How Does Philosophy Relate to My Career?

People today often emphasize "marketability" when they talk about a university education. It would be a mistake to think that this is -- or should be -- all there is to university, but prospective students (and their parents) may still wonder how philosophy relates to marketability. If marketability means learning what will make you an attractive candidate for employment, then philosophy has a great deal to offer.

There is no doubt that an education in business, commerce, finance, marketing, economics, etc., provide immediate skills and practical tools for finding entry-level employment. Philosophy does not emphasize such skills but it provides an ideal atmosphere in which one can develop the more basic abilities on which they depend. Philosophy is irrelevant to marketability only if learning how to think, analyze, and communicate ideas clearly is inapplicable to workaday life. Philosophy is out of date only if being able to form and defend an opinion is no longer a valuable ability. And philosophy is a practically without value only if maturing through an education is useless and outmoded. All of these traits and abilities are important, indeed essential, if one wants to be a marketable employment prospect -- and, of course, a well-educated, mature, articulate, and thoughtful person.

Not everyone agrees that philosophy is the right route to success in the work world, but many experts argue that a well rounded education is the best basis for a career. In a Globe and Mail article "What it Takes to Make a Million," (April 24, 1996), Janet McFarland comments on such views:

Management guru Henry Mintzberg, who divides his time between McGill University and the European business school INSEAD, has long criticized business school education for future CEOs and is particularly withering about MBA programs. But he admits it is hard to advise young would-be leaders to avoid business programs when recruiters favour them so much. He would want companies to look for other training in future leaders, arguing business skills cannot be taught in a classroom and are not easily transferred between companies. "I would get a university degree, not in business, but in philosophy or history, or geography, or whatever you like. Just learn to think," he says. "Then get into an industry or organization or sphere you really like and work your way up by learning to lead."

Why might someone like Mintzberg call for a return to basics? Why a solid undergraduate grounding in the areas of thought and analysis, before the jump into business or any leadership-driven, top management position? There are many possible answers to these questions. It may be that leadership and top success depends on skills which are less job-specific and more general: thinking logically, analysing critically, as well as being able to communicate articulately and precisely both orally and in writing.
Here's an excerpt from an article by a businessman who makes the same point in THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION in 1982.

My company took a contract to extract beryllium from a mine in Arizona. I called in several consulting engineers and asked, 'Can you furnish a chemical or electrolytic process that can be used at the mine site to refine directly from ore?' Back came a report saying that I was asking for the impossible -- a search of the computer tapes had indicated that no such process existed.

I paid the engineers for their work. Then I hired a student from Stanford University who was home for the summer. He was majoring in Latin American history with a minor in philosophy.

I gave him an airplane and a credit card and told him, 'Go to Denver and research the Bureau of Mines archives and locate a process for the recovery of beryllium.' He left on Monday. I forgot to tell him that I was sending him for the possible. He came back on Friday. He handed me a pack of notes and booklets and said, 'Here is the process. It was developed 33 years ago at a government research station at Rolla, Mo.' He then continued, 'And here also are other processes for the recovery of mica, strontium, columbium, and yttrium, which also exist as residual ores that contain beryllium.' After one week of research, he was making sounds like a metallurgical expert.

He is now back in school, but I am keeping track of him. When other companies are interviewing the engineering and the business-administration mechanics, I'll be there looking for that history-and-philosophy major.

Thomas Hurka discusses these same issues in his short essay "How to Get to the Top: Study Philosophy" (Principles; Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1994).

How should Canada educate students to compete successfully in the business world? Some provincial governments think it is by teaching them business.... Recent evidence suggests this approach is mistaken. We will produce better managers if we educate them first in traditional subjects in the arts and sciences. We may do best of all if we educate them in philosophy.... Consider the GMAT, used for admission to MBA programs and, ultimately, to the highest levels of management.

Undergraduate business students, who you'd think would be especially well prepared for this test, do badly on it, scoring below the average for all test takers. The best results are by math students, followed by philosophy students and engineers.... According to a book by Michael Useem, they [arts and science students] have more difficulty finding beginning managerial jobs than those with business or professional degrees because they lack specific skills in finance or engineering. When they are hired, it is usually lower in the company hierarchy.

Once hired, however, they advance more rapidly than their colleagues.... What explains the success of arts and science students?... Corporations report that, although technical skills are most important in low-level managerial jobs, they become less so in middle and top jobs, where the key traits include communications skills, the ability to formulate problems, and reasoning skills. Liberal arts education may be weak in the prerequisites for beginning managerial jobs but provides just what's needed for success at the top.

This doesn't mean there's no place for business education. Canadian industry needs specialized business skills, and our universities should supply them. But in the increasingly competitive world economy there will be a premium on vision, creativity, and analytical power, traits better fostered by liberal education.
This points to the recommendation now heard most from chief executive officers: first an arts and science degree in a field like English, physics, or philosophy, then an MBA. First some general intellectual skills, then the specific knowledge needed to apply them in business.... And this will have another effect. Students educated in the liberal arts will be more rounded individuals, knowing more about the natural world or the history of their culture and better at reasoning about morality and politics: at the very least, a nice side-effect.

Hurka does not aim to drive a stake into the heart of undergraduate business education. He emphasizes that such training helps business stay competitive. But it would be a mistake to overlook the importance of "general intellectual skills" at high levels of business management. Because these intellectual skills can be learned through a philosophy education, it may be a prudent business decision to take philosophy.

But business is not the only area of work which is open to students in philosophy. Some philosophy undergraduates decide to further their education in philosophy (through a master's and/or doctorate degree) and as a result, become qualified to teach at the university or college levels. If you would like to see the kinds of jobs available to people with graduate degrees in philosophy click here: Jobs in Philosophy

Because philosophy provides such a comprehensive undergraduate foundation, other graduates of a philosophy program have the freedom to pursue a variety of professions or graduate degrees. Some examples include,

- Law
- Management
- Medicine
- Applied Ethics
- Business
- Politics
- Education
- Art/Aesthetics
- Journalism
- Religion and Culture
- Communications
- Sociology
- Teacher's College
- Divinity

Here's what Anthony Lemieux, a former Laurier student and now a law student at the University of Alberta, has to say to prospective lawyers: "Philosophy is an excellent pre-law program. It is one of the few disciplines that develops analytical thinking skills that are quite nicely transferable to learning the law. I noticed immediately that I had a bit of an edge in that way."

So what types of careers do philosophy graduates go on to pursue? This is like asking what kinds of sports well-trained athletes compete in. The answer, in both cases, is anything they want! Because philosophy graduates are strong in the areas of reasoning and problem-solving, the employment possibilities are virtually limitless.