CareerConnect: Lessons Learned and the Road Ahead

New York, NY. CAE recently launched CLA+ CareerConnect, a service designed to match employers with high-performing Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA+) participants graduating from four-year institutions. The most distinctive feature of CareerConnect is that it identifies skilled graduates outside the network of selective colleges and universities, as identified by Barron's: Profiles of American Colleges.

CLA+ CareerConnect uses a valid and reliable assessment instrument to change job-search and hiring conversations. Critical thinking, written communication, and logical reasoning are recognized as essential skills for success in the modern workplace. CLA+ CareerConnect allows employers to identify strong candidates with these skills and provides an effective and affordable way to diversify their workforce. Employers can focus on skills and abilities rather than institutional reputation as the chief indicator of candidate quality. Students finally have an opportunity to be evaluated in a transparent and fair manner.

CLA+ CareerConnect aims to address the primary challenges and frustrations facing employers and job-seeking graduates by facilitating more effective connections. Employers see signs of a skills gap every day despite the market being flooded with entry-level talent. Job candidates struggle to find appropriate entry-level jobs and wonder if they are getting a good return on their collegiate investment. Why? Grade inflation throughout the higher education sector indicates that employers do not have the tools they need to identify strong candidates to interview. Moreover, traditional career services and job-search resources do not provide students with a platform to demonstrate their skills to employers.

In April 2015, 50 eligible candidates attended a two-hour virtual career fair to meet with six employers. The service was piloted in Texas due to institutional and corporate support, and included the University of Texas system and the Texas Business Leadership Council. This career fair accomplished three objectives:

- to better understand student perceptions of—and experiences with—the transition from college to career
- to discuss alternative hiring strategies with recruiters and HR professionals and their experiences recruiting, hiring, and employing graduates
- to provide students with opportunities to connect with employers who value their skills

The CLA+ CareerConnect virtual career fair pilot was a success. Students were pleased to find their CLA+ scores used in a meaningful way and appreciated the unique opportunity to meet employers interested in their skillset. These students were using other resources, including university career fairs and job-search engines, but still found value in the virtual career fair because employers had a better basis for deciding whether to pursue future interviews with them. Most importantly, participating employers reported their intent to hire several candidates in fields including business, sales, information technology, and engineering. It appears that by leveraging their CLA+ scores into meaningful interactions with employers, the career fair helped students in their transition from college to career.

Our corporate partners confirmed that this service can supplement their recruitment efforts. CareerConnect reduces employer recruiting costs and increases the likelihood of finding strong candidates. CAE’s surveys of students and employers reveal mixed results for large-scale, on-campus career fairs. Social media platforms, such as LinkedIn, can overburden HR and recruiting resources due to an overwhelming number of applications from aspiring candidates. Additionally, applications received through these platforms do not contain valid and reliable information about candidate's abilities. Participating employers thought the virtual career fair provided them with a good opportunity
to connect with high-quality candidates and that it offered a unique combination of features (e.g., résumé, skills-based credential, and real-time conversation). While employers would consider using a job board featuring only high-performing CLA+ students as a recruitment tool, they valued the interactions that were possible with the interactive virtual career fair. For future iterations of CLA+ CareerConnect, CAE will work with the leaders of the hundreds of colleges and universities that have administered CLA+ to build a large, replenishing candidate pool. That process will be aligned with a parallel effort to recruit regional and national employers to actively use a specialized job board and participate in virtual career fairs.

CLA+ CareerConnect has tremendous potential to help solve the skills gap and expand opportunity for job-seeking graduates. Since the program’s inception in 2014, CLA+ CareerConnect employers have included AT&T, Apple, Federal Reserve Bank (of Dallas and St. Louis), McKinsey & Company, MetLife, SunGard, and Target. The program will continue to grow—both in terms of job seekers and employer participants—as its unique value to all parties becomes more fully recognized.

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