

## EMPLOYERS' AND ENTRY-LEVEL JOB SEEKERS' EXPECTATIONS: ARE THEY SIMILAR?

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### ABSTRACT

The problem of unemployed graduates is not of recent origin. Every year thousands of fresh graduates leave their educational institutions for the world of work. The main purpose of this study was to examine whether the perceived values, skills and abilities of 180 final year accounting and management students are similar to those of employers. In addition, this study also sought to determine whether entry-level job seekers' perceptions were influenced by gender, ethnicity and major field of study. Using a questionnaire survey, this study found that employers and entry-level job seekers differed in their perceptions as per the most desired values and abilities sought in an entry-level job seeker. Whilst gender had no effect on the perceived abilities and skills of entry-level job seekers, there appeared to be some difference in the perceived values amongst gender.

### INTRODUCTION

"New PR graduates cannot write well, including making Press releases. They do not even speak good English" (Lim, 2002); "... some of them were highly qualified with second class upper degrees but they did not know how to communicate or express themselves" (Vasudevan, 2002). The problem of local graduates who cannot speak or write well is not a recent one. In 1995, for example, 8.9 percent of the total unemployed persons had a tertiary education. In 1998, the figure swelled to 12.8 percent. In April 2000, the Ministry of Human Resources reported the existence of 40,000 unemployed graduates, translating into some 15% of the total of unemployed persons (Shamsuddin Bardan, 2000).

With the proliferation of tertiary institutions, both public and private, thousands of fresh

graduates enter the job market each year (Anonymous, 2002). In the past, a person who graduated from a university was said to have acquired a trained mind but this is no longer good enough today. Hence, only those who possess the "extra edge" will stand out (Ismail, 2002).

One of a graduate's major goals is to achieve an important life objective – to be employed (Thornburg, 1997). The majority embark on a process of identifying desirable entry-level jobs, either during their senior year or shortly after graduation. Some adopt a very professional job search process, whereas others pursue the search rather randomly (Golen, Grasso and Moeckel, 1995).

### Values, Skills and Abilities from Job Seekers' Perspective

Students during the 1950s sought high salaries, job security and opportunities for promotion, all perceived as ample during an era of prosperity. In the 1960s, students generally espoused social responsibility, resolution of social problems and meaning of life, in accord with altruistic attitudes prevalent in society at that time. The perspective altered in the 1970s and 1980s, when students and society shifted goal orientation toward individual achievement and reward through careers. Students in the 1990s appeared to be refocussing on a combination of job attainment, job security and self-improvement to enhance their professional status (Anderson, Stanley and Parker, 1992).

A study by Philip, Philips and Cappel (1994) involved rating by management students on 23 factors potentially present in workplaces. The 23 factors were: opportunity for advancement; challenging or interesting work; positive organizational climate; job security; good training



programme; good health insurance; good retirement plan; good pay; job autonomy; paid sick leave; region or city where job is located; location (actual job site); company reputation; good dental insurance; paid personal leave days; good life insurance; ability of spouse to find a job in or near city where they will work; flexible work schedules; financial support for future education; stock option or ownership programme; health or workout facilities; no travel; day care provided.

In examining how graduates reach decisions about applying to particular companies for jobs, Keenan (1985) reported that students at Heriot-Watt University (Edinburgh, Scotland) indicated preferences for career opportunities and training facilities. They also emphasized job security and the opportunity to make use of their academic training. About two-thirds of the subjects stressed salary prospects in the long term, but less than half thought that it was important that the initial salary be high.

According to Herzberg's (1966) two-factor theory, job satisfaction and dissatisfaction stem from different sources (Herzberg, 1966). In particular, dissatisfaction was associated with conditions surrounding the jobs (e.g. working conditions, pay, security, quality of supervision and relations with others) rather than work itself. The factors that prevent negative reactions, are referred to as *hygiene* or *maintenance* factors. By contrast, satisfaction was derived from factors associated with the work itself or to outcomes directly resulting from it, such as the nature of the jobs, achievement in the work done, promotion opportunities, and chances for personal growth and recognition. These factors which are associated with high levels of job satisfaction, are called *motivators*. Hence, the two-factor theory implies that steps should be taken to create conditions that help avoid dissatisfaction, i.e. by taking care of the hygiene factors (Greenberg and Baron, 2003).

Present day graduates have little patience with hierarchical roles and are not interested in "paying their dues". They want work that uses and continually expands their skills so that they can be entrepreneurial generalists rather than narrow specialists. The current generation of

college graduates has different expectations from that of a decade ago. Graduates of the nineties are less wedded to their jobs; they value their independence more and they are more willing to put their careers at risk (Moravec, Wheeler and Hall, 1989).

### **Values, Skills and Abilities from Recruiters' Perspective**

Recruiters, on the other hand, look for people who can land running in an accounting or marketing slot, while Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) talk loftily of the need for visionary leaders with a broad cross-functional understanding of business and its place in the universe (Main, 1989). According to Robert Half (1987), graduates possessing communication skills have an advantage and will do a better job at the company in the long-run taking on more responsibility and advancing quickly. Nellermore (1992) stated that the kinds of education and/or preparation, which the managers felt to be the most important in order for new employees to work productively on the job, were microcomputer skills, communication skills, analytical skills and interpersonal skills.

Gaedeke and Tootelian (1989) reported that employers and students had different perceptions of the most desirable employee attributes. In their study, employers ranked (a) enthusiasm/motivation (b) interpersonal skills (c) initiative (d) oral communication skills and (e) maturity as the top desired attributes. Students, on the other, hand ranked oral communication skills, enthusiasm/motivation, self-confidence, ambition and entrepreneurship as the top five.

Raymond, McNabb and Matthaai (1993) reported that other than the lack of functional skills, current business graduates also lacked written and communication skills, as well as interpersonal skills. This finding was supported by Kelly and Gaedeke (1990) who cited "Poor communication skills and unrealistic expectations as the major weaknesses of business graduates". Based on the above literature, it is obvious that a gap exists between employers and entry level job seekers' perceptions as to the most desirable employee attributes. While the bulk of the studies