Promoting your PhD: employer networking

A workshop and networking lunch was developed and delivered to help students recognise what skills they have gained during their PhD, and then an opportunity to share this with employers at a networking lunch.

**Unit:**Careers Service

**Target Audience:**Current PhD students, any discipline

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Key features

Marketing the value of any degree has become more and more challenging in recent years, and this is no more pronounced than when considering PhD students. The values of a PhD are recognised in general terms by both employers and PhD students, but sometimes only in the sense that a PhD is a mark of high academic achievement. Many PhD students do not consider how to market the skills, abilities and expertise garnered from their PhD as, in the very nature of the PhD experience, academic strengths tend to supersede all other considerations.

Similarly, employers are frequently unaware of the full capabilities and potential of PhD students, such is the focus on its academic nature. Indeed, some employers are reluctant to visit university campuses with the sole aim of recruiting PhD students. Employers, even those who seek to actively recruit PhD graduates, are often not aware of the full value of recruiting a PhD student.

As such, educating PhD students on the importance of being able to market their degree to employers in all its personal and professional development – not academics alone – is of paramount importance. At the same time, it is crucial that employers are given the opportunity to engage directly with PhD students so that the wider benefits of PhD study can be made apparent.

To meet these needs, a workshop and networking lunch was developed and delivered. The first half of this project provided PhD students with exercises with which to identify and think about how to market the wider skills garnered during their PhD. This was followed directly by a networking lunch with employers so that the PhD students could immediately put their learning into practice. This also provided a group of employers with the opportunity to discuss their experiences of recruiting PhD students into a range of job roles.

Planning

When organising a new event for student and employer interaction, it can be challenging to estimate levels of interest from both types of participants. This was particularly true when thinking about an event targeted at PhD students and employers recruiting PhD students. Following an initial brainstorming, the risk was controlled by attaching a PhD workshop and networking event to a large, annual Careers Fair in October. This provided a pool of c. 100 employers who were already coming to campus who could then be invited to join in the PhD-specific session. From generic forms asking employers attending the Fair what kind of students they were interested in speaking with, employers who had marked an interest in speaking with postgraduate research students were contacted and asked whether they would like to come up slightly early and contribute to the PhD event on the morning of the first day (the main Careers Fair started after lunch).

Once representatives from all six companies had been secured to attend the event and sit on the employer panel, the event was promoted to PhD students. The event was listed on MyEd as a central programme event, and targeted emails were sent directly to PhD students. For this initial pilot, spaces were limited to 30 PhD students and the event was oversubscribed.

Event

The event as a whole was delivered in two sections: the first concentrated on preparing PhD students through a series of informal, discussion-based workshop exercises led by Careers Advisers experienced in working with PhD students focussed on three themes; marketing their PhD to non-traditional employers (i.e. non-academic employers), creating an effective CV and using networking for career success.

This was then followed by a ‘Meet the Employers’ event in which a representative from each of the six attending companies would provide a brief overview (5-10 minutes) into their company, job roles and experiences of recruiting PhD students. The session concluded with an informal networking / Q&A lunch, allowing attendees to speak directly with recruiters and put the learning from the morning’s exercises to work.

Resources

A key benefit of attaching the PhD event to the larger October Careers Fair was that members of the Careers Service’s Employer Team were already engaged in the set-up of the latter. As such, bolting on the PhD event required relatively little additional time to arrange and set-up; Careers Advisers running the event engaged in a couple of short meetings to develop the new workshops prior to the event, and then spent some time actually setting up the workshops and preparing materials. Of the c.100 employers attending the larger Careers Fair, those who had identified PhD students as a group they wished to speak to were contacted and asked whether they had interest in attending the PhD networking session.

Financial expenditure relating to the PhD event specifically was similarly limited, with costs primarily going on catering for the networking event and printing materials for workshop attendees. Employers were not charged to attend the networking session.

Evaluation

Overall the event – both workshop and networking session – ran well for those students who attended. The workshops were appropriately sized and provided students with techniques and knowledge that could be used in the session immediately following, and thereafter the wider Careers Fair. Students appeared to be engaged and informal feedback suggests that they found the event to be very much worth their time. It was crucial for the event to be run in close proximity to the larger Careers Fair, and achieving this certainly helped in creating good attendance numbers. The feedback from all six employers who took part was very positive – they seemed pleased to have been given the opportunity to address this audience specifically, and happy with the questions that students were asking.

The feedback from the students who attended was also generally positive and included comments such as “Good advice and I was able to do some good networking” and “Very well structured workshop and addressed all the questions I had”.

Some employers gave excellent presentations, others were perhaps a little too technical in content i.e. their focus was on very specific technical abilities and knowledge that many attendees would not have from the subject matter of their PhDs.

Although students were made aware of employers who would be at the session well in advance, some still hoped for other employers to be there e.g. a greater number of pharmaceutical companies. This was presented by attendees as an ideal to be considered in the future, rather than as a criticism of the networking session as it was. There will always be challenges in managing expectations such as these, but being clear from the outset is important; marketing information for future PhD events should bear this in mind.

Advice

* Fully assess the capabilities of the space you’ll be working in before the event. We attempted to film the panel session and Q&A session but the acoustics in the room and positioning of the camera meant that the quality of the video was not up to standard so we have not been able to use the film.
* It would be possible to run this event in future, with the networking session able to host between four and six employers. Given the popularity of this event, it may also be worth considering whether the event could be repeated on Day 2 of the larger October Careers Fair.
* Some employers were overly focussed on the technical requirements that they had of PhD students, meaning that their presentations were not relevant to every attendee. While it is difficult to ensure every presentation provides something of value to every student, briefing employer speakers on what is really be sought of them – their experiences of hiring PhD students rather than their A,B,Cs of desired technical abilities – could be addressed more directly in future.
* Attaching the PhD event to the wider Careers Fair worked extremely well. By securing a room for the workshop and networking session that was in close proximity to the Fair made planning their day easier for all concerned as participants did not have to prioritise the Careers Fair over the networking session or vice-versa; schedules could be made to accommodate both, and this was the case for PhD students, employers and Careers Advisers alike. This had the knock-on effect of minimising risk for the event, as most who signed up for the workshop and networking session were more inclined to attend if it had been a stand-alone event that took them away either from the larger Careers Fair or their academic studies.

Key contacts

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<http://www.ed.ac.uk/employability/staff-information/how-employability-addressed/good-practice/university/promoting-your-phd-employer-networking>