Q&A with a Social Impact Alum:

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Kellogg’s Career Management Center reached out to some Social Impact alums to find out things like: what they expects a student to know before they reach out, what skills Social Impact firms look for, what backgrounds make a good fit in the Social Impact space and what career path led them to Social Impact. Below are their answers:

What is the hardest part and/or what suggestions do you have about breaking into the Social Impact industry?

SJ: A lot of people assume that "Social Impact" is an 'industry' but it's really not - there are a multitude of functions, roles, organizations and issue areas in both the for-profit and non-profit space. The hardest part I'd say is being patient in your search for the right internship or full-time opportunity. My advice: do the work to figure out: 1) what you want to do; 2) what you bring to the table; and 3) what gaps there are between #1 and #2. There are numerous things you can do at Kellogg itself to close that gap!

CA: Very few (if any) social impact focused organizations have the size and volume of recruiting to warrant an on campus presence. As a result, Kellogg students will need to be more proactive to make connections – go on treks, reach out to alums (from Kellogg and undergrad), use your summer to network in whatever city you find yourself, etc.

What do you wish you had done while at Kellogg to better prepare you for the industry?

CA: Oddly, I did not really engage in many social impact activities at Kellogg. I think Board Fellows was my lone related activity. But context matters. When I came to Kellogg, I did not know anything about business, I was a middle school teacher and wilderness trip leader before Kellogg. I literally told people that my goal was to get a 'business job' because that was the extent of my knowledge. So I had bigger deficits in my own skill set that Kellogg was uniquely positioned to help me close than social impact. All to say I am happy with the choices I made, but people with other backgrounds should probably be taking social impact courses (and it sounds like there are now a lot to choose from), engaging in career treks, Net Impact, etc.
What was your route into Social Impact if not direct from Kellogg?

CA: I spent a few years at Bain & Company after Kellogg. This was an important experience for me because after business school I wanted to do a ‘business residency’ and Bain was a great place to do that. I was able to work in a wide array of industries, with a healthy mix of company sizes and strategy and operational projects. This gave me a great foundation to apply to the work I do today at Bridgespan which I joined directly from Bain.

What types of backgrounds do Social Impact companies look for?

SJ: It really depends! My advice would be to assess each job based on the description and recommended or required qualifications. If you are looking at an organization that doesn't have a specific job description written out, try and think more about what you can bring to the table based on your background and Kellogg skill set!

CA: In general, social impact firms are looking for people that will be amazing at whatever function they are being hired for and that they are passionate about the issues they will be working on. So a social impact consulting firm will be looking for people with the same skills as a Bain or McKinsey paired with a passion for reducing inequities in the world. An impact investing firm will be looking for a great investor paired with a passion for the kind of impact that fund can have.

At Bridgespan, we have a wide array of backgrounds. At the consultant level, we hire people with MBAs, MPHs, MPPs, and, to a lesser extent, JDs and PhDs. Their pre-grad school experiences vary widely – some were already doing social impact work, some were in consulting, some were in finance, etc. It is quite varied. We also actively look for candidates of color and candidates who were first generation college students. Many organizations seek out diversity in these ways, in social impact it feels even more important so our teams can be more representative of the communities we serve.

What skills/attributes do strong candidates have?

CA: At Bridgespan, we tend to look for five things: analytical skill, effective communications, team player, passion for the cause/work, and someone that adds a unique perspective to our team. The first three are pretty much identical to what the major consulting firms are looking for in top candidates.

What should students already know before having a conversation with alumni?
SJ: Please, pretty please, know a little bit about the organization the alum works for - it's really disheartening to talk to a student whose first question is "so what does [XYZ org] do?" You are of course not expected to know everything, but have specific questions in mind about the org first. Secondly, unless you've reached out to the alum about a specific job, do not assume that there is one. Frame the conversation around your learning, and follow-up later if you think you'd be interested in working there.

CA: Students should know the basics about the person’s background and their organization. That way the student can ask more targeted questions. The difference about how an alum will perceive a student who simply asks, “Tell me about your path to xxx” vs. “I know you did x and y on your way to your current role. The second transition seems like it might have been really challenging and parallels what I think I may encounter. Can you tell me more about that?” is pretty significant. The second person will leave a lasting impression.

What are your suggestions for transforming a networking conversation to an employment opportunity?

CA: A key to this is building trust and showing you can add value. People often try to do this by advocating for themselves and touting their experience. It is often more compelling the use inquiry to really understand the business and challenges the potential employer is facing and to get the potential employer talking to you more candidly. Then you can both build trust and understand what they really need, positioning yourself accordingly.

What are roles post-graduation that are viable?

CA: Would imagine the CMC has actual data on this so you should focus on that vs. my perception. Seems like roles in impact consulting, impact investing, at a handful of foundations or bi/multilaterals, domestic education, and social enterprises are all viable. One that should be viable, but seems to get discussed less would be roles at large domestic and global NGOs.