Summer Jobs and Job Skills

by **Jack Wilson**

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

Q: For financial reasons, I've decided to go to work full-time after receiving my BSCS, instead of pursuing an MS immediately, but I'm still interested in furthering my education. Do employers offer such opportunities?

A: Yes, many of them do, in a variety of forms. You can tell a lot about the degree to which an employer values advanced education by the number of programs they offer, and that is a criterion you may want to use in evaluating job offers. In some instances, when competing with other employers, they have been known to offer a highly sought-after candidate an immediate, tuition-paid enrollment. Most will have graduate study and/or tuition refund programs for which the employee becomes eligible after a designated period of employment. A recent innovation has been the inception of online courses that employees can take while at work, from schools with high-quality CS programs.

Q: I have been offered a part-time job for next semester, and the pay is OK, but the job title (junior programmer) does not sound very important. Will that be a disadvantage on my resume?

A: Not necessarily. First and foremost, more important than job title, is the content of your work, and I don't just mean your responsibilities. The specific tasks that you complete, the problems you solve, the needs of users that you are able to fulfill, the skill and competence that you demonstrate in doing these things….all can be shown through the accomplishments in your resume. Moreover, I would not worry about using an exact job title (versus a general one such as programmer) on your resume unless you have gained a series of promotions and want to show the progression of responsibilities.

Q: I've been ``surfing'' the web for job opportunities after graduation and I've found a wide variation in the way jobs are described. How can I make a useful comparison?

A: I believe the best way would be to focus on the specific skills required, to the extent that they are described. Compare the description of technical and functional skills, in terms of hardware, software, systems, applications, databases, etc. Also look for any expressed requirements in the area of personal strengths, such as teamwork, oral communications, user interaction, to get a feel for the work environment. Make a list of these skills and strengths required for each position to see how they match up with your own interests and qualifications.

Q: In considering my future career, what are the skills that will prove most valuable to me?

A: I think at the entry point of your career, you would be well served by focusing not so much on specific, narrowly defined skills, for they will change over time as the technologies evolve. As hard as it is to predict the future, based on the present outlook, I would make sure that I was very well grounded in at least three important areas of technology: object-oriented, client/server, and relational database. In each of these areas, I would try to develop some degree of expertise in more than one programming language or system, probably the more the better. And while technical skills are important, do not neglect your "soft" skills, such as listening ability, business savvy, teamwork, adaptability, presentation skills, time management, etc.

Q: My summer job was a great experience, and I would like to go back to the same company next year. Would it be more beneficial to work somewhere else though?

A: It depends on the nature of the work, whether you can perform at a higher level of responsibility and whether your accomplishments reflect continued growth in skills. If you can achieve these at the same company, you would have the added benefit of showing that you were valued highly enough to be hired for a second year. There is no stigma however in moving to another company if you want to gain some diversity in your exposure to the business world. In either case, if the second year's work is more challenging, I think you can benefit. All things equal, I would give the edge to the former employer.