Heather: Hello this is Heather Sprandel with the Walton College Career Development Center and I am joined today by Sara Yell and Renee Clay also of the Walton College Career Center. And then we have a guest who is a recent alum, and we are proud that he has joined us today. His name is Ram that is what I call him because I would butcher his name otherwise, so hopefully he will clarify how to say his name correctly. And we are very, very excited for him to join us today as he helps us understand contract work and his success is seeking contract work and working within it currently. So let’s welcome our guest Ram and please help me say your name correctly for listeners.

Ram: So my name is Ramanathan Chandrasekaran, but as Heather pronounced it you can all call me Ram.

H: Great, thank you. Okay so let’s just get started with our first question. Would you please provide us with a brief sketch of your education and professional background?

R: I was working in India for Wipro Technology for about two and a half years before I decided to do my MBA. And Wipro Technology was specializing in IT development and engineering. So I was part of their consulting team in Chennai, India and I was helping them to get things them, to get (inaudible) done and some testing and developing work. And once I completed my MBA in spring of 2008 I moved to Seattle were I got a contract position with Microsoft and from then on I have been working with Microsoft as a contractor.

H: Okay, great. Did you attempt to find a full-time position that would provide you with H1-B sponsorship after graduation and how did your pursuit of that type of employment go?

R: Yes, defiantly applied for a full-time position. I started my full-time search in Fayetteville and most of the companies out there paid well. So most of them kind of knew of the potential to sponsor me for that. Most are allowed an H1 transfer; however I knew that an H1 sponsor wasn’t real well known fact for the companies around Fayetteville. So, the problem was not a that... I would say that the H1 is a specialized form of worker visa. So most of the companies out there didn’t need such kind of promotion to really look for such special attributes. Especially with IT, H1 really go with IT. There was one company Wal-Mart. They were hiring H1 visa holder, but there were not doing new H1 hires. They were only open to H1 transfer. So pretty much in and around Fayetteville they were not very welcoming for people who need an H1 sponsor. But outside Fayetteville, especially in areas near New Chelsea and San Francisco, and big cities like Chicago, Seattle H1 is a common thing. And most the people who end up in IT are more of a bio-American industry that request a specialized type of worker. And there are companies that are open to new H1 sponsorships and you are pretty much considered on par with the other employees, except for the H1 sponsorship.

H: Okay, well in regards to contract works. What exactly is exactly is that, what is contract employment?

R: Contract employment is more of a concept than a road. The company hires a person to get a project accomplished. For example, I do a product management of, project management role in a division of Microsoft called Global Formation Services who take care of Microsoft data servers. In a nut shell, I would say that it more of a customer profile. I provide a new idea, from the outside, about the system. And most the contract works are intended to meet a business’ needs at that period of time. So the contracts usually have a duration of a year or two years or five years. But it is more of a temporary capacity for that type of fulltime work.
H: Okay, and how did you go about pursuing the contract position that you are in?

R: So these contract positions generally show up on all of these job websites. Like Monstor.com or what other websites. (inaudible) or other websites that are available out there for jobs. These contract positions are equally short of a... on door site, but the difference is these contract positions are sponsored by the contract companies or a staffing companies. And you get the first round of interviews with a staffing company and the next round with the next round the company that you work for.

H: Okay, and what was the staffing company you used?

R: I used CORESTAFF and they are from Texas.

H: And do they specialize in IT staffing?

R: No, they do all kinds of staffing, IT included. So the CORESTAFF company typically has around 40 offices throughout the US. And they are headquartered out of Texas, as I said before and they are 14 or 15 million dollar company. And you typically find resources for the company, for example in Texas; they work with the most of the oil companies to meet their staffing needs. In Seattle, we have like 40 different corporations one of them is Microsoft, Dell, and ViaNetworks. And a AT&T, (inaudible), so they pretty much help these companies with their temporary staff needs.

H: And do you work full-time and how long is your contract for?

R: So my contract was for one year, when I joined. With one for 6-months when I joined, but now it has been extended to one year. So, my contract goes until August of this coming year, 2009. And a... year, does that answer your question?

H: Yes, so are you working on OPT time currently?

R: Yes, so particularly the process is once you finish your graduation you get an OPT card. And an OPT card allows you to go ahead with any employment. It doesn’t mandate any particulars, like the E-80 card. But, it is only available for a year. So you can work for any company and most create 4-5. But your job should be kind of (inaudible). My gut feeling is if it is not being advocated. So people generally wind up lining up positions that they would like to or they fight. And with location preferences they would they would be fine to take up positions which are available in that location. So the process starts with an OPT card. The OPT card allows you to start working. The next step is you can apply for an H1. And in the month of April you apply for your H1 and in October you get your H1. So as soon as you get your H1 you are free to work off your OPT. And once you get your H1 your can work on your H1-B.

H: So would you suggest to an International Student who is having a hard time finding their H1-B, to in the mean time on their OPT, work in a contract position while trying to find a position that offers full-time H1-B sponsorship.

R: Yes, there are actually two ways to look at doing the (inaudible) and two if you wind up in a company who are open to doing H1 sponsors. You have a very good chance of obtaining a contract position. Microsoft also interviews three candidates to hire again; they select characteristics that they like about that person. Then of the three candidates interviewed they offer the position to one. But they are on par with a full-time employee. So the interview process is the same, but just be more confident how
long this position goes then with everything on it. So using somebody, like an agency to get it done and once they are liking the employee they are going to go ahead and give an offer to them. So if you are enjoying your job and like your job they are more likely to offer you a position. But, again it is a two way if you like the job you get an offer and if you don’t like the job you can go ahead and start applying elsewhere. So that is a first aspect and the second aspect is to come out of graduate school and go on fulltime.

H: Yeah, it sounds like it is also a good opportunity for an employer whose not sure if you’re a good fit or not. To have you on a trial basis and then decide if you are worth keeping.

R: Right, so, it’s a trial for both of you, employee and employer. So both of you can have a trial and the employer can see the aspects of you provide. And the employee can see if you would really like to do the job in the future. So that could give the room for a stop gap arrangement and kind of goal achieved.

H: Now if we are realistic and we know the challenges of securing H1-B. Do you find that there would be benefits for students to work in a contract position using their OPT and then taking that experience and going to another country or back to their home country with that experience?

R: Yes, I would say some aspects Heather. One is that you can take the experience back to your country. I don’t know how far some of the aspects are going to help you in that country. But, the point here is once you are employed, there are lots of companies out there to sponsor your H1. So these are like one step visa staffing agencies, specializing in H1. So once you have your papers, including your bills, you’re ready to go get your H1. And once you get your H1 you automatically get that transferred to that company you work for. For example, I work for CORESTAFF and they don’t do my H1. So I find a little company called Hedge and I then get them my H1. Once they know that I’ve got my H1, because you never know until you get your H1. But, once they know that I have my H1 I get my contract transferred to company X and I can start working on this profile. You get my point.

H: Um, sort of. May be you can clarify that a little bit more for our listeners so. And let me say it back to you to see if I understand it clearly. CORESTAFF is unable to process an H1, so you have gone to another agency to try to sponsor an H1.

R: That is correct.

H: And what is the name of that agency again?

R: There lots of agencies out there. But the one I am going with is Siemens IT.

H: Okay. And so, are they actually sponsoring you?

R: Yes.

H: Okay. There sponsoring you as a contract worker.

R: Yes.

H: I see. Well that’s exciting. So you’re on...
R: CORESTAFF doesn’t do H1, they are a staffing company helping you find a H1 company. Unfortunately I have not been in a company that does do H1. But there are staffing companies that do H1. So I am a CORESTAFF employee and after I obtain my H1 I am fine.

H: But they don’t, so you found one that they do?

R: But if they don’t you can actually ship the appointment to a different company to handle the H1.

H: I see. That’s good, okay.

R: So the point that I am trying to make here is once you are in employment the companies are after you. Instead of you being after companies for jobs.

H: Exactly, they like what they see so they are willing to move that contract to another agency.

R: So the working model is the company gets a pay from Microsoft and they typically have a margin of pay that month and then give the rest to us. A margin really anywhere from 70% or $80,000. And I would not say that 70% or $80,000 would stick. I would between $50,000 and $80,000 that is what the market standard is. So the company typically has a margin on right, starting on $50,000 to $80,000. A company may have a margin of 30% or they may have a margin of 50%. So you may get $3,000 cut of what Microsoft pays or you may get $5,000 cut of what Microsoft pays. Do you get my point?

H: Do you get my point? And so when you switch your contract over to Siemens, will they keep you as contract labor.

R: No, there are two things that I don’t think you have got the point yet. For Siemens and CORESTAFF I am an employee. That is for Microsoft I am a contractor. So there are two things here. So there are two companies here. The first company is the company that I actually work for CORESTAFF and I am an employee of CORESTAFF. The second, but I don’t work at that location, I work for someone else. That is Microsoft in this case. So the company that I am working for has to do the H1. In this case CORESTAFF doesn’t to do the H1, so I work for Siemens IT. And Siemens IT has agreed to do the H1, so I am still an employee but I work at Microsoft.

H: Yeah, and that is where that really comes into play as we started our conversation. Is you are representative as a consultant.

R: Yes

H: I see and that is very clear now.

R: As long as they have a me, they [U.S. Customs & Immigration] don’t need any companies other than Siemens IT or CORESTAFF or whoever does this. (inaudible) move to any companies.

H: Okay that’s great. What general advice do you have for international students who are pursuing student’s employment especially as you have seen how tough the economy is right now?

R: That is not one of the easiest questions to answer.
H: We thought we would leave the hardest one for last.

R: I would say that you should start looking for possible, searching for positions that are available and applying for them. The second thing is you have to move with whatever you have, not being very particular with the job that you would like to do. And yes that goes for the industry too. For example I was really focused on doing something in the perspective retail, but I wasn’t able to really to realize something in that field. So I had to go back to IT experience that I had, my experience in IT was. So it’s really what the experiences you have that affect your job. And kind of I am pretty much worried about that because big companies, especially as contract positions. Companies are looking at what skills you have and stuff. So I think given this tough economy they should be able to sell what they have and stuff looking for something. And IT is kind of doing okay compared to the other sectors. So IT is a good bet and bio and health is a good bet. And manufacturing and financial are out of the picture so I think I would go with these other industries. Is this the kind of answer for targeting a tough industry you were thinking of?

H: Certainly those who are domestic students will look at federal government jobs. There are various agencies that fall under the government umbrella that are growing, so those are opportunities. But for international students defiantly information systems, transportation still is not suffering quite as bad as some of the other disciplines, accounting is still doing moderately well.

R: So people get good pay and so if students are willing to take something to take something on contract that would be great. But the demand of it to the experience of the degree like the Walton school has like a MAcc degree to hire you. Compared to some of the other forms an MBA is not really viewed as a (inaudible).

H: No of course not. Well Ram thank you very much for of your time. If there is parting words you would like to share with international students.

R: So, I am not sure that I really summarized what a contract worker is. So I would like to highlight some kinds of things about that work. One of the benefits of that work really missed when I was talking. So the benefits are kind of on similar to what the company gives. In fact it is on par with what the company gives. And the extra benefits like taking the bus and train systems and are on par with what the Microsoft employees get. That is the good thing about contract work. And you work at the location of Microsoft. So you are going to work with people who work fulltime at Microsoft. So working in the location everything is going to be the same as a fulltime employee. So the only difference is going to be your e-mail ID that is going to be different. That does kind of differentiate you and indicate whether you are an employee or a contractor. So companies, specifically IT companies, have 25-35% of their workforce are contractors. For example, Microsoft has 90,000 fulltime employees and 20,000 contract workers. So it is not like you are a minority here you’re as big as employees themselves.

H: Ram, just one second. Okay Ram you were telling about the benefits about being of contract work with Microsoft and how many employees that Microsoft actually has that are contractors. That is amazing I didn’t realize that there were that many. But it sounds like you are a part of the team at Microsoft just as a full time employee is, is that right?

R: So again there are different levels of contracts that allow you to be fulltime or not. I am in the level that I am working only with the fulltime employees, so most of the meetings I go to, there are 10-15 people in the meeting there are probably no other contractors in the meeting. So this is the first level of
contract. The second level of contract is where the company goes to you and you do the work and send it back. So that is the type of work where they give you work to be done and you get it done. So there are two kinds of contracts here. Since mine has a business profile I typically doing the first one, rather than the second one. I work with a team of MBAs from a university here in Washington to consult with Microsoft. So typically I have access to all of the strategies and typically I try to come up with new strategies. So there is no information on (inaudible). I would like to change the contract work to do with something that is not done by a fulltime employee. Since they don’t have any funding for a fulltime employee at this point or right hire, I just go with a contract position.

H: So you are defiantly a specialized member of the team. Can you tell us what the process was for you to be interviewed? It sounds like you were interviewed first by CORESTAFF and then did you move on to an interview by Microsoft.

R: Yes I saw the position with CORESTAFF and I called them up and told them I was interested in that position. So I had the first interview with CORESTAFF people and that was more of a formal interview.

H: Was that a face-to-face interview?

R: Yes, that was in April and I told them what my background is and they wanted know about the company profile. They informed me of who was possibly going to hire me. So they essentially were trying to hire me before the company that would hire me would hire me. And the next day was the interview with Microsoft. I interviewed, there are three offices, with the different offices. They took about two weeks’ time when interviewed other people and got back with me. So the interviewed asked us about contract position turnaround times. The time at which they give you vary because contract positions are typically close to two weeks time. So the third week you are in a contract position, because there are a lot of contract companies competing for that person. The process is that Microsoft opens that position and they typically find people to place in that position. The hiring manager finds 3-5 candidates, interviews them, and then chooses 1 of them. The whole process can take 2 weeks, so within 2 weeks you know if you got the position or not.

H: Yeah, that is a benefit to you though because they move very quickly.

R: Yes, that is the good thing about contract positions. And if you find a fulltime position while you are here, it is like a one day notice and you are the only person that goes for that position. You don’t have to be put through all of the industry standards. So that’s the good thing about them and once you are in the positions and once you know all the people and are going well you are highly likely to obtain a fulltime position. But, for the economy my view is the economy is kind of really in the crack because of the Microsoft had a bad quarter and are expecting another bad quarter and laid off 5,000+. So it’s a series of lot more things and lot of networking, than just the contract position itself.

H: Yes, defiantly and it sound like you are networking with a lot of people because you mentioned another consulting group involved with your team.

R: Yes. Microsoft has contracted me and this consulting group to analyze and advice them on how to get things done. So they hired me to get things done and things that are out of my control I delegate to the consulting group to get done. So that is why we need an outside group to get things done.
H: Well, that is great you really provided us with a lot of information about contract work and benefits. Some information that I am sure will help some of our listeners.

R: The salary is typically on par with the upper market. But what you get would be less because the company which places you in IT, in my case is CORESTAFF. They make a profit off of you. Typically I think that they pay wages from the profit they receive. So what you get is going to be less than what Microsoft pays a fulltime worker. But the difference is once you have priority and go fulltime you are going to be making the same as a fulltime worker.

H: So you are saying the company will keep you at the same salary. So it sounds like Microsoft will keep you at the same salary that they were paying the contract company.

R: Yes, so if you want to be seen in the middle you can be (inaudible), but that is up to you. So you could be keeping the $20,000 - $50,000 that the company was making per month, but it is up to you if they hire you full time. The factors for fulltime should be good work, you should be a leverage for that business, and the one thing is once you are in you should be choose to do the best work and encourage the team to do the same. So if you choose these things they would be great for those who wind up in a contract position, you should be thinking more in the long term if you choose to be in a contract position and what value you can add to the team. Once you have developed such a profile, Microsoft will probably hire you based on that profile. They had a profile which is not going to be as a contract as it tends to be.

H: Well it sounds like you are recommending that students, when they are hired into a contract position treat it as if it were a fulltime role because it could...

R: Exactly, if you work towards a fulltime role you will be able to ask for a fulltime role. So they may not be working as a fulltime contractor. But they should be looking one step forward and if what they are really doing is going to matter. It is going to mean more if it matters in the long run. That is going to be the key to be hired. I would say that if you work as if you in that fulltime role you would be hired for a fulltime role.

H: Well, my last question is maybe the most important, but this maybe the most important and probably is. So now that you are in Seattle, do you ever call the Hogs anymore? I am just curious.

R: Yes, I do.

H: Have you done so at Microsoft?

R: Yeah, there are some football teams here. I am not a big football guy. But I do call the Hogs.

H: Okay, good. Well thank you Ram

R: Of course, thank you Heather. I still think of Fayetteville as my home even though I am in Seattle now.

H: Well we miss you and invite you back to your home anytime.