Underemployment for the Underprepared

By: Eric Johnson

Today’s employers want to hire people who can hit the ground running. Yet, many undergraduates who land their first job are underprepared. Their degree has primed them for how to think, but not necessarily for how to do. They end up flailing because they aren’t equipped with the practical knowledge and usable skills necessary to do the job they are hired to do. This is especially true in the world of modern marketing.

There are a number of reasons for this, but here are the five most critical:

1. **Vanishing training programs**: Fewer and fewer companies have formal training programs to teach people how to do their jobs, and how to do them well.
2. **Urgency of business**: Business today is about getting things done now, not yesterday. There is little time for fresh-faced grads to learn the ropes when clients need answers and deadlines need to be met.
3. **Risk aversion**: Many managers would rather pay more for people who know how to get the job done, rather than take the risk on a newbie who hasn’t done the job before.
4. **Entitled youth**: Many managers have hired recent graduates who come in with an entitled attitude. They immediately demand a proper work-life balance, which can irritate managers who have put in years of overtime, trying to get ahead.
5. **Change**: The marketing is in a state of massive change. The principles from the classic marketing books are helpful, but are often irrelevant to someone in their first job assigned to managing a search campaign or social media community. The pace of change in the business is only accelerating, and most colleges can’t keep students current with state of the art thinking.

And yet, not hiring college graduates creates its own problems for employers over time:

1. **Small employment pools**: Agencies forced to keep stealing talent from one other, as there are fewer new people coming into our business. This drives up costs as people bid for talent with above-average skills.
2. **Title inflation**: To keep talent happy, many companies quickly give raises and promotions. Often, people haven’t actually got the skills and experience to take on the bigger job responsibility. In the long run, this can haunt employees who fail due to unrealistic expectations for positions that they are unqualified for to begin with.

In the midst of this problem, some educators and companies have taken action to address the issues facing the future of the marketing industry by developing hands-on programs within some of the country’s major universities. A far cry from textbook Advertising 101 classes of yesterday, these cutting-edge programs provide students real-life training and experiences inside agencies and marketing organizations. Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) Brand Center and Boulder Digital Works at the University of Colorado were pioneers of this approach, and more recently, the M-School at Loyola Marymount University has paved the way for students in Los
Angeles.

Students at the M-School learn from and inside of advertising agencies and media companies like TBWA/Chiat Day, Google, Deutsch, 180LA, Ignited, and Facebook coupled with non-traditional classroom work. Top execs across digital, creative, account service, data, and other sectors as well as accomplished marketing professors provide students with unique, customized, and real-time curriculums based on the marketing landscape of today and tomorrow. Students also work in teams to solve business challenges and present their solutions at the end of every class. This not only gives students the skills to address real business challenges, but also a sense of the potential environment they may work in one day.

Vocational-style learning leverages the power of working professionals to teach students how to do the jobs of today and provides a way for schools to stay relevant. The M-School program launched as a partnership between the LA marketing community and the business school at LMU. The last two years have seen incredible growth with 90 percent of students receiving industry jobs right out of the gate. We hope as LMU and other programs around the country mature, our industry will continue to reap the benefits of upcoming star talent that has already been immersed in the latest advertising tools, skills and latest technology before they step into the office on day one.