ALUMNI SHARING SESSION
INSPIRING WORK EXPERIENCE & COVID19 PANDEMIC CHALLENGE

GENERAL INFO & PURPOSE

JOHOR - A talk was organized by Technology and Information System, School of Computing from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia through Webex, entitled 'Inspiring Work Experience and COVID-19 Pandemic Challenge', on 29th December 2020. There are three speakers named Qistina Bastriyia binti Azman Shah, Mohamad Zaharul Akmal bin Mohd Hussin and Tan Yong Keong, with one moderator, Dr. Johanna Ahmad.

The purpose of this talk is to let the speakers share their working experience and also how to encounter their problem during the COVID-19 pandemic situation. This talk is targeted at fresh graduates, students, and even the public. The talk also shared about how to improve one's skills to be hired. Besides, the speakers also share how to improve our soft skills.

GETTING THE JOB

The first question of this talk was shot to Tan on how he managed to get his job. Tan managed to get his job by participating in a lot of competitions where he gained some professional skills and his presentation skills have improved. Besides that, he also did freelancing jobs where he was able to develop some technical skills. He got his job interview during a competition where he won. Not only that, Tan also did his internship at ViTrox Technologies Sdn. Bhd. In addition, he proudly mentioned about his Chancellor Award on his 63rd competition.

For Zamarul, he is currently being absorbed as a permanent staff in his intern company, PPG Coatings. His advice on increasing the chances of getting hired is to keep being proactive by frequently giving out ideas and opinions. Before he proposed the idea to create one system that could monitor everything, such as a support dashboard, the company used a manual monitoring tool. This proposal then became his final year project, which led to his supervisors giving him more attention due to his appeal. Through his proactivity, he was able to become a permanent staff in his company.

Meanwhile for Qistina, she has been in the position since her internship at TM One. During internship, she showed a lot of effort to join real life projects. She also said she volunteered to do a dashboard for a project and from there, her supervisor cum manager asked her to join the company to further complete the project. When asked what kind of project she is part of, she answered that most of the project is focused on social media where she gathers social media data and then creates it into a dashboard. The client will use the data on establishing their branding.

MAIN CONTENT

Currently, Tan is a Data Science Engineer at Micron Semiconductor Asia Operations . He is dealing with factory loading optimization where he gathers a lot of data and optimizes the market demand based on the current factory tools availability. Mostly Tan uses Rouen data science tools, Hadoop systems and Apache spark platforms to gather data and process data. The next question was asked to Tan which is how people learn new languages. According to Tan it is not about learning the new language but it is about learning the concept. " You need to conquer one concept then you can spread similar concepts to other languages" said Tan.

Dr Johanna then asked them for any tips to increase the chances of getting hired as a fresh graduate during the pandemic. According to Qistina, "in terms of technical skills, you must have great skills on Excel, Python and SQL. The most important is to be proactive. When given a task, do not wait until someone teaches you or tells you what to do. Ask around." She also advised to not limit oneself and try to learn new things as in a company, there are a lot of things that can be learnt. Giving herself as an example, she always mingles around with people and offers to help others.

In Zamarul's opinion, it is important to learn new technical skills and to not entirely depend on the fundamental knowledge gained in university. He suggested taking online courses, such as using UTM E-Learning and EDX; though EDX requires payment for you to obtain the certificate, students could then attach it on their resume. Zamarul then continued to explain the significance of improving soft skills, such as communication skills by expressing ideas and suggestions, and polish teamwork skills because it is easier to complete tasks in a team, compared to individually.

Dr Johanna questioned Tan on how to love programming where he answered it by saying loving programming depends on the person. People have to think about creating something new either software or app through programming. The software or app you created must tackle the real world problem that can help the community.

Continuing with her questions, Dr Johanna asked the speakers on how to gain confidence. In Tan's point of view, confidence can be trained by participating in a lot of competitions. When students participate in a competition they have to present the idea or project very well. Therefore, they must show a high level of confidence so that they can beat other teams.

Zamarul's way to gain confidence is to always join programs and volunteer themselves to present discussion topics. He also advised all students to take these chances, because it is always good to join activities that require you to speak to clients, in comparison to solely preparing codes.

Qistina agreed with what Tan has said, as confidence can be trained. She added that she joined a lot of programs that needed her and her team to present their projects. Qistina also ensured the participants that there are a lot of programs and projects that could be joined to build their confidence. She reminded them to not be shy and enjoy their study life with their friends.

The upcoming question was asked to Zamarul which is what is on the difference between study life and career life and which one he loves the most. In Zamarul's opinion, he loves and enjoys university life most because there is a lot of free time in comparison to the career life he is experiencing, because every day it is a requirement to live a repeated cycle. He spoke more in terms of responsibilities, where when you are in university, the worst thing that could occur is not receiving an A grading on your exams. However when you are working, it can entirely affect your future in new job applications. Zamarul urges students to confront and consult seniors and lecturers when facing doubts to minimize potential mistakes.

QUESTION & ANSWER

Before passing the question, Dr Johanna explained the differences between the private and the government sectors. Privately, they focus more on skills while the latter considers CGPA as a top priority. "As I work in the private sector, the company only looks at whether I can do the job and have the attitude," Qistina responded. Zamarul joked that if CGPA were compulsory, he would not have been chosen. During his internship, there were eight students in total with two of the candidates obtaining high CGPA results, however he was the only one that received the most attention. Zamarul suggested that this is due to the skills that he has and not entirely on CGPA results. Tan agreed with all of them and stated that CGPA is one of the criteria that filters you out of other people or competitors. Therefore, people need to maintain a good CGPA, such as 3.0. He suggested that students still need extra skills and participate in non-academic activities to be selected as permanent staff, instead of solely focusing on CGPA.

"In a competition, there is always a winner and a loser," answered Tan. Though he has participated in many competitions, he still lost in a lot. He said, even though one loses a competition, you win in terms of experience, exposure, new skills and much more. He added, "If we cannot win the competition, we can win the experience." Passing the question to Qistina, she agreed with what Tan had said. She shared that she once asked her management on why the exposure (to competition) is important, and they stated that they want to look whether the graduate can work in a team or otherwise. She emphasized that losing or winning the competition is not important, it is the experience. With agreement to what the other speakers; Tan and Qistina said regarding winning experiences, Zamarul gave a comforting statement saying that people would not hate you. Being seen as a burden and gaining hate through losing is not possible in his perspective.

Besides that, a participant asked how the speakers stay motivated on a daily basis. "Actually, we have to love the job and always try to do better," spoke Dr. Johanna. Tan emphasized on the importance of mindset. His mindset was to create something that can contribute to the world. For example, his final year project was on dengue outbreak prediction and he tried his best on it. Zamarul anticipates the new things he could pursue in his career that he did not manage to learn in his university life, as it is exciting for him. He says that his current project is one of the big projects in his company, so he reminds himself daily that this opportunity does not come often and not everyone is capable of it. He also adds on that caffeine consumption has helped him to stay motivated, which was then agreed by Dr. Johanna.

The next question was on how Tan joined the competitions. Half of Tan's competition was supported by Tan himself and another half was supported by UTM especially by his supervisor. In order to win some competitions students may need the resources from the university. Therefore, they need to get their supervisors or any authorities who have formal positions in the university that can grant permission to access the university resources for the competitions.

Media analysis in the industry and the technology used was asked next. As a social media data analyst, Qistina was chosen to answer it, "for social media data analysts, they collect data from social media. We then create a dashboard for the client to use. The technology used for data crawling are other software systems, and we also use data provided by the social media itself." She further explained about the steps after the data was collected, which consisted of running the data through Python and using Natural Language Processing (NLP) for data tagging. Just like how different people use different words, NLP allowed some modelling to happen.

Zamarul said that his company treats him professionalism, and his co-workers treat him more as a friend rather than an intern. Regarding minimum wages, he said he received the highest among the other interns. Zamarul added that you could actually demand the payment if you receive a low amount, so the company could discuss with your university supervisor. For him, he does not see his internship as an overworked experience because he was able to understand in depth about his actual course. Though there are people with overworked experiences, it is compulsory for you to contact your university and industrial supervisors about it.

The next question shoot to Tan was about his hobbies. Tan mentioned he likes football, and books which are related to Computer Science. His personal interest is to explore AI and machinery stuff. Apart from that, Tan also loves to play chess during his free time. He also participates in a lot of competitions which held outside of university too. The upcoming question was what language is used in a career where Tan has answered it before which depends on the project.

Later on, jobs not related to the course studied was asked. With this question being asked, Zamarul agrees that it is common to have a career that does not relate to the course you study. Plenty of his colleagues pursue machine learning (AI) although they study data engineering. As long as you can cope with the fundamental requirements, it is beneficial to you as you can gain knowledge on said tasks. However if you cannot cope with it, you can discuss with your supervisors whether or not you could change to tasks that relate more to your course.

A participant asked them about their first year experience. Qistina confessed that she forgot most of it as it was four years ago for her, but she remembered getting excited to join many programs and projects, and also to make new friends too. For Tan's first year he plays around, makes some new friends especially by participating in competitions. Tan has started to join competitions in his first year of university. Apart from that he tried his best to make friends within and outside his faculty as he may collaborate with them during competitions. Zamarul says that his first year experience was similar to everyone as it is significant for students to get to know new friends, lecturers, the buildings, and all your classes. He added that during the first year, the subjects learned are still general, so opting to change courses in your second year is still possible if it is for the best for your studies.

SUMMARY

Graduated in June 2020, with a CGPA of more than 3.0, Qistina managed to secure a job in TM One as a social media data analyst. Qistina emphasized on joining a lot of programs to expose the students to varieties of experiences and to build self-confidence. She also said how important it is to be proactive, as Qistina, herself got the job from being proactive during her internship. She also shared what it takes to be a social media analyst.

Zamarul has stressed a lot on polishing the soft skills because it is important to be able to blend in and communicate with others. He also reminded students to always be proactive in sharing ideas and opinions, as it could be an extra step for a company to notice you. Zamarul's talk was very insightful and knowledgeable, and he shared plenty of his experiences for everyone, especially the first year students to understand.

Tan graduated from UTM in June 2019 with a CGPA of 3.92. He has participated in a lot of competitions from his first year of University. Through these competitions, he gained his professional and technical skills and his confidence also has been trained through these competitions. Tan keeps himself motivated by setting his mindset to create something new that contributes to the world. Tan's dedication in participating competitions has brought him the Chancellor Award.

REFLECTION

There are some strengths and weaknesses of this talk. One of the strengths of this talk is this talk conducted online and also being recorded. Since the talk ran online and being recorded, the students or the public are more comfortable attending the talk and can refer back to the recording whenever they need anything from the talk. Moreover, the speakers are just graduated in the past few years. The speakers are more understand the mindset of the younger generation and more comfortable to communicate with them. This will cause the fresh graduates to gain and learn the experience more comfortable. The weakness of this talk is that the time being conducted is too short. There is only one hour to let three speakers share their experience. Therefore, the speakers only share a little bit of their experience instead of the full story. Lastly, we can learn from this talk that we need to improve our soft skills to secure a job, especially in this COVID-19 pandemic. This is because, except for hard skills, soft skills are the most important criteria for a company to hire you.

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