALE University Partners’ professional development resources was to help develop students’ professional skills. On the other hand, the professional development resources found in academic literature and online professional development articles focus on helping applicants stand out from others. In the list of qualitative criteria and features, there were factors that separated the exemplar resources from the others.

For example, most exemplars have numbered lists and small tips to separate themselves in the “Easy to read” subset of criteria. While in the “Descriptive” subset of criteria, the exemplars catered to all types of students and also covered multiple areas, allowing readers to get a complete picture of each important topic area. The exemplar resources were from more well-known, credible sources and were up to date in the “Accurate” subset of criteria. For the “Engaging” category, it was vital that the resources were intended for students and had steps on what to do for each professional skill discussed.

4.2 Industry/Government Panel Results

A SCALE industry/government panel with students was hosted virtually in Zoom and recorded in Fall 2023 for all SCALE students to interact and receive valuable insight and advice to help develop their professional skills. Similar to the professional development resources found in academic literature and online professional development articles, the SCALE industry/government panel with SCALE students focused on giving advice and helping students stand out from other applicants. The panel was 75 minutes long and primarily focused on four main topic areas that help improve students’ professional skills: resume development and review, cover letter help and review, elevator pitch, mock interviews, and interview preparation. A transcript from the panel was used to summarize the insights and advice employers gave on the topic areas discussed in the panel. Three panelists from industry and three panelists from government participated. A university faculty member with significant industry experience moderated the panel. Prearranged questions were asked of the panelists by the moderator for each topic area. Typically, one question was asked of an industry member and one to a government member, and then other panelists would jump in with comments. Finally, there would be open time for questions and answers with the students before moving on to the next topic area, where the process would repeat.

While the employers had several thoughts and advice regarding students’ resumes, the employers’ over-arching thoughts were that the resume should be a factual representation of the student using prior work-related experiences. The resume should express who someone is and should indicate one’s vision and goals. While using prior experiences, a student should aim to highlight their critical thinking skills and discuss the accomplishments and quantifiable results. With regard to advice and tips on the resume, employers strongly suggested using templates and examples provided by SCALE University Partners’ career services. The employers suggested customizing one’s resume based on the different companies and positions they are applying to. More specifically, a student should try to use keywords that companies provide in a job posting. Students should aim to use the same keywords to drive the conversation and draw interest from employers to stand out among their peers. Additionally, employers suggested using the STAR interview method (describing the Situation, Task, Action, and Results) in their resume to stand out to employers. The thoughts and advice given by employers largely remained consistent with the exemplar professional development resources provided by SCALE University Partners’ career services websites.

Although advice on the cover letter was not originally planned to be discussed, the employers still delivered insight on how to effectively use the cover letter. While not all positions require a cover letter in the application, employers strongly urged students to use a cover letter to separate themselves from their peers. Employers stated that the resume is very factual and can be used to

express oneself at times, but the cover letter should be used to give a more colorful background of the student. Employers claimed that students should use the cover letter to showcase how they are moving forward, and it should clearly outline their career goals.

Throughout the discussion of the elevator pitch, it was clear that employers valued more than just the elevator pitch at career fairs. Although an elevator pitch introduces a student to an employer, students should be prepared to be flexible during their elevator pitch to engage in a separate conversation with the employer. The employers expressed that they are looking for someone who can truly engage and hold a conversation with them. While the elevator pitch is an important tool to use as an icebreaker, an employer can more easily relate to students who are able to freely talk about their interesting experiences presented on their resume. The employers on the panel argued that body language, both during the elevator pitch and throughout the entirety of the meeting, is one of the most important takeaways from students. Beyond the elevator pitch, employers stressed that they are more likely to find interest in a student who shows interest in the employer's company.

Regarding interview preparation, employers stressed that the most essential tool students should use is to practice their interview skills. Employers strongly suggested that students practice interviewing as often as they can while using their university's resources appropriately. Employers urged students to practice as often as they can in mock interviews that their university's career services can set up. Before an interview, employers stated that a student research not only the company they are applying to, but also the position they are applying to. Students should aim to make themselves more competitive by studying the topics listed in the application. Being able to answer questions and relate experiences to the listed topics can often indicate one's competency on the topics. Employers recommend that students know their resumes and be able to answer traditional, upfront interview questions regarding their interesting experiences on their resumes. During the interview, students should be confident and aim to present themselves in the best way they can to sell themselves to employers. Employers revealed that students should be aware and attentive to their behavior and speech throughout the interview. More often than not, employers are deciphering how students act and how well they would mesh while on a team in a job situation.

5. Discussion

Stepping back for a moment and putting yourself in the shoes of a student, it has to be hard to know where to turn as a student when preparing for employment opportunities. Students are bombarded with information about different educational and career tracts to pursue, about various career opportunities, and are so focused on doing well in their technical courses, is it any wonder that when they go to speak with an employer for the first time, most are underprepared for the type of questions they will be asked? Where can students turn when they need help, from high-quality professional development resources they can trust to be accurate and helpful in real time? These are some of the questions we asked ourselves as we looked at putting together resources that would help our students in SCALE.

We searched the literature for a framework or a list of skills students needed when meeting with employers. We could not find one, so we created one ourselves. We used that framework on ourselves, in other words, on our own SCALE members, to find resources at our career services

at each university that help our students. We also found other professional development material in academic literature and online professional development resources. But then we asked ourselves, which of these resources are the most helpful, or in other words, are the “best”? We searched the literature for criteria to help us identify those “best” resources. We did not find any helpful criteria, so we developed our own using a grounded theory approach. We now have a list of excellent professional development resources to help students prepare to meet with employers that others can use.

But more importantly, we triangulated this information with what employers think is important, using firsthand information from a virtual panel between students and employers to know what employers are telling students about these same topics. This triangulation results in a very good alignment between the employers and our approach to student professional development materials. First is the framework of skills that employers focused on in the virtual panel: (1) resume development and review, (2) cover letter help and review, elevator pitch, (3) mock interviews, and (4) interview preparation. These four skills were a perfect fit for the panel and student discussion. Due to the time available for the panel, follow-up with prospective employers and job offer negotiation could not be discussed. Second, the employers highlighted much of the same, exact content in the exemplar professional development materials that we located. While this paper does not detail each exemplar due to length restrictions, the examples highlighted in the employer feedback were very similar, with details provided for various exemplars. While this result is not surprising, it is reassuring that students can use exemplars that correspond to what employers say.

6. Implication, Limitations, Conclusions

There are many ways this work can help various stakeholders. Students can be supported by the exemplar professional materials identified through this work, and by the advice from employers. University career centers can utilize the framework that was developed as well as the criteria to develop better professional development materials for students. Faculty and administrators can utilize the exemplar professional materials as they help students, as well as the framework and criteria developed in further research or their own centers that focus on workforce development. Additionally, further research can highlight the more advanced professional skills for students to develop before meeting with employers, such as doing research on the companies and asking important, thoughtful questions. Employers can use these results to get the word out to more students and career centers that “best practices” are out there to review.

While the study primarily focused on undergraduate engineering students, subtle changes would need to be considered for graduate engineering students. While most preparation for meeting with employers is the same between undergraduate and graduate students (resumes, cover letters, etc.), often employment fairs and other opportunities for graduate students are held at separate times for graduate students, and the job opportunities are different, sometimes making preparing for interviewing slightly different for graduate students. Future work can focus more on the unique challenges facing engineering graduate students.

Students need more encouragement to pursue professional development resources and skill development before they engage with employers. They need resume and cover letter feedback, interview and pitch practice, and how to follow up and negotiate with employers. None of these

are easy things to do, but every university provides ample opportunities to get feedback on these things, and most faculty are willing to help individual students whom they know well with parts of these skills. Most students do not realize it takes an entire skill set to do well when meeting with employers, but engineering educators can help change that message and help students develop their careers.

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