Interview with an IT Professional

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October 17th, 2013

Interview Date: October 9, 2013

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Word Count 1,335

Cyphers – Interview of a Professional

      Since my primary interest lies in adult and online learning, I was thrilled to be able to interview V*, the Director of Online Learning at the University of Awesome* (or UA). The position V fills is new to UA, so V is still adapting to her new role at the university. I feel very fortunate that she was able to fit the interview into her very busy schedule and was very excited to hear about her experiences in the field leading up to her current position. While I did provide V with a set question list beforehand, there were instances of spontaneous questions as the interview progressed. As I am a distance student, I had to conduct the interview via Blackboard Collaborate. The interview lasted approximately fifty-five minutes.

      After emailing back and forth to schedule a time for our interview, V and I settled on a date and venue. As a self-professed terrible note-taker, I was concerned with being able to keep up with the conversation, so we made arrangements to create a Blackboard Collaborate session. Because of the time of the interview, I had to hope the wireless network at my second office would work with the scheduled Collaborate session; although there were a few hiccups, the session went smoothly. My goals for the interview were fairly straightforward; I wanted to look at V's education and experiences, her newly created position and the responsibilities that go with it and her thoughts on the field of instructional technology.

      After a brief introduction of myself, I explained to V that I was very interested in hearing about her education and experience in the field of instructional technology. I was curious about the qualifications and previous employment experiences that led to her position as Director of Online Learning at UA. V explained she had earned her undergraduate degree in literature, but her master's and doctoral degrees, awarded from UA, had been in instructional technology. Since earning her degrees, she has been fortunate to have always been employed in the field of instructional technology. Before moving into her position at UA, she spent seven years at Florida

State University in online and distance learning and nearly three years at a private liberal arts college in the same area. V's experience in design and administration are a huge part of what led to her position as UA as Director of Online Learning.

Once V's education and work background had been reviewed, I wanted to look at her new position at UA as Director of Online Learning. I say new because V filled the newly created position a mere five months ago. Although the position is primarily administrative, she does not have an army of instructional tech designers are her beck and call. Currently, V works out of the Provost's office, and she still spending a lot of her time meeting people, learning about the various units she works with on campus, and about her job responsibilities. A huge part of her job involves working towards accreditation and working with the higher education commission in regards to anything dealing with online learning. She also works with faculty to help them with online course development, student learning outcomes, and instructional technology and design. V explained that she does not have a lot of hands-on instructional design work at this stage in her career; she functions primarily as a middle man between faculty and higher level university administration. She does, however, spend a lot of time meeting face to face with faculty to ascertain their classroom practices and technology needs in order to direct them to the correct OIT unit on campus. She said it is very important to get both faculty and administration to understand that they need to be on the same page. While faculty certainly has needs and desires when it comes to technology, administration has to ensure that certain rules and regulations are being followed. To her, this is one of the more difficult aspects of the job, but also one she most definitely enjoys. Another aspect V really loves about her job is that she gets to work with people from all over campus. She has be to conversive and knowledgeable in a lot of areas which makes for interesting and challenging work days! While she does not work

directly with student learners, she does serve students indirectly by helping faculty members use the tools at their disposal in the best way they can be used.

While her current position is at the top of the food chain, so to speak, V freely admits that there are still many things she has to do to ensure she stays current in the field, so that she is able to serve the faculty and administration in the best possible way. Collaboration, V tells me, is also a huge part of instructional technology and requires individuals who are prepared to work with people from a variety of different backgrounds with a variety of different skills sets. V mentions it's also very important to be a good listener in order to ensure that faculty strengths and ideas are being incorporated into course design while still making sure the course is meeting the needs of the student and the requirements of the administration and accrediting agencies. I mentioned to her that based on her descriptions, the job seems to require her to wear many hats. She laughingly agreed, but assured me that none of it was impossible. V made it clear that research, conference attendance, and memberships in professional organizations like Educause and the Sloan Consortium were invaluable in terms of best practices and technology review for instructional technology professionals. She stressed the importance of being flexible and capable of exploring new technology in order to make suggestions or recommendations to faculty and administration. V mentioned to me that it was impossible to be knowledgeable about every single piece of technology out there, but by being flexible and capable of exploring the recommendation process is easier in the face of time constraints. She also recommended that everyone in the field of instructional technology be familiar with lecture capture software or at least familiar with how to navigate it. V's advice for instructional technology students: "Develop good communication and writing skills. Learn the language (of accrediting agencies, state and federal education groups) so you can read and understand the expectations for your

institution. Know how to use Excel! Have a good foundation of education theory and strong basic research skills, so you can be conversant and can see the connection between the teaching, the learning, and the student outcomes, and so you can determine which tools will help or hinder the teaching and learning experience."

This interview, for me, was an invaluable experience. While I do not know that I want to be in an administrative position like V's, learning about how she got to that position has given me a lot to think about in terms of the competencies I need to develop. I love teaching, and I hope that wherever this field takes me, it's not too far from the classroom. Because my ultimate goal is to make the learning experience better, I would be just as happy teaching faculty as I would be teaching students. During the course of the interview, one statement V made resonated with me: "Instruction technology is more about the people than the technology". Coupled with the knowledge gleaned with course readings, I am certain that collaboration will be a huge part of what I do. Learning the ins and outs of various campus departments will enable me to develop good working relationships with the wide variety of individuals I will come into contact with as an IT professional in higher education. Through her experiences and advice, V has given me the capability to set more specific goals for myself professionally. I need to work on developing my strengths in several areas – communication skills, professional language acquisition, educational theory knowledge base, and (my arch nemesis) Excel.

References

Gramling, J. (2013, October 9th). Blackboard Collaboration interview.

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Interview Questions:

1. What is your education and background in the field of instructional technology?

2. What are your job responsibilities? What is a typical day like?

3. What is the most challenging part of your job?

4. What do you do to stay current in the field and do you belong to any professional organizations?

5. To what extent does research play into your job responsibilities?

6. How big a factor is collaboration in your position (or the field in general)?

7. Explain how online learning course development works at your university. Who's involved? What roles do they fill? What problems come up?

8. In your opinion, what are the most important competencies in the in your field? What skill set do you partner most with your IT skills?

9. What types of software should IT graduates be familiar with or be prepared to use?

10. Is there anything - training or education - that you came into this position wishing you had more of? Anything you would have liked to concentrate more on?