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March Madness Lesson: How 'And One' Can Boost Your Career

By Michael Preston
UCF Forum columnist
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Welcome to March Madness! Sixty-eight college basketball teams are vying for their ultimate prize: a national championship.

These teams will struggle to score against fierce defenses, try to maneuver for the perfect shot, and hopefully draw a foul and a chance for an “and one” scoring possibility. “And one” refers to the free throw awarded to a player who is fouled and still manages to get a shot into the basket, thus giving the player a chance for a three- or even a four-point play.

It can be quite a game changer when your effort can net you more points than scoring the basket alone.

March madness can also refer to the time of year that many soon-to-be college graduates are experiencing as they return from spring break.

After four years of classes, tests, lab reports, student-organization meetings, homecoming events and papers, the time has come to enter the working world. Getting that first job can be scary. The fear of the unknown can be daunting for even the most seasoned job seeker. For the first timer it can be downright paralyzing.

But fear not! According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2016 is supposed to be a great year for new graduates. NACE anticipates that the labor market will be up 11 percent from 2015, offering the best labor market for new graduates in years.

However, it is important to note that just because there are new and more jobs, the employment landscape is changing, forcing new graduates to change with it.

According to the employment-trend experts at the Boston firm Burning Glass, more and more jobs will not only require a degree but also additional credentialing focused on a number of skills, including information technology, sales, graphic design, computer coding and programming, and assessment.

These skills can enhance not only your job prospects but also your earning potential. For example, according to Burning Glass, a student coming out of college this year with a liberal arts degree will find nearly 1 million job opportunities tailored to their degree. That sounds like a lot! However, add one certification from the myriad of skills mentioned above and the job prospects nearly double to 1.8 million anticipated openings.

And it does not stop there. Students who achieve specialized badges and certifications in areas such as coding and programming can boost their earnings by up to 27 percent over just having a degree alone.

Fortunately, additional certifications and credentialing can be your “and one” in the job market..

The great thing is that many of these credentials can be acquired through a number of sources. LinkedIn is now offering certificates and training and many companies such as Microsoft, IBM and Cisco are offering their employees access to certification bundles to boost productivity and support their growing need for credentialed staff.

Of course, higher education is also getting into the certification game. For example, the University of Central Florida has entered the certification game by offering programs such as its Web Development Boot Camp. This boot camp allows for students to learn how to develop and maintain websites utilizing Javascript, HTML, CSS and other coding languages in just 24 weeks. This certification can have a tremendous boost for students looking for that great job.

It used to be that just getting a degree was enough. While achieving a degree is an important part of the process, today’s labor market demands that students commit to being lifelong learners. That commitment will mean that from time to time employees will need to return to the classroom to learn the skills needed to stay competitive and valuable to their companies. Of course, certifications can also lead to new opportunities and expand horizons by allowing graduates to juggle multiple offers as their skill portfolio expands.

Think of that expanding portfolio like that basketball team making a deep run in the tournament. Every great basketball team needs a point guard to control and distribute the ball, a shooting guard to nail the deep shot, a center to rebound and defend, and two forwards to go strong to the hoop – and all of them to get that “and one.”

Only when all of those parts are working together can a team win and advance in basketball.

And likewise, your skill portfolio can be made up of a great combination of a college degree and the various certifications necessary to land any job and make yourself an invaluable asset to your company and yourself.

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