

Team 3 - Sparc Background Research

Client Overview:

Sparc is a dynamic career-centric social network and talent platform, founded by Laurel Djoukeng, in 2019 in Washington DC. Since its beta launch in May 2023, Sparc has experienced rapid growth, accumulating over 4,000 users, establishing partnerships with 60+ SaaS (Software as a Service) customers, and onboarding 50+ coaches and tutors. The platform's primary focus is to foster meaningful connections between students, young professionals, and employers. This is achieved through various initiatives, including organizing career exploration and job interview preparation events, facilitating on-demand career coaching with industry experts, and hosting employer recruitment events alongside providing job search recommendations. Sparc's innovative approach aims to alleviate the challenges faced by students in their job search, making it more efficient and effective. Also, Sparc enables partnerships between collegiate organizations and employers, streamlining the communication process, and creating a comprehensive platform for professional growth and networking.

Sparc aims to address the challenges faced by both students and employers through its feature offering. For students, it tackles issues such as outdated job listings, limited access to employers, and inadequate support from university career centers. Concurrently, Sparc assists employers in navigating complex relationships with career centers and student clubs, streamlining candidate filtration, ensuring diversity, and optimizing resource allocation. By providing a direct channel for college students and professionals to connect with employers, Sparc envisions itself as the future of the workforce and talent marketplace.

Sparc is gearing up to launch a new feature in October that will facilitate partnerships between employers and student clubs. By fostering direct connections between hiring managers and students, Sparc aims to streamline this process and solve problems on both ends of the spectrum. Sparc is also focused on improving the overall user experience of the connection process, ensuring that it feels intuitive and meets the needs of all users.

Success for Sparc is defined by the acquisition of a substantial user base on both ends of the platform and establishing a strong foothold in the professional networking sphere. In tandem with this objective, Sparc is proactively seeking feedback to enhance the user experience and make the platform as robust as possible.

Key Players:

1. Laurel Djoukeng

- Role: CEO (Chief Executive Officer)
- Education:
- MBA (Master of Business Administration), MLT fellow, 2018-2020 (Duke University – The Fuqua School of Business)
- Bachelors, Accounting, 2004-2008 (Hampton University)
- Work Experience summary: Founder/CEO Sparc (since 2019), Former Investment Banker, Private Equity Analyst & Social Entrepreneur Business Development

2. Florin Relea

- Role: CTO
- Education: Certificate, Information Technology (Vasile Sav Technology School)
- Work experience summary: Full Stack Engineer with 8 years' experience
- Technical skills: Proficient in JavaScript, C#, and Go; building user-friendly interfaces in React.js and scalable servers in Node.js.
- Project Portfolio: <https://florinrelea.dev/>

Stakeholders:

For the stakeholders involved, they can be categorized as follows:

1. Job seekers:

- a. **Individual students:** Their interests include finding relevant internships and networking with potential employers.
- b. **Young professionals:** For those wishing to pivot or transition roles in their early career.
- c. **Collegiate organizations:** They partner with the platform to provide their students with additional career resources and opportunities that match their members' profile and needs.

2. Companies:

- a. **Hiring managers:** They are interested in connecting with qualified students, participating in recruiting events, and networking to fill their talent needs by reaching out to clubs from prestigious universities.

3. Career Coaches:

Professionals wishing to volunteer their time to train and mentor upcoming professionals.

4. Sparc:

- a. Laurel Djoukeng - CEO
- b. Florin Relea – CTO

Resources:

1. User Experience best practices:

- <https://lucidspark.com/blog/ux-design-best-practices>

This article lays emphasis on the importance of UX design best practices. It talks about empathizing with the user to create designs that are consistent and user-friendly.

- <https://www.uxpin.com/studio/blog/guide-design-consistency-best-practices-ui-ux-designers/>

This article talks about the importance of design consistency in UI/UX. It tells us that following best UX design practices is not sufficient and that testing and prototyping is equally important.

2. Psychology behind UI/UX:

- <https://youtu.be/fdXI9yznzz8?si=LsgRXnxjIP417wj1>

This video delves into how psychology plays a crucial role in UI/UX. It discusses how tech companies are making design decisions to make products more appealing.

3. How to evaluate user experience?

- https://medium.com/@AmDee_Elyssa/measuring-the-user-experience-of-a-website-a58d5ce41db9

The article emphasizes the importance of tracking the right metrics to ensure that a website's user experience aligns with broader business goals, contributing to its success.

- <https://www.forbes.com/sites/theyec/2020/01/03/how-to-evaluate-your-user-experience-ux-to-grow-your-business/?sh=44bf00f32fe3>

The article stresses the critical role of user experience (UX) in marketing and sales, extending beyond visual design to the core of user interactions. It entails considerations like usability, value, and accessibility.

4. How do you interview users when seeking feedback about user experience?

- <https://www.userinterviews.com/blog/the-ultimate-guide-to-doing-kickass-customer-interviews>

The article stresses the use of qualitative insights from customer interviews to validate quantitative data, and vice versa.

5. Feature-specific approaches and best practices

- <https://pencilandpaper.io/articles/ux-pattern-analysis-enterprise-filtering/>

This article provides the best practices for designing and implementing filtering – which is an essential component of a job board website. It focuses on the importance of intuitive design and proposes techniques to implement it.

Insights:

The above resources cover a series of concepts on the process of understanding the user and creating better UX, which is at the core of this challenge. To achieve the end goal, we must understand and adopt tenets from each of these disciplines. A few key ones are listed as follows:

- **Design Consistency:** A uniform design across the product fosters trust and user adaptability. While the platform can be used for multiple types of purposes and interactions, it is important to model the same experience across different sections. This is important to ensure the product feels cohesive and polished.
- **Evaluate user experience:** Leveraging a top-down UX strategy, we prioritize user intent and actionable behaviors, equipping our client to refine user journeys effectively.
- **Psychological Principles:** Incorporate insights from psychology to make designs more appealing and emotionally engaging. It is important that we understand how users perceive and interact with design elements of the product.

- **Filtering Best Practices:** For job board websites, focus on intuitive design for filtering features. Implement techniques that simplify the user's ability to refine search results and find relevant information quickly.

List of competitive offerings and how they solve the problem:

1. Engaging University Students for Job Opportunities

- **Current Landscape:** Typically, recruiters liaise with the university's career team, leading to blanket announcements and attracting a broad and often mismatched student audience.
- **Sparc's Solution:** Sparc targets university clubs, ensuring the right students are reached. Clubs then fine-tune candidate selection based on goals and expertise.

2. Direct Connection Between Student Clubs and Companies

- **Current Landscape:** Student clubs traditionally require career team mediation to engage with recruiters, causing delays and inefficiencies.
- **Sparc's Solution:** Sparc streamlines this process by offering a direct yet formalized channel for clubs to connect with companies. This ensures no inundation of recruiters with redundant communication while accelerating engagement.

3. Efficient Talent Acquisition

- **Current Landscape:** Recruiters face the daunting task of sifting through vast application pools, consuming considerable time, especially when quick hires are imperative.
- **Sparc's Solution:** Sparc facilitates direct outreach to esteemed university clubs, ensuring access to a refined candidate pool. Club leaders can further assist recruiters by aligning candidates based on specified job requirements.

4. Streamlined Job Postings for Student Organizations

- **Current Landscape:** General job platforms cater to the masses, neglecting the niche talent pools within student organizations.
- **Sparc's Solution:** Sparc enables employers to engage multiple student organizations with a singular action, ensuring efficient talent sourcing. This specialized outreach saves invaluable time and ensures targeted candidate engagement.

5. Proactive Engagement by Student Organizations

- **Current Landscape:** Established platforms primarily favor employers, providing limited avenues for educational institutions, particularly students, to initiate engagement.
- **Sparc's Solution:** Sparc empowers student organizations to proactively approach potential employers. Whether it is requesting informational sessions or suggesting extended collaborations, Sparc facilitates a two-way engagement, fostering synergy between academia and the corporate world.

Areas of Observation:

To understand the user journey through a job-seeking platform like Sparc, we will have to observe and document interactions between students and the job platforms, as well as with collegiate organizations. However, this must be performed without any intervention or personal bias affecting the activity. The various parties that are to be observed as follows:

- 1. Observing individual job seekers**
 - a. Their job search process
 - b. Networking goals and benefits
- 2. Observing collegiate organizations**
 - a. Their event structures
 - b. Interactions with recruiters
 - c. Value delivered to students
- 3. Recruiters**
 - a. Their streamlining process
 - b. Outreach to colleges

All these observations will be performed via either uninterrupted observation or interviews with the concerned party or both. The university career center will also be used as a resource to source information on user behavior and tendencies.