



Ask Jack

CareerLine Q & A

by Jack Wilson

ACM's career consultant, Jack Wilson, answers questions from students about their forthcoming careers in computing and information technology.

Q: I will be graduating from college with a bachelors in Computer Science this summer. I don't have a lot of experience nor do I have a very high GPA. I have a few questions I hope you can help me with or give some guidance to start further research.

1.) One problem that I have is that most companies seem to want you to decide on a specific type of software programming that you want to concentrate on. However, I would like to give a general answer as not to exclude myself from various positions. Should I be worried about defining my programming interest in more detail and if so how would you suggest I find out about (their) specific areas of interest?

A: This sounds a bit like the continuing theme we hear from employers, i.e., they want to see and hear people that have a "focus". They seem to value focus as much as anything, and they look for people who know what they want to do, where they want to do it, why they want to do it, etc.

One thing you might try, if they ask you the question before you have a chance to find out what their needs are, is to say something like (in your own words), "Inasmuch as I have a broad range of programming skills, I'm interested in applying them in the area

that fills the greatest need for my employer, thereby making the best contribution to your business. So if we could discuss your needs in the programming area, we could probably determine where my skills may be able to fill your needs."

Q: 2.) Could you give me (in your opinion) any major generalizations about working in a government DOD contract environment as opposed to a private commercial environment as a computer programmer/scientist.

A: At this stage of your career (in my opinion), I don't think it makes a whole lot of difference. Either experience will be valuable, but in the long term the commercial environment will be more lucrative.

Q: 3.) Lastly, one concern that I have is my overall GPA of 2.5 and my lack of real world programming experience. How big a role do you think this will play in landing a good entry-level programming job and is there anything that I can do at this late stage to circumvent this problem?

A: It depends on how competitive the situation is where you are applying. I know of cases where the subject of GPA never even came up in interviews, and it would be to your advantage not to bring it up or apologize for it. The thing to do is to stress the positive aspects of your knowledge, skill, and competence, as opposed to the way they were evaluated in an academic environment.

Q. (I am often asked by student members to review and critique their resumes. Following is a combination of my comments and suggestions to several different members.)

A.

- Make your name more prominent by putting it in a larger type size than the text, but use the same font.
- When listing four or more traits, skills, courses, etc., you can make them more readable (and thus more impactful) by putting them in a columnar format, rather than stringing them all together, separated only by commas.
- You can use a profile or summary in lieu of an objective, if you also use it to position yourself as, for example: "Systems Programmer", or "Creative Web Designer...." or "Experienced Network Administrator", or "Telecommunications Analyst", etc.

- Remember: The profile or summary is the one place in the resume where you can say subjective things about yourself and your personal qualities, as long as you don't overdo it.
- Try to keep your accomplishments to one line, or two at the most, bulleted and starting each with an action verb, past tense.
- Don't put your Education data ahead of your Experience data, even though the latter is only part-time, summers, or internships. An exception to this might be the pursuit of an academic position. Relevant experience, however short-term, is still a discriminating factor in the hiring process.