

ROLE OF CAREER CENTERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Ljiljana Pecić¹ Sara Savićević²

Abstract: The intention of this paper is to point the necessity of having Career centers at applied higher education institutions. The labour market is dramatically changing every year due to new technologies entrance in all businesses each year. Very often Students can not choose their most suitable career while passing exams, so the career center has to provide services that can help students to better profile themselves for future work. This paper analyses existing services at the university level in Serbia and strives to provide guidelines for applied higher education.

Key words: Career center, services, labour market

1. INTRODUCTION

Over recent years and globally, workers have experienced tremendous changes in their jobs and workplaces [1]. In today's rapidly evolving world, businesses face profound shifts in labour markets, driven by technological advancements, changing demographics, and new workforce expectations. While this transformation affects costs and productivity, it also offers opportunities for innovation and reshapes the strategies needed to remain competitive [2].

During the meeting of World Economic Forum in September 2024, it was heard that by 2027, 23% of jobs will change, with 69 million new roles anticipated, with 83 million existing ones displaced. This represents a historical jobs transition, and is being driven by new technologies and the long-running impact of the COVID-19 pandemic [2]. As technological advancements, economic shifts and the green transition disrupt traditional employment patterns, the ability of workers to transition into new roles is essential for maintaining employment and achieving social mobility [2]. By 2040, the population aged 65+ is forecast to grow by 33% in developed countries, while the working-age population is set to shrink by 4%, creating significant workforce gaps. Meanwhile, millennials and Gen Z, who now represent a growing share of the workforce, are bringing new expectations. As these generations prioritise work-life balance, corporate social responsibility, and diversity, companies that do not align with these values may struggle to attract younger talent [3].

At the same time, the integration of automation and artificial intelligence (AI) is revolutionising different industries. Globally, 58% of companies plan investments in automation in the next five years, while roughly half expect adoption of either traditional or generative AI [3].

Lack of talent or skills remains one of the top barriers hindering the effectiveness of business innovation initiatives globally. Many industries, from technology to healthcare, are already feeling the effects of global talent shortages, which is exacerbated by skill mismatches. About 74% of businesses globally reported that labour shortages affected their operations in 2023 [2].

To remain competitive, businesses should take proactive steps to mitigate these challenges. By embracing technology, fostering talent development, and offering flexibility and support to employees, companies can transform these challenges into opportunities, positioning themselves for long-term success [2].

A more intense search for talent has begun, but also change of employee's mindset. Unlike generations Y, Y, Z, most millennials expect to pursue multiple careers and change directions a few times over their working lives. Today's goal is to be employable, rather than hanging on to a job for life: to develop the skills, experience and expertise necessary to move on or up, regardless of employer. Ideally, this gives people greater choice and flexibility to ride career waves or slow down at different stages of their longer working lives.

¹Professor, Academy of technical and art applied studies Belgrade, Starine Novaka 24, Belgrade, Serbia, ljiljanap@viser.edu.rs

²Assistant, Academy of technical and art applied studies Belgrade, Starine Novaka 24, Belgrade, Serbia, sara.savicevic@viser.edu.rs

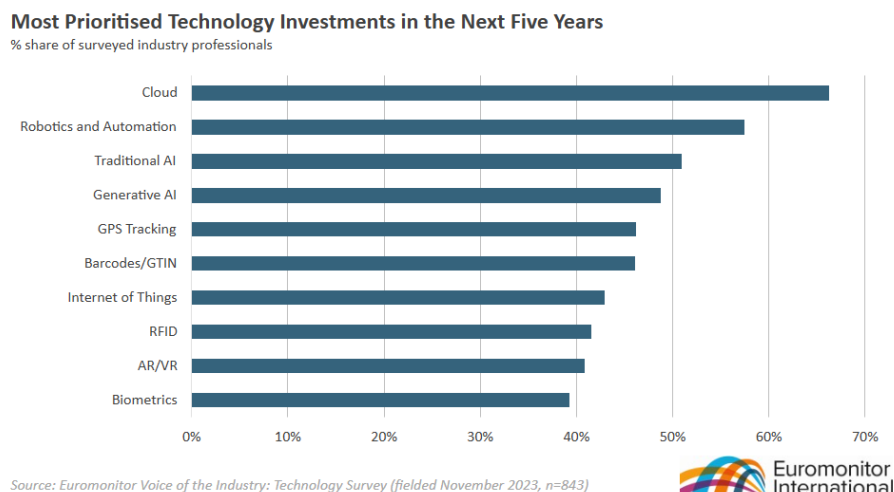


Figure 1 – Most prioritized technology investments in the next 5 years (Euromonitor Voice of the Industry: Innovation and NPD Survey (fielded November 2023))

To remain competitive, businesses should take proactive steps to mitigate market challenges. Expanding talent acquisition beyond geographic boundaries and leveraging remote work capabilities can provide access to a global pool of skilled workers. Additionally, outsourcing certain functions to lower-cost regions can help manage labour costs more effectively [2]. These solutions further emphasize the importance of education and lifelong learning - if you have the skills, you are a desirable employee on a global level.

Globally, at this moment, the world faces the high unemployment with unfilled work positions, rising productivity with stagnant wages, and economic recovery with declining upward mobility for many. The European labor market has more job openings than available skills. The employees and employers who can adapt to new trends and developments will be better positioned on the labour market in the future.

2. CAREER CENTERS

Choosing a career can be an exciting and challenging process for students, graduates and people reentering the workforce. For many, managing the own career can be very difficult. Understanding the wide range of careers available to anyone can help each person to choose a professional path that aligns with hir/herskills and interests[4]. Career planning is about actively preparing for the future – a conscious effort to link what you learn in school with the actual challenges you will face in the real world. Knowing why career planning is important is one thing, but it is just as important to know how to do it[5]. If person is deciding on a career path, searching for a job or hoping to improve professional skills, a career center might help in achieving those goals.

A career center (CC) is an office dedicated to help people find jobs and develop their professional skills. These offices are often part of a school, college or nonprofit organization, but might also be an independent business or government agency [4]. Trained career development professionals can help anyone to choose a career path, find and apply for open positions, create a resume and learn skills that employers might prefer in candidates. But, with so many job board providers in the marketplace, associations can find it difficult to choose their ideal provider – one who understands their needs, members, and industry [5].

To fulfill its role, CC must be the source of information for those who seek for the employment or want to change their workplace, through: providing forecasts hiring and trends in the job market; tracking salaries, recruiting and hiring practices, identifying the best practices and internships. At the same time, CC must take care of individual attitudes and outcomes of education processes.

Different CC serve people of different ages and experience levels, for example:

- secondary school CC –the counselors in these offices are there to advise pupils about different educational paths, coordinate internship programs with local organizations and host college and job fairs.
- higher education CC - college and university CC have a role to help students in building professional skills and prepare them for entering the job market or graduate education. Career counselors can help students choose a major and minor based on their career goals and advise them on when to take certain courses.
- Government CC - often the government manages many career centers across the nation for job seekers of all ages and experience levels. Staffed by government employees, these centers might offer career guidance, skills workshops and other resources for job seekers.
- Nonprofit CC- some community organizations have career centers for job seekers in their area, staffed by volunteers or paid counselors. These centers might have part-time hours or move from one location to another so they can serve a wide range of people in the community.
- Private CC - offer counseling and training for a fee and may also provide referrals to tutoring companies or other individuals to help students succeed in school. These firms might offer both virtual and in-person services and often charge by the hour. They can help you find a job, change careers or develop skills to advance in current organization.

3. THE ROLE OF CC IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Most higher-education institutions (HEIs) have a university career center that provides a team of dedicated professionals whose job it is to help students in defining their future. A career plan helps student to make informed decisions about academic and professional life. Students can align their coursework, internships, and extracurricular activities with personal career goals. Those personal goals can be connected with desired job, reaching a certain salary, or mastering a particular skill. During the studies, it is easy to lose sight of final study goals. Career planning provides a roadmap that tells the student where he/she is now and the best routes to their personal ultimate goal [7]. Without a career plan it can happen that student gets a degree for the sake of it, while losing focus from skills in demand in a desired field and what employers want. With a career plan, students pinpoint skill gaps and take steps to address them. This way, they are developing skills that open doors to desired job opportunities [7]. On the other hand, employers love candidates who customize their education and skill set to fit the job market. The role of CC is to help each interested student to figure out what he/she loves doing and what aligns with his/her values.

A good career center should also help students connect their major - whatever it is to the world of work.

It seems, the role of CC is obvious. CC should help students in guiding career exploration, choice of major and use job search strategies. Also, CC should connect business sector and students in such a way so each can reach the maximum benefit. Students profile themselves as employees that business company desire and a business sector meets employees that already have skills that are needed, so the time needed for reaching the best work contribution diminish.

Through activities like: self-assessments, fairs, events and workshops, the CC can help the student to find a personal path exactly for him/her and to focus efforts and resources on activities that will bring student closer to desired career outcomes [7].

A surprising number of higher education students fail to utilize this particularly great resource available to them throughout their studies - their university's career services [8]. The benefits of using career services can be counted as follows [8], [9],[10],[11], [12]:

- *Internship Opportunities* - Career Services coaches may assist with internships and other forms of experiential education. Internships provide students with a structured introduction into a career field, and within a specific firm. Internships may be organized on a national or an international level,

- *Job Search Strategies* - students receive support in developing effective job search strategies in the career center, including guidance on resume writing, cover letter crafting, and interview preparation. These skills are essential for a successful transition from academia to the workforce. CC staff clue students into other strategies and tools, such as job boards, popular online job search engines, and using LinkedIn's alumni tool to find alumni of their university who may be willing to connect them to positions at their companies.
- *Labor Market Research* - explore career options to help students get the answer on question what they can do with their degree program. Career Services coaches are an excellent resource for additional help in this area. With today's evolving world, more and more job opportunities are becoming available online. Working with Career Services coaches can improve your chances of getting a job by understanding where job postings are and best practices for applying.
- *Networking Advice* - the old state is saying "*It's not what you know, it's who you know.*" Many times, new job opportunities arise through established networks. Career Services staff can assist with best practices for building student's professional networks.
- *Professional development workshops* - many CC help people develop skills for the workforce and organize sets of workshops. Some workshops might focus on soft skills like public speaking, effective communication or conflict resolution in the workplace, while other programs might focus on mastering common computer software or learning how to use the internet effectively. Often, CC also host experienced professionals in certain fields to lead workshops for students who are interested in a specific field [12].
- *Free career counseling from experts* - career centers also sponsor networking events where students practice the techniques to connect successfully with potential employers. CC also sponsor job shadowing programs and other shorter-term career immersions, helping students learn more about potential careers.
- *Career Fairs*—during a job fair, recruiters are typically expected to speak with as many candidates as possible to increase their chance of finding potential employees. Interviews are normally short and aim to get to know the candidates better and to make sure they are legitimately interested in the position before moving further through the recruitment process. Recruiters should inform candidates of the next steps of the recruitment process and contact them rapidly after the job fair if they are interested in their profile.
- *Social media guidance* - career counselors can help students in managing their social media presence and use it to improve career potential. They can show them how to make your personal accounts private and give you guidelines for posting. Some career centers also host workshops that teach you to create and use professional social media accounts, which can show potential employers your skills, qualifications and career networks [12].

4. CAREER CENTERS IN SERBIA

4.1. Career center of University of Belgrade (UoBg)

The major goal of the center is to create a connection between the employers and the recently graduated students, to develop the awareness among students about the modern-days requirements.

Activities of the Centre are:

- working on development of student's capabilities, knowledge and practical skills relevant for employment;
- providing information for students on various opportunities: additional education, scholarships in the country and abroad, vacancies;
- connecting students and employers through internship programs and trainings in the leading companies and organizations in the country;
- organizing presentations of the companies, and of their business ethics and policy;

- providing counseling services for students with dilemmas about their career choice or positioning on the labor market upon graduation;
- other activities of student counselling regarding career development such as organizing seminars and workshops on job search techniques, writing good CVs and cover letters, preparation for job interview, etc;
- coordinating work of the existing CCs at the faculty level;
- Following-up strategic goals in the area of employment in cooperation with the Centre for Strategic Management and Planning;
- Cooperating with other University Centers [13].

4.2. Career center of University of Novi Sad (UoNS)

UoNS set up the center in order to connect academic and business community as well as to provide personal counseling and advice to students on an individual or group basis.

The center fulfils the following tasks:

- Personal counseling;
- Providing support in developing capabilities, knowledge and crafts of students which altogether are vital for employing;
- Providing reliable and evaluated information about possibilities of additional education and job offers;
- Connection of students with employers via organizing professional practices and trainings in companies and organizations;
- Organizing presentations of companies with the aim of introducing the opportunities and business;
- Providing council services to students who have dilemmas while choosing the career or positioning on the work market after graduation;
- Other activities of counseling regarding career development (seminars and workshops).

The center provides a wide range of services to the employers so that the cooperation would be successful and a long-term one. The center provides relevant information about getting a job, connects students with employers by the means of organizing internships and voluntary work and by organizing trainings and seminars.

On the other hand, the center helps the employers to articulate their needs in the best way and be actively involved in shaping their future staff. It also enables them to promote their companies as socially responsible ones.

4.3. Career center of University of Niš (UoN)

The career development center of the UoN is established with the aim of supporting students of all levels in the development of skills and abilities that are of key importance for their employment, as well as providing information on education and scholarship opportunities, in the country and abroad. One of the key roles of the Center is connecting the academic and business community and providing information and services and developing the capacity of multi-sector cooperation.

The center monitors and analyzes student enrollment and study efficiency, prepares informative publications, internet presentations and other forms of familiarizing potential students with study opportunities, establishes contacts with relevant employment services, collects information on student employment opportunities, creates a unique database of former students of the university employed in the country or abroad, organizes meetings of students and potential employers. Also, the center provides help in the preparation of CVs, motivational letters, applications for competitions advise and prepare students for job interviews, provides information on internships, volunteering and scholarships, organize workshops, trainings and seminars, organization of company presentations and meetings with employers, prepares brochures with tips for employment and career development, provide professional literature [14].

4.4. Career center of University of Kragujevac (UoKg)

The center for career development and student counseling of the UoKg was established with the aim of providing students and graduates with adequate information, counseling, training and support in realizing their career plans.

The work of the center is focused on developing student services through various programs that provide support to students and graduates of the UoKg. Providing relevant information on the scholarship opportunities, mobility options, possibilities of employment, professional development and improvement in the domain of formal and non-formal education, as well as through good cooperation with employers, the center offers opportunities for students and graduates to gain valuable experience through participating in exchange programs, volunteering and internship programs, to familiarize themselves with the foreign academic atmospheres, business environment and in this way helps them to make the most successful step up in their careers [15].

5. CONCLUSION

According to the WEF, 23% of jobs will change significantly over the next five years. Many jobs (69 million) will be created, and many more (83 million) will be destroyed. That's a global loss of 29% of the current workforce [3].

Career center have a big role in the fight against the work gap. Students of applied studies are closer to the labour market than the academic students due the gained practical skills during the education. In the complex of higher education environment, students often stand at a crossroads, unsure of their career trajectory and as well as having lack of certain soft skills. This crucial juncture calls for guidance and in today's fast changing working environment, due to the services that can provide, the CCs are a must have in applied higher education. They should be built guided on experiences from academy higher education and other good practice sources. The CC should organize a dynamic series of exhibitions, workshops, employers days and other events, advise students about their choices of internships, prepare for interviews with employers, all meticulously tailored to sharpening students' career readiness.

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