

Winter 2026 , 519 Qualitative Research Methods

NAVIGATING IDENTITY & JOB SEARCH:

A qualitative study exploring how UW Human-Centered Design and Engineering students' self perception of their professional and vocational identities affect the job and internship search experiences.

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HCDE M.S. Research Team, Winter 2026

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research Context And Framing

This study examines the job and internship search experiences of undergraduate and graduate students in Human Centered Design and Engineering (HCDE) at the University of Washington.

Specifically, it focuses on how students' self-perceptions of their professional and vocational identities shape the ways they navigate, approach, and experience the job and internship application process.

Our research team aimed to investigate the role that UW undergraduate and graduate HCDE students' self-perceived professional identities play in their job and internship search process. For the purposes of this project, the job search encompasses internships and full/ part time jobs. Our research is particularly concerned with how students' self-perceived professional and vocational identities shape their job search processes. For the purposes of this study, the job search includes both internships and full- or part-time employment opportunities.

As an interdisciplinary field, HCDE sits at the intersection of design, technology, and social sciences. Students are trained to think across domains, developing skills in user experience design, research, product thinking, and system analysis.

However, this breadth often creates a unique tension: while the field values multidisciplinary, the job market often rewards specialization. Students are frequently expected to translate a complex, evolving skill set into a narrow professional narrative when applying to jobs and internships.



Why This Space Matters Now

Exploring this space is especially critical within the current landscape of UX, product design, and technology-related careers, where early career entry has become increasingly competitive and uncertain. Rapid shifts in hiring practices, driven by the growing use of artificial intelligence, evolving role expectations, and an oversaturated applicant pool, have fundamentally changed how students navigate job and internship searches.

Within this context, HCDE students are not only required to demonstrate technical and design competencies, but also to articulate a clear sense of professional direction and identity. However, students vary widely in how they perceive their vocational identity, some approach the process with confidence and clarity, while others experience uncertainty, misalignment, or anxiety when evaluating roles and their own qualifications. These differences are not just emotional; they can directly shape students' self-efficacy in completing key application tasks, such as tailoring materials, networking, and interviewing.

By examining how vocational identity influences self-efficacy during the job and internship search process, this research highlights an often-overlooked dimension of career readiness. This study aims to create space for reflection among HCDE students, while also informing how faculty, advisors, and career mentors can better support students in developing both confidence and clarity in their career trajectories. Additionally, it offers insight for hiring managers seeking to more effectively understand and engage early-career candidates navigating this evolving landscape.



Key Insights from Secondary Research

Prior research in career development and identity formation frames professional and vocational identity as dynamic and socially constructed, shaped through experience, reflection, and interaction with external systems.

Vocational identity is an individual's sense of purpose in their work, shaped by their interests, values, skills, goals, and perceived fit with a career path.

Research on design and interdisciplinary education highlights that students often struggle to articulate their value when their skills do not map cleanly onto traditional roles.

Additionally, studies on early-career job seeking emphasize the growing importance of narrative coherence, the ability to present a clear and compelling story about one's background and direction.

However, existing work often stops short of examining how these identity challenges directly influence students' self-efficacy and perceived ability to perform specific job search tasks, leaving a gap in understanding the connection between identity and self-efficacy in practice.

Self efficacy is the confidence you have in your capacity to plan, take action, and persist when challenges arise to achieve specific goals.

So based on this, what did we explore?

Research question

“How do UW HCDE undergraduate and graduate students' vocational identities impact their self-efficacy within job/internship application tasks?”

Our secondary research consisted of articles focusing on both undergraduate and graduate students. It revealed to us that many students are still navigating career paths, and therefore do not always have an established “professional identity.” In an interdisciplinary field like HCDE, these roles are not always clearly defined and career paths are not always linear. This can make it difficult for students to map their skills out into a distinct professional identity.

The definition of vocational identity captured the malleability of student identity more adequately than a solid “professional identity,” as it portrayed career-related identity as an ever-changing, uncertain phenomenon. This representation more accurately highlights the data we obtained through observation, and relates to students feeling anxious or unsure about their job applications. Hence, we decided to change this aspect of our research question to reflect this semantically. Many of our articles also touched upon self-efficacy, so we were specifically interested in how students' subjective beliefs about their capabilities affected how they completed various tasks/ steps in the job and internship application process.

Finally, we chose to examine how barriers related to perceived identity shape the ways students present themselves through their resumes, professional networking platforms and portfolios as they apply to jobs and internships.

Findings from our secondary research indicate that students' perceptions of their own identities play a critical role in shaping their willingness and confidence to engage in career seeking behavior, in this case applying to jobs/ internships. Based on this, we decided to refine our question further to examine how these factors manifest among HCDE students at the University of Washington.

Secondary questions

How do UW HCDE graduate and undergraduate students describe the relationship between their vocational and professional identity?

How do UW HCDE graduate and undergraduate student's perceived social identity barriers affect their self presentation strategies (resume, portfolio, professional networking platforms, etc) when applying to jobs/internships?



1.2. Secondary Research

What is known in this space?

Professional identity is widely understood in literature as a dynamic, socially constructed meaning system that images as students negotiate their belonging within a professional domain and through real-world experiences. According to Carvalho et al. (2021) work experiences during undergraduate studies shape how students conceptualize and narrate their professional selves, producing distinctly different semantic networks of identity meaning depending on whether students have no work experience, work in a field related to their studies, or work outside of their field.

The findings of this study highlighted that practical experiences not only served as a way to build skills but also played a role in anchoring identity narratives, thus influencing students' confidence, self-appraisal, and meaning making in ways that are pertinent to how students perceive and approach their career opportunities.

For students and early-career job seekers, vocational identity clarity plays an important role in helping them feel confident about the job application process. "Vocational identity is defined as the formation of a sense of individuality and personal goals within the occupational domain, characterized by clarity, coherence, and stability of perceived occupational motivation and abilities. It involves the integration of skills, values, and attitudes that facilitate identification with a specific occupation and guide career decision-making" (Koopman et al., 2023).

They argue that when students have a stronger sense of who they are, and can clearly see how their skills, values align with real and socially recognized job roles, they feel like they are more employable. Internships help exacerbate this feeling even more especially when effective in teaching them skills, as they add on to this confidence. In contrast, when job roles are ill-defined and lack social recognition, students struggle to form a stable professional identity (Biehl et al., 2025).



Tensions, debates, and gaps

We also found that traditional career development programs fail to serve students with multiple identities, becoming barriers to their ability to have career readiness, confidence, and access to meaningful opportunities.

In response to these perceived barriers, another debate emerges in the self-presentation behaviors that job seekers adopt. On professional platforms like LinkedIn, users are encouraged to be authentic, yet research shows they often optimize and disclose information selectively, or withhold part of their identity to align with hiring norms (Weiss et al. (2024). These behaviors can be understood as adaptation to inequitable hiring practices.

In addition to structural inequities and social identity shaping job search outcomes, research suggests that professional identity can be actively constructed through students' lived

experiences, particularly work experiences during college (Carvalho et al., 2021). Carvalho et al. (2021) demonstrates that undergraduate students' professional identities vary significantly based on whether they have no work experience, work experience aligned with their field of study, or work experience outside of their field.

Students with field aligned work experiences developed more coherent and interconnected understandings of their professional identities, while those with unrelated or no work experience exhibited more fragmented, uncertain, or aspirational identity constructions. This distinction is critical, as identity coherence appears to influence not only how students perceive themselves, but how confidently they are able to navigate and engage with professional spaces.

Relevant concepts and distinctions

One of the most recurring concepts across our research is job search self-efficacy, which represents job seekers' confidence in their ability to engage in the job search process and to successfully find a good job (DeOrtentiis, 2021).

Vocational identity clarity is another key concept. According to our research, it acts as an intermediary between college students' academic lives and post-graduate lives in the workplace, helping students feel more confident in their employability when job searching.

For this project, we are particularly interested in specific measures students take to build upon this identity, and how those measures consequentially impact self-presentation in their job search process. Exploring both overt and covert barriers that might obstruct students' ability to strengthen their vocational identity is also of interest to our research team.



2. WHO WE LEARNED FROM

Perspectives Represented

UW HCDE Graduate & Undergraduate Students

Our study included a total of nine participants who were all HCDE students who were either currently seeking roles or have applied to internships/jobs within the recent year. HCDE students come from interdisciplinary fields that uniquely reflect the tensions between vocation identity (values, motivation, sense of purpose) and professional identity (skills, roles, industry norms). Including both undergraduate and graduate students allowed us to capture a variety of experience level and career clarity.

International Students

Our study included 3 participant graduate students who were international students, whose job search experiences were shaped by additional considerations such as visa sponsorships and work authorizations. These factors influenced how they might approach a job application and decide on whether they would pursue it.

Research Team Autoethnography

Our study also incorporated autoethnographic reflections. Our research team consisted of four HCDE graduate students who were all actively applying to internships and as members of the target population we decided to reflect on our own experiences and contribute an insider perspective on identity in relation to job search.

Representation Gap

Although recruitment efforts were made through various HCDE networks, such as Slack group chats, social media, and word of mouth – participation from undergraduate students was limited. As a result, this study more strongly represents graduate students' experiences.

"I felt that, like, HCDE was very interesting, and a lot of, like, my interests and experience already kind of closely aligned to HCDE." [I-P2]

"HCDE has shown me that achieving my goals isn't just about talent, it's about pairing knowledge with consistent action and allowing my confidence to keep up with my ambition." [A-P1]

"As an international student, I feel like I can't filter as much as I want to. I just need to apply and get something." [FG-P1]

"Will you now or in the future require future sponsorship? I'm an international student. It's harder for us than it is for domestic students, so..." [I-P2]

"Although my time in the HCDE program hasn't been for long, it has made me reflect as a person and my goals, numerous times in the past few months. I feel like this program is definitely shaping my emerging identity as an aspiring UX researcher." [A-P4]

Key:
FG - Focus Group
A - Autoethnography
I - Interview

3. RESEARCH METHODS

The qualitative methods we used for our study included focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and autoethnographies. Across these methods, we explored HCDE students' experiences within the program, their job and internship search experiences, and how they define their professional and vocational identities.

Focus Group

The focus group helped us understand the shared perceptions, emotions, and challenges that HCDE students experienced during the job process. This method was appropriate because it allowed our participants to engage in discussion where they were reflecting collectively on their experience. This interactive nature of the focus group allowed for participants to build on one another response, which revealed common concern and patterns that might not have occurred during an individual interview.

The focus group highlighted shared frustrations related to the job requirements, perceptions of competitiveness in the field, and how students interpret her hiring expectations in the current market.

One limitation of this method was the inability to conduct a focus group with HCDE undergraduate students. Although we initially intended to compare perspectives and conduct two separate focus groups, recruitment constraints limited us to only one focus group with graduate students.

Semi-Structured Interviews

This semi-structured interview method allowed for us to gain valuable, in-depth insights into the participants' individuals experiences with the job and internship search process. This method was appropriate because it allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words, while also giving us the flexibility to ask follow-up questions and delve deeper.

Through these interviews, we were able to better understand how UW HCDE graduate and undergraduate students define and reflect on their professional and vocational identities, particularly in the context of job and internship search and process.

One limitation of this method was the small number of undergraduate participants, which limited our ability to directly compare undergraduate and graduate students' experiences.



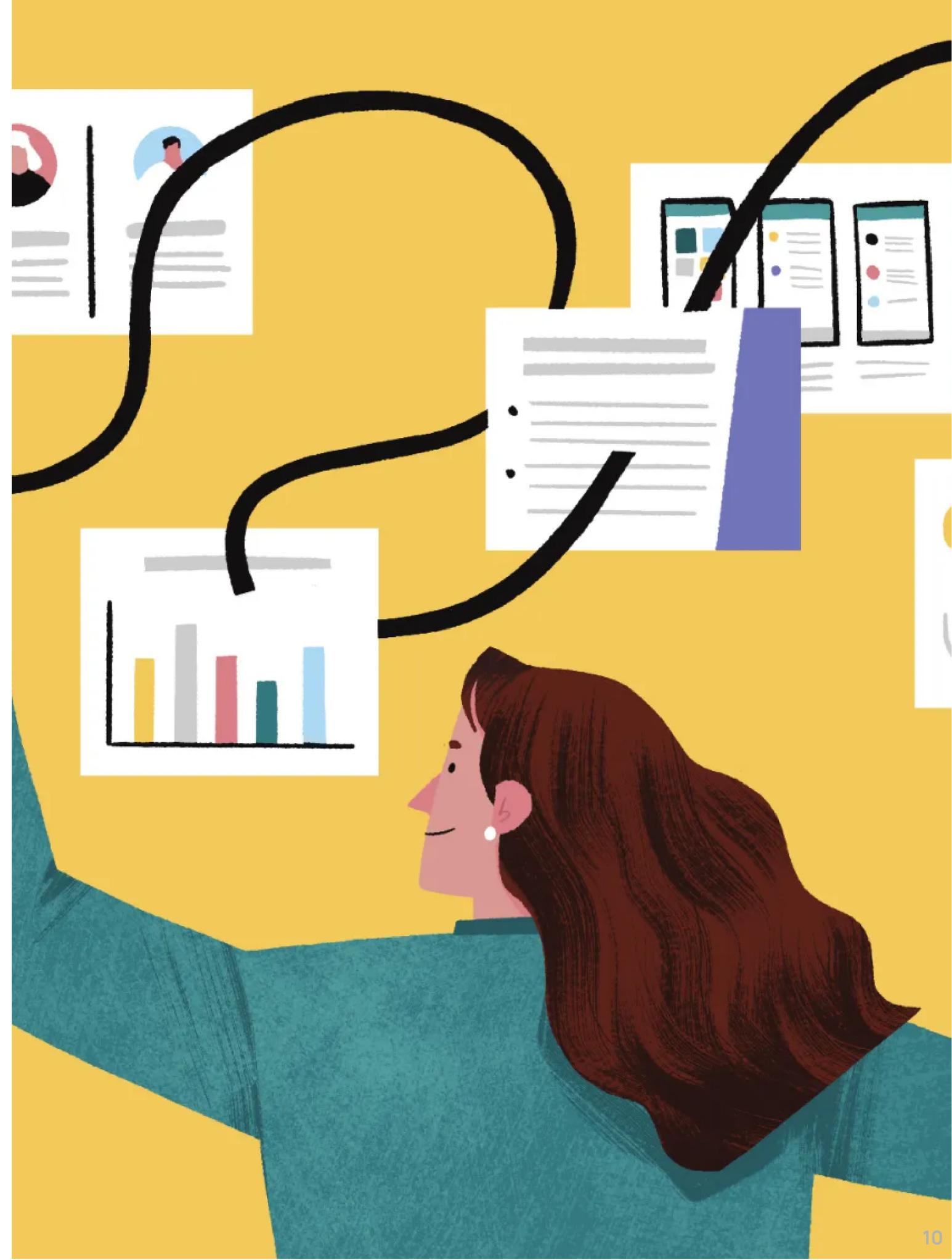
Focus group with graduate student participants.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography was the final research method for our study. We selected this approach because our research team consists of UW HCDE graduate students who are actively navigating the internship/job search process. As members of the target population, this method allowed us to draw on our lived experience and engage in systematic critical self-reflections.

To guide this process, we responded to a set of reflection questions that address the same core topics explored in the interview and focus group discussions, including HCDE related experiences, the job and internship search process, and reflections on professional and vocational identity. Using shared reflection prompts allowed us to maintain consistency across all three methods, while examining our own experiences within the context of the study.

One limitation of this method is the potential for subjectivity and bias when reflecting on our own experiences, which could increase the risk of confirmation bias. However, incorporating the autoethnographic reflections allowed us to acknowledge our positionality and consider how our experiences influenced our interpretation of the research topic.



4. FINDINGS

4.1. Identity Is Fluid And Multidimensional

Identity Multidimensionality

Across participant responses from three of our methods, the pattern of multiple identity dimensions emerged. All nine participants explicitly or implicitly mentioned clear discrepancies between their professional and vocational identities, and indicated that these differences took root in the form of varying personality traits, qualities, skills, and sometimes even job titles or goals.

For instance, in quote 1, a participant makes use of the fig tree metaphor to describe their life in terms of several interests and roles branching out to multiple possibilities.

This reveals that students possess aspirations and skills that go beyond linear HCDE paths. HCDE being the chosen career does not necessarily diminish the existence of other personal goals and aspirations. It is merely an indicator that there is more to HCDE students than what is on the surface.

In quote 2, another participant highlights the discrepancy between her vocational and professional identity, thus suggesting that there is more to her than what she professionally presents on her LinkedIn profile or resume.

These students' confident and non-hesitant accounts about their identities emphasize that HCDE students are certainly not clueless about who they are. They are hyper-aware of all of the various aspects of themselves, and even embrace these different sides.

Identity Fluidity

HCDE students' multidimensional quality allows them the agency to choose what sides of themselves they want to present while applying to jobs and internships. This self-presentation also typically varies based on job-searching artifact, whether it be their LinkedIn profile, portfolio, or resume.

For example, in quote 3, a participant discusses this phenomenon of fluid self-presentation, where she chooses to tone down or display her personality depending on which industry the role is in. This indicates that her identity is not fixed; rather, it is malleable to the context and environment she is in.

However, another participant [quote 4] compares this adaptability in identity to xylophones, stating that she is unable to "turn off" parts of herself so she simply chooses what parts to highlight more than others. This varies slightly from the previous participant's response because this is less about downplaying aspects and more about strategic emphasis of traits. However, the focus is still on adjusting to cater to a specific environment.

Fluidity in the context of HCDE job search is evident in students' need to conform or adapt their identities to become what they perceive certain roles require of them. However, it can also be more authentic.

Many participants highlighted the portfolio as a means of more genuine identity expression, discussing how it gave them the ability to showcase themselves more, as exemplified in quote 5. This signals that fluidity is a double-edged sword that provides students enough freedom in self-presentation, but simultaneously gives them the ability to adjust to norms.



Participant Quotes

- 1 "When I think of vocational identity, I think of the fig tree metaphor. I would like to be a photographer, a traveler/ blogger, a teacher, a coffee shop owner, and a fashion designer. But, because of my reality, I'm unable to live out these dreams." - [A-P4]
- 2 "My professional identity is UX-focused, but my vocational identity leans more visual." - [FG - P2]
- 3 "In the entertainment or gaming industry, professionalism is more flexible, I try not to downplay my personality too much. But when applying to corporate roles, I tone things down" - [FG-P2]
- 4 "These two identities are not mere switches that I turn on and off. They operate like xylophones; where all sides of me are visible, but one personality trait gets accentuated depending on what my environment requires of me" [A-P2]
- 5 "In LinkedIn and resumes, there's an unspoken template in everybody's head that you're supposed to follow, and that's what I'm doing as well. I fail to capture the real me in those, but I'm glad the portfolio is something we can still make our own way."
- 6 "I'm applying to anything in the UXR field, but I am prioritizing companies that I feel like their product is contributing a little bit more good than a little bit more harm in the world" [I - P1]
- 7 "Does the company have integrity? I'm also big on that as well. So integrity, diversity, communication- those are values that I have and I look out for when I'm applying to jobs and roles." [I - P2]

Strong Awareness of Values

Although there is a need to have a more fluid identity expression, HCDE students still have solid values that they hold onto.

In quote 6, a participant discusses the importance of staying true to her moral values, and expresses her interest in working for UX Research companies that prioritize ethical impact.

This connects to the previous findings on identity fluidity and multidimensionality, because HCDE students mention how values act as a foundation for their goals and self-presentation.

Another participant [quote 7] explicitly states that they are looking for specific values like integrity, diversity, and communication when applying to roles. This lack of hesitancy in listing out values signals a genuine inclination toward social impact, thus aligning with the previous participant quote.

These values can sometimes conflict with adaptability in job applications, especially when participants feel the need to downplay or emphasize specific characteristics. Yet, they do not view their values as inhibitors of their multidimensionality. Instead, they view them as guides that supplement their career journey, thus suggesting that they know themselves on a deeper level.

Coupled with their various identity dimensions, students' values allow them to hold vocations and professional goals that are rooted in meaning and purpose, even when they are adjusting themselves to fit job application norms.

Though the expression of identity might appear different based on the context, the deeper values do not change.

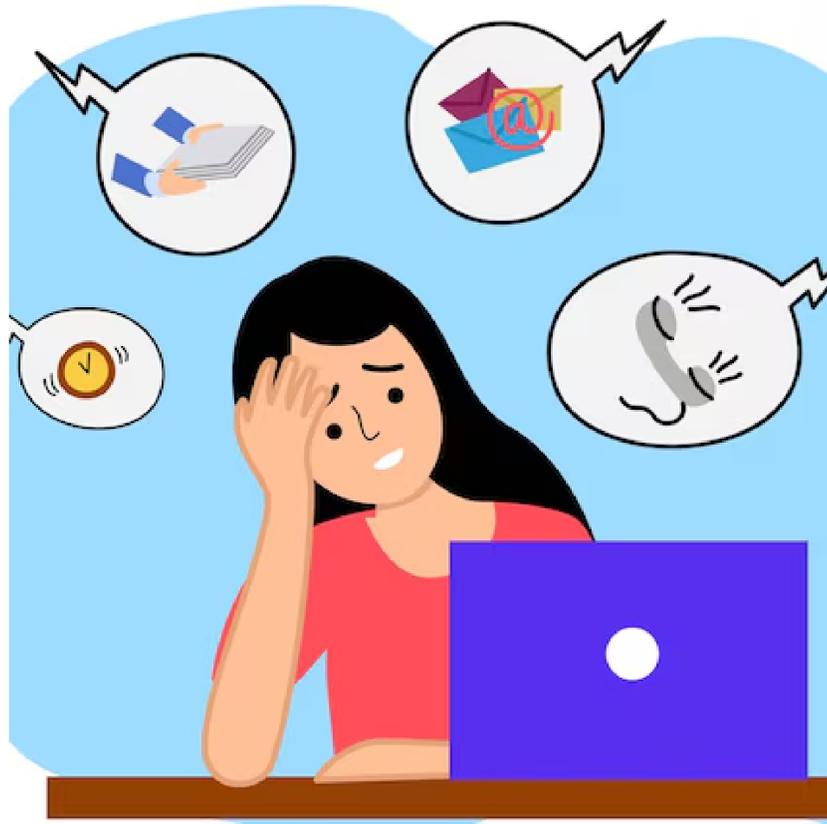
Why this matters

HCDE is a field that is inherently interdisciplinary, thus mirroring students' multidimensionality. In the job application search process, companies and/or hiring managers are unable to grasp these different sides of students early on, which leads to missed hiring opportunities and potential valuable talent being overlooked.

Students know who they are and have values-driven goals, but there is a large disconnect when it comes to translating these parts of themselves into specific application components like their resume, LinkedIn, etc.

Students also desire to portray themselves in a way that more accurately reflects who they are, but they feel as though barriers such as fear, job application norms, and high-volume applications can sometimes impede their ability to do so, causing a need to conform to what they feel is expected.

4.2. Navigating Fear, Hope, And Self-Presentation



HCDE students strategically adjust how they represent themselves in the job search. They also hold conflicting emotions; they simultaneously teeter between self-selecting out of fear and embracing job opportunities with hope.

Pressure to conform

During study sessions, participants reflected extensively on the various ways they deviated from their true identities for the sake of appealing to jobs better. They are hyper-aware of the fact that there are overt and covert expectations for candidate presentation, and try their level best to meet them, even if they are not entirely confident about these expectations.

For instance, many participants articulated some variation of "professional identity is how I present myself to recruiters and companies."

Participants discuss the inevitable change they feel they have to make to present themselves better, whether that be listing projects on their resume, adding the right words and language, or focusing on personal branding.

One participant also spoke about a more complex case of completing freelance work and then coming back to school. She adds that she is applying to internships, which are geared towards students, and wonders if she should position herself more clearly as a student even though she has worked freelance.

The need to choose between either of the two aspects clearly highlights the desire to cater specifically to the job itself.

Other participants mention that they change their self-presentation based on who they are catering to. They want to make their application as easily digestible to recruiters, so they choose to remove anything that is not completely relevant to the position they are applying to.

Self-selecting out of roles due to fear

Many participants mentioned that the years of experience that a job requires can be intimidating, causing them to self-select out of applying to certain roles.

One participant states, "I feel more confident when the posting clearly says it's for students currently in a degree program. But when it says '2+ or 3+ years of experience, I get hesitant' [FG-P2]. This suggests that experience requirements can discourage students from applying to the relevant skills needed for the position.

Another participant adds, "I know sometimes they have product design interns, but they're looking for someone with a strong background in, like, CAD. And, like, I know CAD, but I'm not very strong at it, so then I normally just don't apply" [I-P3].

This is a clear example of a participant self-selecting out of hesitancy even though she does have the required experience for the product design role.

Students find it difficult to gauge one's own ability when it comes to applying for desired roles, because there is no clear indication of what being "proficient in" a tool actually means. This can cause people to second-guess their abilities.

Positive HCDE Influence

Although students do feel afraid and intimidated when applying to jobs, they simultaneously feel hopeful and optimistic as a result of being in the HCDE program.

Participants described that interacting with and being in the presence of their peers has allowed them to maintain a growth mindset in regard to their career.

One participant mentioned "being inspired and challenged by others' approaches and priorities to integrate that into her own identity." This illustrates a hopeful outlook toward others' perspectives and identities, as opposed to the traditional intimidation that accompanies job searches.

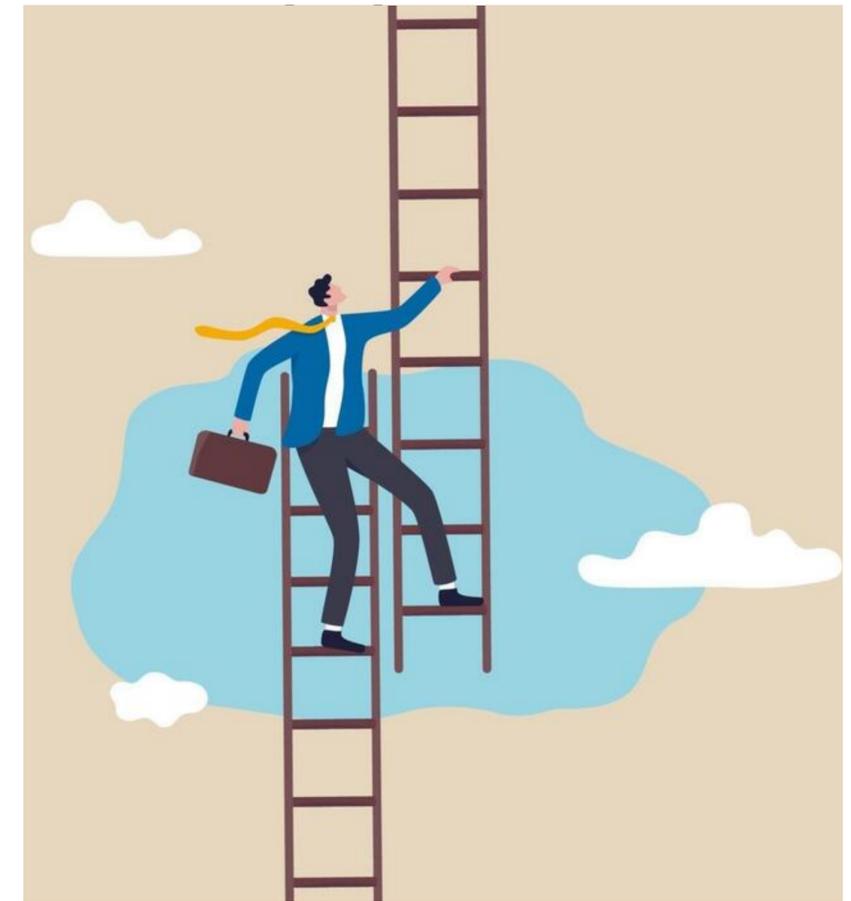
Another adds, "When I see what my peers are doing on LinkedIn, their achievements do not shake my confidence so much as they motivate me. I use their progress as a reference point. Where are they now, and how do I get there?" [A-P4], thus reiterating the need to evolve and be inspired by others.

This same participant elaborates, "applying to jobs feels a little like buying a blind box item right now. You do not always know what you are getting, but you keep going anyway" [A-P4].

However, another participant does contrast the more optimistic responses by suggesting that social comparison negatively affects their confidence and motivation in the job search, thus calling attention back to the dichotomy of fear and hope.

Why this matters

The job search can be rigid, which causes students to present their professional identities a certain way to meet perceived expectations.



This tension between hope and fear can shape how students apply to roles, network, and evaluate opportunities. If students' perception of their abilities are negatively influenced by fear or intimidation, they risk not applying to roles that they are qualified for.

The ambiguity in these hiring systems can often undermine their confidence, thus creating barriers to self-efficacy during the job search.

Due to experiencing mixed emotions and feeling pressure to conform, students ultimately end up engaging in specific techniques to circumvent these systems.

They take certain actions, manage their expectations, and double-check parts of their applications before submitting. Although there is apprehension, there is also a need to keep pushing and working toward increased confidence in one's application,

“Applying to jobs feels a little like buying a blind box item right now. You do not always know what you are getting, but you keep going anyway”

“ You have to think about the right term used in the industry to actually put that skill down and then categorize it under the right heading. I'm like, oh my God.

4.3. Circumventing Rigid Systems

Considering the high-stakes nature of job searches, students take specific actions to circumvent rigid systems and increase their confidence in their application.

Navigating ATS Systems

Many participants have described using different methods to improve their chances of progressing further in the hiring process and feeling optimistic about their application. These strategies often involve tailoring their application materials, to better align with the ATS system, which typically evaluates candidates at early stages.

One participant mentioned, "I check keywords to make sure they align with my skills, especially because of the ATS system" [FG-P1].

This illustrates that students have to match their resume with the key words that are found in the job posting to help increase their chances of passing through the ATS system. Any errors in this step will obstruct their job search process dramatically.

Another participant discussed the positions she has previously received, stating that she took time to edit those applications instead of adding AI-generated bullet points into her resume.

This is an example of a situation wherein dedicating time to personalizing one's resume according to key-words improved one's chances of landing a role.

Students are compromising during the job search

Participants expressed how they have to compromise or settle when applying for jobs.

This can include accepting a lower pay than they expected, having to adjust parts of their application materials to better align with what employers are looking for, or struggling to balance their vocational and professional identities.

One participant stated, "...if things are not aligning vocationally and professionally, I would settle for what professional identity demands rather than what vocational identity is hunting for" [FG-P1].

Unfortunately, some students may have to prioritize practical career opportunities even when those opportunities do not fully align with their personal interests or aspirations. Chasing after vocational identity feels more exhausting than efficiently settling for professional goals.

Many international students also added, "As an international student, I feel like I can't filter as much as I want to. I just need to apply and get something" [I-P2].

This shows how many different factors such as visa status or job security concerns come into play, hence forcing students to broaden their application and chase after roles that do not fully match their original or ideal goals.

Paying attention to details while applying

Students mentioned many different numerous aspects that they keep in mind while they are applying for a role, as well as little actions they take to feel more confident and increase their self-efficacy.

One participant mentioned that "I once got rejected because I didn't attach a cover letter. That was wild" [FG-P1]. This shows how a decision as minor as not attaching a cover letter, even when optional, can have a determining factor on if they are considered for the role or not.

Another participant frustratingly recounted having to focus on minute details such as using the right terminology and stated, "you have to think about the right term used in the industry to actually put that skill down and then categorize it under the right heading. I'm like, oh my God" [FG-P2].

This illustrates how students have to pay close attention to how they properly describe and organize their skills, but also ensure that the text is not too detailed.

Another stated that using the Google XYZ method helps her feel more confident when applying to roles. "Doing that trick just makes me more presentable when it comes to applying for jobs" [I-P2].

This suggests that incorporating such a structured framework allows for students to seamlessly translate their experience into ways that feel more aligned with the industry, while also helping boost their confidence.



Why this matters

Students are aware that they could be extremely qualified for a job, but any discrepancies in wording, layout, or other job application aspects could hinder their chances of progressing further in the application.

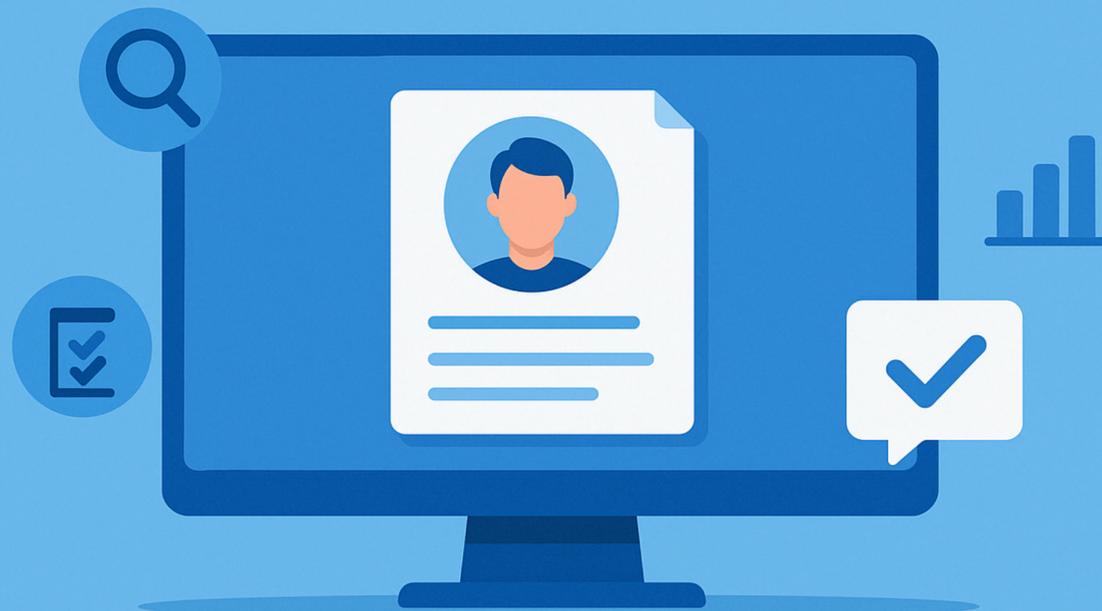
In an over-saturated job market where each job posting receives a high volume of applications, students feel irritated at the thought of having to tailor each application to match certain key words. However, although they are frustrated with having to make these changes, they do it anyway because they know they will fall behind if they do not accommodate these systems.

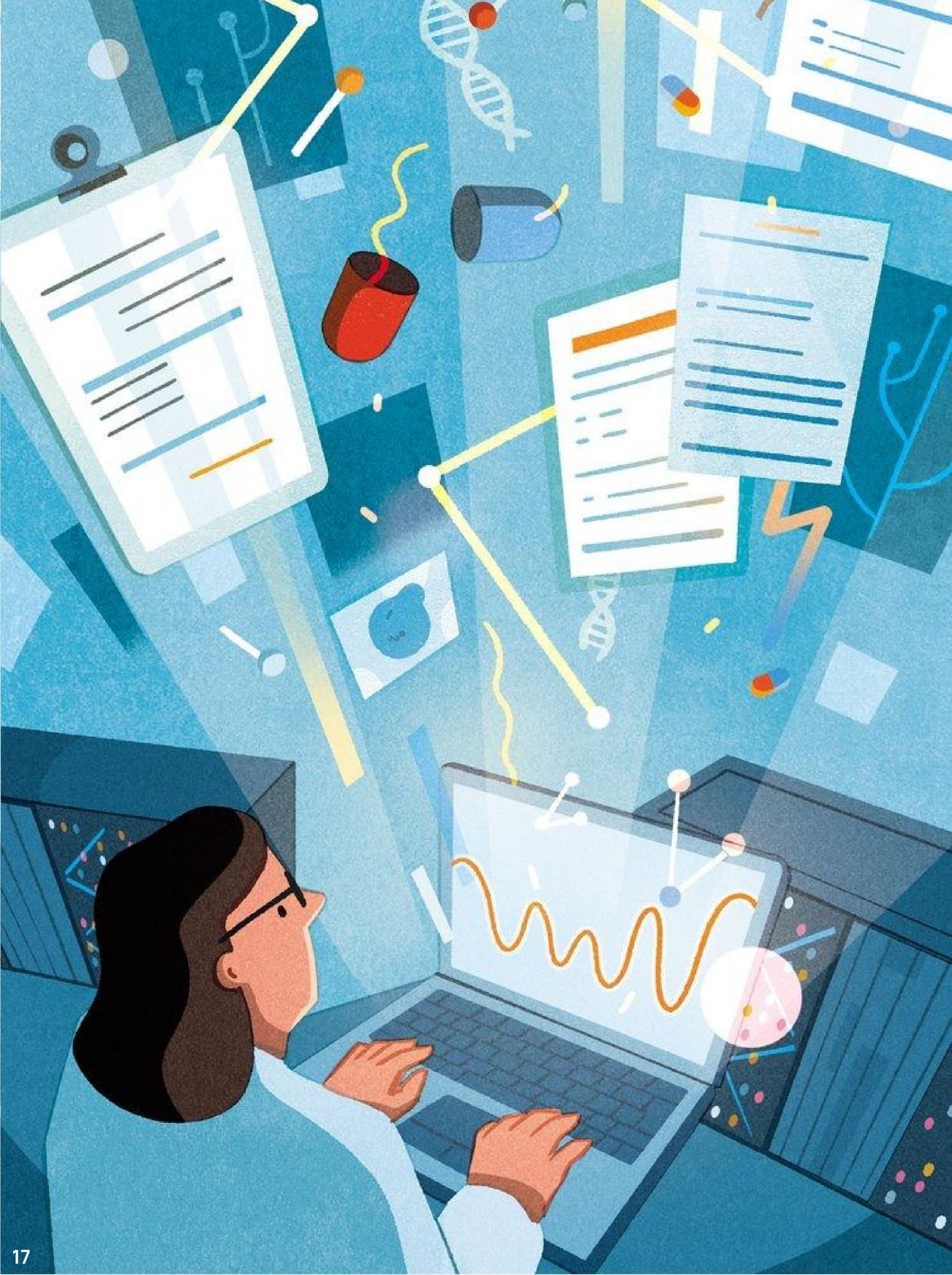
This need to dedicate effort to catering toward highly rigid systems suggests an implication that goes far beyond accuracy and attention to detail. It sheds light on a deeper truth, which is that students' emotions, hard work, identities, and values are undermined and flattened throughout the job search process. Although the job application systems are meant for students to utilize, they are not created with their needs in mind.

Every time a job application rejects a student because they said "UX research" instead of "user experience research" or overlooks an application because it does not meet narrow ATS standards, hiring managers miss out on valuable talent.

Creating better job application systems will immensely benefit both students and hiring managers. It allows an already stressful and busy HCDE student to capture themselves with ease, and it makes it possible for recruiters to see students' potential quicker.

APPLICANT TRACKING SYSTEM





5. SO WHAT?

5.1. Implications

The identity pressure is real, and we don't talk about it enough

Students are not struggling because they don't know who they are. They are struggling because the systems they apply to are too rigid to receive them fully. Most students arrive at the job search with a clear and layered sense of self: they know their strengths, their motivations, the kind of work they care about, and the experiences that shaped them. The problem is not a lack of self-awareness. The problem is that none of that complexity has a place in a standard application.

To get through the door, students learn to compress. They present the version of themselves that fits the format, and leave the rest out. Part of this is practical: ATS systems reward keyword matching, one-page resumes are treated as a hard rule, and minimalism is held up as a sign of professionalism. Students shape themselves around these constraints because the constraints are real. Over time, this becomes a kind of practiced self-erasure, not because students lack confidence, but because the system quietly teaches them that the full picture is too much.

And yet, none of these rules are written down anywhere. They are not taught in classrooms or spelled out in job postings. They travel through word of mouth, through older students, mentors, and professional networks. Someone tells someone else to keep it to one page. Someone warns a friend that every title on the resume must be capitalized to present themselves to be more serious. The result is a quiet but persistent pressure: to become legible to a system that was never designed with them in mind.

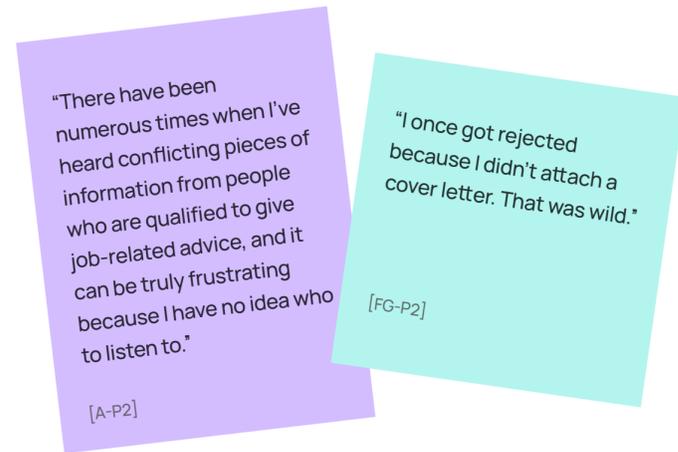
The current system does not take emotional labor into account

The burden on students goes far beyond handling rejection. There is application fatigue: the weight of sending up to 1,000 applications in a single cycle, spending two hours carefully crafting each one, and then hearing nothing back. There is job market anxiety, a background noise that follows students through every stage of the search and makes the silence after each submission feel heavier.

The hiring system, as it stands, does not acknowledge any of it. A large share of applications receive no response at all. No confirmation, no feedback, no indication of where a candidate stood. The system is designed for speed and scale on the employer side, not for the human cost it creates on the candidate side. It rewards quantity over fit, and it treats silence as a neutral default rather than a form of harm. Many platforms make this worse by running applicants through Applicant Tracking Systems. Students are filtered out automatically before a human ever reads their name.

5.2. How can we change?

Understanding this dynamic matters. It can help educators, policymakers, recruiters, and platform designers make changes that reduce the pressure, rather than ask students to simply endure it.



For career services and program designers:

Students need more than resume templates and mock interviews. Career programs talk a lot about personal branding and finding your unique selling point. But branding, as it is usually taught, is still about packaging the professional self. It is about standing out through what you have done, not about communicating why you do it or what you are working toward. Vocational identity rarely gets that same attention, even though it is often what makes someone a genuinely good fit for a role rather than just a technically qualified one. The result is that students learn to present a version of themselves that is legible to the system but not fully true to who they are.

The opportunity for school programs and career guides is to help students hold both. Not to choose between being strategic and being authentic or to compress either, but to develop the language and confidence to bring their full identity into the application process.

Design principles:

Teach the hidden curriculum. Name the unwritten rules: how ATS filtering works, why keywords matter, what one-page conventions actually signal, what is the importance of cover letter. Students cannot navigate a system they do not understand.

Support the full identity, not just the credential. Career resources should help students translate their layered sense of self into application materials, not flatten it. This means making space for students to articulate their motivations, their values, and the experiences that shaped them, not just their job titles and technical skills.

Build in emotional support alongside practical guidance. Application fatigue is real. Programs that acknowledge the emotional weight of the job search and build in space for reflection and recovery will serve students better than those that treat the process as purely logistical.

For policy makers: It is time to rethink ATS systems

The hiring system has structural problems that individual students cannot solve on their own. Policy has a role to play in setting expectations for how platforms and employers operate.

Applicant Tracking Systems that rely heavily on keyword matching create bias and exclusion at scale. They filter out candidates not because those candidates are unqualified, but because their language does not match the algorithm's expectations. This disproportionately affects students from non-traditional backgrounds, career changers, and anyone whose path does not follow a straight line.

If policymakers set transparency standards for ATS use in hiring, then candidates can make more informed decisions about how to present themselves

Design principles:

Push for transparency in automated screening. Candidates deserve to know when and how automated systems are being used to evaluate them. Transparency is a basic starting point for accountability.

Encourage standards that assess potential, not just keyword match. Policymakers can create pressure on platforms and employers to move away from purely mechanical filtering toward criteria that better reflect actual job readiness. One starting point is requiring a human in the loop in selection rounds, or potential evaluation.

Recognize emotional labor as a legitimate concern. The current process asks a great deal from candidates and gives very little back. Policies that encourage or require employers to acknowledge applications and provide basic feedback to fasten the application cycle.



5.2. How can we change?

For recruiters: be intentional with job description language

Recruiters are often the first human in a process that has already done significant filtering before they see a single name. The decisions they make, including the job descriptions they write and the criteria they use, shape who gets through and who does not.

The way a job description is written directly shapes who applies. Wording alone can filter out strong candidates before they even submit. Rigid qualification lists discourage capable people who may not check every box but bring real potential and values. When a posting signals that all ten requirements are non-negotiable, candidates who meet most of them often decide not to apply at all.

Design principles:

Be mindful that language carries signals beyond its literal meaning.

Exhaustive lists of years-of-experience requirements can communicate who is and is not welcome.

Create space for motivation, not just credentials. If the job description only asks for qualifications, that is all candidates will send. Small prompts that invite candidates to say why they care about the work can shift the tone of the entire process.



For tools and platforms designers

The tools and platforms that mediate the application process have enormous influence over what is possible for both candidates and recruiters. Right now, most of them are built around speed and scale for the employer side, with very little consideration for the candidate experience.

If hiring platforms create structured space for candidates to express their vocational identity early in the process, then both candidates and organizations can make better decisions and find matches that go beyond qualifications, toward shared values and purpose.

This is open territory, and the questions here do not have clean answers yet. But they are the right ones to start with.

Open questions:

How might we design tools and platforms that can help applicants showcase their multidimensional selves, but still speaks the language that recruiters can easily understand?

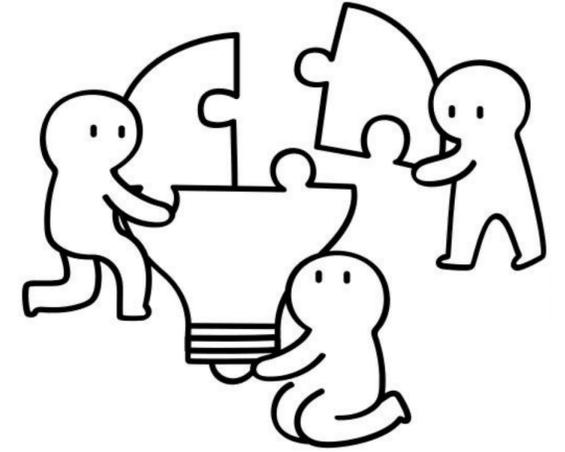
- How to remove the barriers of conventional formatting?
- How to make the application process easy, straightforward and feedback-driven?
- How might we create space for candidates to express their vocational identity sooner in the hiring process to better align with organizations?

Design principles:

Create earlier space for vocational identity. One of the participants in our study noted that they could not fully express their motivations until the interview stage, or sometimes not until after accepting an offer. By that point, the most important decisions have already been made. Building earlier prompts for candidates to share why the work matters to them could lead to more meaningful matches between people and organizations.

Design for the candidate, not just the employer. Platforms that take the candidate experience seriously, by offering feedback, reducing unnecessary friction, and allowing for more expressive formats, will produce better outcomes for everyone in the process.

6. REFLECTION & LIMITATIONS



Learnings

Challenging assumptions

Not all students are experiencing complications with the job and internship search. Since we fit the participant profile, it felt easy to cling onto pre-conceived notions about HCDE students' identities and the job search.

We eventually learned the importance of embracing perspectives beyond our own. This led us to challenge our own biases and embrace differences.

Certain topics can impact people differently, so approaching each session with care and empathy was always top of mind for each session that we conducted – interviews and focus groups alike.

Logistics

With studies that consider multiple methods, it's imperative that we as researchers are able to stay organized so we can retrieve our study materials or data more efficiently when necessary.

Communication is key

Throughout this experience, we learned the importance of clear communication to remain on track with our deliverables. We also learned to follow up promptly with our participants for study sessions to ensure ample time for data analysis.

Flexibility/accessibility needs

We also prioritized personalizing and considering participants' needs by ensuring accessibility and flexibility for sessions. We accomplished this by providing in-person and virtual options for sessions.

We considered their availability by utilizing survey forms to capture their preferences, i.e., if they were willing to participate in both focus groups and interviews or just one method. We also provided snacks during sessions and allowed participants to add any dietary restrictions to cater to them better.

For snacks: Please include any dietary restrictions that you have or that we should be aware of

Long answer text

Please describe any accessibility needs or accommodations you'd like us to consider.

Long answer text

Thank you for your interest!

Any questions/comments?

Long answer text



Limitations

Given the limited time frame of 10-week course, there were some recruitment limitations.

We were unable to reach as many undergraduate students as intended. Resulting in a sample size more heavily represented by graduate students.

As researchers who were also members of the HCDE community, our perspectives and experiences may have influenced how we interpret the data.

As this study focused on HCDE students at the University of Washington, the findings may not reflect students in other programs and/or institutions.



APPENDIX

References And Readings

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