


COMMENTARY

Career days: Dipping your toe in I-O volunteerism

Richard Hense 

Bank of America, Tampa, FL, USA
Email: righthense@hotmail.com

“Professional Hiring Dude.” That was the response from a sixth grader when I asked if anyone knew what PhD stands for. Where I live, they call it the Great American Teach In. Other places call it a Career Day. Many schools schedule a day for people in the community to talk to students about their jobs. The focal article (Tippins et al., 2023) provides a compelling case for pro bono organizational volunteerism. This commentary offers an easy way to start volunteering by providing suggestions for speaking about industrial-organizational psychology in a local school system. If you are worried that industrial-organizational (I-O) won’t be as exciting as firefighting or zookeeping, my experience indicates the experience can be personally rewarding, beneficial to students, and valuable to the profession.

Typically, the presentation audience is a single class and takes 30 minutes to an hour. An overall description of the field should be covered. I often ask younger students if they have heard of psychology and what it means. In one class, a student raised her hand and proudly told us all that she went to a psychologist every week (I love the mental health positivity). Like in our real lives, it is unlikely the students will have heard of I-O psychology, so it is new and potentially interesting information for them. One other critical part of the discussion will be the education required, which can help motivate some to pursue a college path or even a path to graduate school.

Interactivity and real examples are key to an effective presentation. As someone who has been a selection practitioner for 30 years, I focused my talk on selection topics such as interviewing, types of assessment, and even job analysis. One scenario I use frequently is going through the process of designing a selection system for teachers. I start with a “focus group” to determine the critical knowledge skills and abilities (KSAs) required. To get different perspectives, one can ask the teacher or even ask the students what their parents would say. Then, I have a discussion of different ways to assess the skills, which can include tests, minimum education requirements, and, of course, an interview. Conducting a mock interview is another great activity. I’ll ask a volunteer to tell me about themselves and ask a few behavioral interview questions (e.g., tell me about a time you helped a friend or sibling learn how to do something new). This activity also provides the opportunity to give students some coaching on proper interviewee skills, which could serve them well no matter which career path they take. Once I played a game where groups of students picked a job and did a mini job analysis. We all had fun guessing the jobs from the list of KSAs.

The presentation can be adjusted by area of expertise and for the audience. For example, training and performance management experts could also start with job analysis but lead to discussions about developing a training program or methods to measure performance. Work/life balance would certainly be a compelling topic and relevant to students. Many would find data analytics and AI fascinating. All the suggestions above can be adapted for elementary school audiences with slightly more basic explanations and questions. I am certain these younger children will have an opinion on whether Harry Styles or the Big Bad Wolf would make a good teacher. When I did Career Day for a class of 2nd graders, I read *Maybe You Should Fly a Jet! Maybe You*

Should Be a Vet! by Dr. Seuss (1980) to help with the career discussion, and I still did the mock interview.

It is possible that a first Career Day experience will be presented to one's own child's class. My oldest son originally brought the idea to me with a mixture of pride and anxiety. "Please don't embarrass me," he said. As a fourth grader, he was just learning PowerPoint and asked if he could create a deck to share with class. With multiple slides about me sitting in meetings all day going "blah, blah, blah," it was not only accurate, but it was also a great icebreaker.

The teachers for the class are a critical resource. They can give a preview of what to expect from the class and be there to help if things momentarily go a little off base. They can help pick the right kids for role plays or targeted questions. They can also help you with classroom management tips like the ones I learned as the husband of an elementary school educator: Be enthusiastic, ask them questions, do brief "turn and talks" to give the students a chance to interact with each other, encourage them to raise their hand before responding, and touch your nose or use the classic "one, two, three, look at me" to get back their attention. As a side note, bringing branded items for your place of business, even a pencil or pen, is a nice but unnecessary touch.

The benefits of participation are varied. The I-O psychologist may get a few laughs and stories along with the positive feelings from the prosocial behavior. The students in the class gain knowledge, connections between what they are studying and the real world, broader perspective on careers, and encouragement for some to study hard to go to college. The field of I-O can also benefit. SIOP strategic goals (Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, n.d.) related to increasing awareness of I-O and increasing diversity within the field can be positively impacted.

One of the best things about volunteering in a school system is that it can be initiated today. Call a neighborhood school or a school in your region with a diverse population. Even if they don't have a career day, they may have a psychology or AP psychology class with a teacher who would love an expert to come share their experience. Perhaps, by volunteering this year one might inspire someone who will be writing their own commentary for *IOP* a few years from now.

References

- Seuss, Dr. (1980). *Maybe you should fly a jet! Maybe you should be a vet!* Random House Books for Young Readers.
- Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology. (n.d.). *SIOP vision, mission, values and goals*. <https://www.siop.org/About-SIOP/Mission>
- Tippins, N., Hakel, M., Grabow, K., Kolmstetter, E., Moses, J., Oliver, D., & Scontrino, P. (2023). I-O psychologists and volunteer work. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, *16*(4), 421–432.