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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 140: BRETT ALPERT – JOB SEEKING DURING THE PANDEMIC

Ken White

From William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, this is Leadership & Business. The podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that help make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. According to a recently released report by McKinsey, jobs will most likely change following the pandemic. The report says the adoption of automation and digitization will accelerate, demand for contract and remote workers will increase as well. Well, thanks to COVID-19, the way we look for a new job is changing, too. In-person, face to face interviews have moved to video. Traditional networking is now mostly online. But those changes don't mean you should put your job search on hold. Some of the tactics we've used in the past continue to be effective, while some new approaches are also working. Brett Alpert is Associate Dean for Career Services and the Executive Director of the Graduate Career Management Center at the William & Mary School of Business. He and his team, among other things, offer comprehensive career planning assistance to students while working closely with employers. He joins us on the podcast to talk about the ways job seekers are finding success during the pandemic. Here's our conversation with Brett Alpert.

Ken White

Well, Brett, thank you very much for taking time to join us. Good to see you.

Brett Alpert

Good to see you as well, happy to be here. Thanks for having me.

Ken White

You know, you have the kind of job where I'm sure people come up to you all the time you know and say, what's it look like out there? Who's hiring and what's your crystal ball say so. And I want to ask all those questions. So basically, what's it look like when you see the overall picture out there? What do you think?

Brett Alpert

Well, the world is definitely changed a lot since COVID, the onslaught of COVID, and it hasn't changed everywhere and in every way. But it has changed a lot. And it's really important that people who are out searching for employment or those doing the hiring really accept that. And think about it. I remember a book by Amanda Ripley who survived disaster and why, and it talked about how people go through a stage during a crisis of denial, then deliberation, and then a decisive moment taking action. And while we're all dealing with difficult circumstances and some are dealing with more than others, they've lost loved ones in this difficult time. It is important to acknowledge that the world has changed. It is different. You can't just do the same things that you did before to find employment. And when you do that, and you accept that things have changed, you adopt different strategies to go out and to search. You find the silver linings. You find the opportunities in the midst of a crisis. You do things like connect in new ways by reaching out via virtual technology and other mediums versus just waiting things to get back to the way that they were before.

Ken White

Oh wow, what a great point. Well, you said reaching out, which, of course, is networking. Has that changed, or are there different strategies now? While we're still dealing with the pandemic.

Brett Alpert

Definitely, it's changed. It's changed in multiple ways or some ways where, you know, common practices, what you follow in the course of a conversation stays the same. However, you've lost the ability for chance encounters for happenstance during this COVID time frame. Where you just bump into somebody in the hallway who happens to be in a building, and you shake hands, and you say hello, and you decide to sit down for coffee and a meal. You've lost that opportunity, at least during this time frame. However, the model, the mode, whatever you might want to call it, that networking has to take place in person, has been totally shattered. People have gotten accustomed to the fact now that they're utilizing Zoom and utilizing other forms of virtual technology. So with that, some of the geographic boundaries for networking have also been shattered. You may be somebody that's living in Virginia, and you'd like to make a contact with somebody who lives in California, you see, has the exact type of job that you one day aspire to be in. In the past, you might have waited. You may have done a quick email or a phone call or something of that nature or waited until you were in that area before reaching out to that person because you might have thought that the best way to do it was to meet for coffee or for lunch. Well, now you can't do that. And people on the other side of those interactions know that as well. And it allows people the freedom and flexibility to think about connecting virtually, setting up a Zoom chat, setting up a conversation by Skype or GoTo meeting, or whatnot. People are more receptive to it. It's also led to more of a

benefit of the doubt where you're trying, of course, to put your best foot forward in the course of networking. But people understand that you may have kids in the background. They understand that you may have a situation where the technology just fails on you. And it's nice to be in that type of environment where people are going to at least give you more of the benefit of the doubt than you would have had before.

Ken White

Interesting. So so in this case, change isn't necessarily all negative, right? Some people don't like change, but there's some real benefits to this then.

Brett Alpert

Yeah, it's a mixed bag like most. You have to be looking at both sides acknowledge the fact that there's difficulties, there's challenges, there's things you wish were back to the way they used to be. But once you have really accepted and adopted the change mindset that there's a new world out there, and you have to do something because others are actually taking action, and you find out what the strategic things are that you need to do. And you build your network or reach out the right ways. Well, you have opportunities for expansion. There's a great book out there as well that was written by a gentleman, Steve Dalton, who works over at Duke. It's called the two-hour job search. And it does a great job of outlining strategic approach to network strategic approach to the job search to help ensure that you're not wasting your time on inefficient activities. And it's a wonderful book. And the practices still apply during a COVID time frame, even if the method by which you're communicating with those in the network have changed.

Ken White

So what do you see when you look at the employment front and opportunities, how overall, how's the picture look for professional people today?

Brett Alpert

That's a great question as well. We'll hear from time to time. There's nothing out there for me or in my specific field. Well, we advise people to do is to think hard and deeply about whether they're defining their field too narrowly. If you're in a situation and where you're taking a look and two months into the COVID, you say, you know, your field or your industry of choice is travel and hospitality. And then beyond that, you are thinking more specifically about hotel and resort management. Well, I would encourage you to think a little bit broadly, more broadly, if you're thinking hotel and resort management and that's it, and that's all you're looking for. You really do need to think a little bit more broadly or think about how long you're willing to wait for those types of opportunities to continue to emerge. You're better off thinking and taking a skills approach and looking around and saying, you know, where can I find my skills and potentially acquire new skills so that two, three years from now or whatever it is, the travel and hospitality is booming again. You're

able to take those skills that you've attained, and you've put into practice back into the hotel and resort management arena and possibly have a higher level role than you would have had a few years beforehand. And I would say likely have a higher level role than you would have a few years beforehand because you've acquired new skills. I would also encourage folks to take a look at their whatever institution they've graduated from, to take a look at their career management portals that their prior universities continue to maintain, whether it's through handshake, simplicity, 1220. There's a lot of platforms that are out there that are specifically seeking either current students or graduates of very specific colleges and universities. Often these employers will recruit regionally. So if you happen to be in the region where your alma mater was or continues to be, then you want to really tap into that and reach out and make use of those strategies in that network.

Ken White

Well, you hit on something. You didn't say it, but you hit on that transferable skills, and everybody has them. But you and I work with so many professionals, and we see a lot of people don't see that they have transferable skills. Right. So I've been in the hotel business. That's where I keep looking. But, boy, I've got skills that allow me to really flourish over here in this industry. How do people learn that they have transferable skills? Are there certain processes you walk them through? How do you realize that what you really do have some talent and experience there?

Brett Alpert

Yes, definitely. We've got a really talented team here. Fortunately, that helps to work with our student population to guide them through that process. But beyond that, just in speaking with the general audience, if you're really that best off asking others, I think to some, if you are not unable to determine yourself what skills would apply to particular areas, ask people within those industries to take a look at your resume and your prior experiences, see what types of skills resonate with them and they think are specific to their industry as well. Ask people that you care about. Ask peers, whomever it might be that you know will give you constructive, valuable information. But often, when you go to the leaders within the field that you're potentially looking to enter into, they are very skilled at being able to point out and pull out those particular skills, leadership traits, et cetera, that you may not have inherently noticed, but they will see are directly applicable to what they do or what they're looking for in terms of candidates.

Ken White

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William & Mary MBA will change and improve the way you think, the way you lead, and the way you live. Just ask any of our alumni. Now back to our conversation on job seeking during the pandemic with Brett Alpert, associate dean of career services at William & Mary's School of Business.

Ken White

You know, if one of our listeners has not been searching for work lately, things have really changed in just a couple of years. And one of them that I think really throws people the first time they see it is their use of video in interviews. Can you tell us how companies are employing video in the search process lately and now?

Brett Alpert

Yeah, that's a very big issue. It's really interesting, too, because there's a consultant, her name is Mary Scott, who does an annual survey of recruiters and students and presents each year at the National Association for Colleges and Employers. And she gathers data throughout this whole process. And historically, but not counting this COVID time frame. Video technology had been on the increase, but students really didn't like it. They really, really, strongly preferred employers coming to engage in person and on campus. I have not seen yet. And they may not have gone through the process of these surveys again to determine what the reflections are of students. But now we're in an environment where there really isn't a choice as to whether you use virtual technology or not in order to connect. So my sense is that students have a lot more comfort with it than they historically did. And they're not drawing maybe the same inferences that they did in the past, which was, oh, this employer doesn't care enough to come to meet me where I am. So that's changed a bit. What I will say is continued is there still is discomfort. There's a two-way technology which is like Zoom or Skype or whatnot, where you have somebody literally on the other side of the camera in this or the laptop or whatever it is that you might be doing where you can read nonverbals, you can have interactions, you can ask questions. That's generally seen as a much more favorable approach than one-way video, which is something that's a reality as well, where a screen will pop up, and it'll have a question here. And you may have a limited amount of time in which you could answer that question, and then you have to make sure you're hitting your points within that limited amount of time. That is still perceived really negatively by students. It was perceived particularly negatively prior to COVID but from at least anecdotal information. Students still find that to be very difficult because they again read into it and say, well, first of all, it's awkward you can't read nonverbal. You don't know if you're perceiving you, your responses are timed, and you can't just rely on nonverbal cues to sort of help trigger when you narrow down your answer. And then it also gives that impression that the employer, on the other side, does not necessarily value you as a candidate enough. And you maybe just a number. They don't value you necessarily enough to actually have somebody on the other side of the camera. Now, some employers are doing a hybrid, which is also a legitimate approach

where maybe the first interview, they're having a in-person interaction. And then to get through part two, they've got some specific technical questions or whatnot that they'd like to ask you. And they're deploying them both ways. But I wouldn't advise any employer to really think about doing whatever you can to help ensure that there's somebody on the other side of the camera, at least at some point in these screening interviews, because it does have a challenging and sometimes a negative impact on these student perceptions. And from a student side to be mindful of the fact that you really need to prepare utilizers. There's different technologies out there like interview stream and others that we deploy and others. I think another one called big interview that you could utilize to help practice one-way video type interviews and then watch your performance was like and adjust accordingly.

Ken White

When I talk to professionals, if they have not done one of those one-way video interviews, it is such an eye-opener. It's a jarring experience. And for our listeners who've done them, they know exactly what I'm talking about. Technology is definitely in the game. The other thing that I'm hearing, and of course, you're our guest, you know more in terms of using technology. Is artificial intelligence being used to sort of scan resumes and pull out keywords? How is that? How's that work today?

Brett Alpert

Yeah, some employers are using it, and some aren't. It depends also on the number of resumes that they're accustomed to receiving any unit. If they're receiving thousands of resumes for each sort of segment or set of roles. They will do some sometimes some artificial screening on intelligence screening, on making sure that the appropriate degrees are there, some key skills pop up, and also some of the experiences and the length of time that you've been working. Some of those things can be triggered and set up through AI, so it's a reality with some companies. What we advise students to do is to make sure they're including some of the key buzzwords specific to their industry at hand, but also include beyond the buzz words, some real concrete specifics. So, for example, if you know that a job that you're applying for is looking for coders and programmers. You don't just want to put in your resume. I took a coding class, or I have coding skills. You want to list the specific programs, packages that you are fluent in because those might be things that AI will pick up and will trigger you going into a pile where somebody else may not. You also want to be mindful of ensuring that you're including some other words sort of appropriate for the level of role that you're at. So if you're looking to be a manager of a particular organization, include words like leadership, led, co-founded, ran an initiative on. Things of that nature include key data points. Numbers also sometimes are picked up. I raised five million dollars in X, Y, and Z. If it was a fundraising role, people are going to want to see those types of things. It shouldn't just be long lists of verbiage that don't have

any of those keywords that you would want to see or that, you know, an employer would want to see that are specific to your industry.

Ken White

You know, searching for a job when you don't have one or when you do is such a stressful situation. It's just so many unknowns. What kind of advice do you give to people to try to stay positive and to stay up? Because it'll happen, but it's easy for others to say that. What advice do you give?

Brett Alpert

You know, I reflect back to several years back when I graduated from a doctoral program. And that can be a lonely process. You wrap up your dissertation, and you're trying to find employment, and you're searching as you're going doing your dissertation as well. What I found really helpful and advice students as well and those that I've worked with over the years have also found really helpful is to track your activity. And there is some guidance for this and that two-hour job search book that I referenced earlier as well. Because it can feel like you may have submitted 12 resumes, and you could feel like an eternity before you hear back from anybody. And then, all of a sudden, you hear back from three organizations or three companies who are interested in interviewing you. At some point, some of them may be successful; some of them may not. Some of them, they may have had internal candidates in mind, and you just don't know when you're going through that process. And so it can be very frustrating. It could be very lonely. So sometimes surrounding yourself with other people who are also searching can be a really helpful motivating factor, continuing to network with folks who have found positions recently or maybe a year beforehand where in your very shoes to make sure that they can hopefully potentially advocate for you within those companies. But tracking your activity is key so that you have things that you can check off that shows you're making progress along the way. If you set a goal of submitting five resumes and reaching out to 10 contacts today and you've done that, check it off. You may have zero results to show for it that day, but at least you know you're taking the right steps towards potential success. And that really, really is helpful for most students. It was helpful for me as well to show that, hey, I'm doing all the right things. I'm adopting all the appropriate fundamentals in certain cases. I'm going above and beyond by making that next contact or reaching out to someone who knows somebody. That's all you can control. And the degree to which you are focused on the things that you can control versus the things you can't is also something that is uplifting and will keep you positive on your path to finding meaningful work.

Ken White

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