Career Coach Helps McHenry County College Students Convert Strengths to Careers

Longtime career services professional Daniel Ortego has seen his fair share of strength-finder and career exploration tools. But in June 2017, he joined McHenry County College in Northeastern Illinois as coordinator of career services—and found one tool that distinguished itself above the rest: Emsi’s Career Coach.

“In my 13 years in career services, Career Coach is the best tool I’ve used,” said Ortego.

A number of unique features stood out to Ortego, including Career Coach’s regularly updated job opening and wage data, which is tailored to MCC’s region. But the real strength of the tool is how it combines this in-depth career data with speed and ease of use.

**INSTANT FEEDBACK + NEXT STEPS = EMPOWERED STUDENTS**

For example, Career Coach includes a self-assessment based on John Holland’s theory of personality that helps users identify their top three traits (see below). Unlike other programs that Ortego used in the past, Career Coach gives students and community members instant feedback when they finish the assessment, immediately mapping their results to various industries and careers.

Just as importantly, Career Coach also connects those careers to programs at MCC, providing students with a clear pathway to pursue their goals. As Ortego put it, current and future students value Career Coach because it helps them answer the critical question, “Here’s the job I want; am I on track or not?”
COLLEGE AND CAREER GOALS—THEY’RE NOT JUST FOR HIGH SCHOOL GRADS

Ortego also uses Career Coach to counsel community members who might be looking to change careers or re-enter the job market. After all, as a community college, MCC is committed to providing services to local residents in all stages of life—not just 18-year-old high school graduates.

For example, Ortego works with older adults coming to MCC to pursue their GED. These students are usually highly motivated to grow professionally but don’t always know which career to pursue. Ortego uses Career Coach to help them identify available jobs in their area and see what it takes to qualify for those positions.

This is an eye-opening conversation for many of these nontraditional students. Some are motivated to go beyond the GED to an associate’s degree or even a bachelor’s. Others discover that the job they thought they wanted requires more formal education than they’re interested in.

Fortunately, Career Coach enables users to filter by required level of education when browsing careers. This gives all students the ability to discover careers and academic programs that fit their personalities, goals, and life situations.

“They know they have to do something more—maybe a certificate program or associate’s degree,” said Ortego. “Either way, they see that this is reachable.”

KNOW THYSELF—LAND THAT JOB

Ortego also uses Career Coach to prepare students for job interviews. In one recent appointment, he asked a student the classic interview question: “Tell me about your strengths.” The student replied, “I don’t know what they are.”

Ortego reminded him of the Career Coach assessment that had identified his top three traits. Ortego pointed out that these results can not only guide him to a suitable career, they can also indicate why he’s likely to excel in that line of work. This approach “sets our students apart and helps them think more deeply about their strengths,” Ortego explained to Emsi.

The result? Instead of using well-worn phrases like “hard working,” a student can tell a prospective employer, “I’m enterprising, so I find myself confident, outgoing, and optimistic about the task at hand.” This guidance is especially valuable for students in MCC’s ESL program who typically have a limited English vocabulary and might otherwise struggle to express themselves adequately in a job interview.
GETTING THE WORD OUT

No matter how good a tool is, it can’t help anyone if nobody uses it. That’s one reason MCC requires all full-time students to complete MCC-101: The College Experience. The eight-week course is designed to equip new students for success and help them get the most out of their time at MCC. As career services coordinator, Ortego visits these classes to introduce his department’s resources. In fact, some faculty now request specifically that he include Career Coach in his presentation.

MCC promoted Career Coach campus-wide by distributing posters and flyers. The school’s public relations team also put together a press release, and the school placed a link on its career services page. Ortego verifies the effectiveness of these efforts by checking the usage analytics reports available in Career Coach’s administrator dashboard.

WHY IT MATTERS

While this data is useful, at the end of the day, it’s not about the number of clicks. For Ortego and McHenry County College, it’s about helping people of all backgrounds find meaningful work and equipping them with the skills to continue growing for a lifetime.

“That’s the part I enjoy most about career services,” said Ortego. “Helping people and finding tools that I can use to make things easier for them.”