

College Student Characteristics
as Related to Job Success: Employer Perspective
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Objectives

For the soon-to-be or new college graduate finding a job can be a difficult task. An often asked question is: "What are employers looking for in the college applicant?" In order to obtain a job, students should have some idea what the employers expect from them. This study was undertaken to obtain employers' ratings of certain characteristics of college graduates as they relate to a successful working career.

Studies have been conducted on how to recruit, sources of job applicants, interviewing techniques and screening methods (Benson & Chasin, 1976; Wingrove, Glendinning & Herriot, 1984; Shingleton & Scheetz, 1985). Except for grades (Shell, 1967; Shell & Patrick, 1973), however, little is known about the complete set of applicant characteristics that employers use to select new employees with the highest probability of being successful on the job (Posner, 1981; Tschirgi, 1973).

In recruiting new college graduates for employment, different types of employers may look for different factors when considering the applicant for a job. For example, for sales and production employers, the ability to work with and to persuade others is considered more important than grades, or marital status (Ma, 1969).

Three questions are considered in this study:

1. When considering new college graduates for employment, what factors do employers rate highest in importance?
2. Are there differences among types of employers in how these characteristics are rated?
3. What are the implications of the results with respect to college students, college counselors, and placement advisors?

Method and Procedure

Data collected from the 1985-86 recruiting trends survey conducted by Placement Services at Michigan State University were used in this study. Information on hiring characteristics were obtained through a mail questionnaire to personnel representatives from organizations that recruit at Michigan State University or are members of the College Placement Council. The organizations cover a broad spectrum of American industry, with the majority engaged in some form of manufacturing, sales, education, governmental administration, or services. A total of 710 representatives have completed surveys that can be used for analytical purposes.

Employers were presented with a list of characteristics that are often associated with job success and were asked to rate each on a five-point Likert scale from Extremely High Importance (1) to No Importance (5). These items were selected from previous studies of criteria commonly used by employers when interviewing and hiring job candidates for entry-level positions (Posner, 1981; Tschirgi, 1973). This list included: communication abilities, motivational abilities, speaking abilities, ability to accept responsibility, an example for others, self-pride, ability to go along with the organization, maturity, perseverance, staying power and stability, organizational ability

when speaking, team management skills, budgeting abilities, good looks and youthfulness, interest in family life, neatness, physical fitness, competitive abilities, tactical and strategic planning, ability to work in close quarters, entrepreneurial spirit, and ability to depend on people.

Employers were divided into four different types: Industry and Manufacturing, Business and Service, Government, and Education. Aerospace, automotive, chemicals, and construction, electrical machinery and equipment (computers), electronics and instruments, glass, packaging, petroleum, and tire and rubber product firms were included in the industry and manufacturing group. Business and Service was composed of accounting, agribusiness, banking, finance, communication (radio, TV, and newspapers), food, beverage processing, restaurants, hospitals and health services organizations. Employment with bureaucratic agencies and the military at the city, county, state, and federal level was categorized as government. Educational employers were representatives primary, secondary, and postsecondary institutions.

Analysis of variance procedures (MANOVA) were used within each of 22 job characteristics (predictors of job success) to test the null hypothesis of no statistical significance in the set of differences between types of employers. Differences between pairs of groups on each item were further tested using the Tukey test ($p < .05$).

Results and Implications

Aside from grade point average which was considered in a separate question, surveyed employers have identified the most important predictors of job success as communication ability, and ability to accept responsibility. The following factors were rated highly in importance: motivational abilities, maturity, perseverance, speaking abilities, organization abilities when speaking, staying power and stability, and self-pride. The least important characteristics of job success were budgeting abilities, interest in family life, and good looks and youthfulness.

Except for education employers, there were no significant differences in the rating of the five best predictors among employer categories. Industry and business employers have rated the five best predictors of job success as communication abilities, ability to accept responsibility, motivational abilities, maturity, and perseverance. Government employers replaced motivational abilities from this list within staying power and stability. Education employers have, on-the-other-hand, perceived that an example for others, and speaking abilities were the most important factors.

The least important characteristics of job success according to industry employers were physical fitness, ability to work in close quarters, budgeting abilities, interest in family life, and good looks and youthfulness. For business employers, ability to work with people replaced physical fitness. Government employers have rated as least important the same factors as industry except entrepreneurial spirit was included rather than ability to work in close quarters. Educational employers rated budgeting abilities, good looks and youthfulness, competitive abilities, entrepreneurial spirit, and ability to work in close quarters as the five least important characteristics. Similar, to the pattern found in comparing the most important characteristics, there is some variation among different types of employers.

Educators differ from other employers in the type of people they hire as indicated by how they rated applicant characteristics in comparison to other employer groups. According to the analysis of variance results between education and non-education employers, education employers rated self-pride, interest in family life, neatness, physical fitness, good looks and youthfulness, an example for others, motivational abilities as significantly more important than other groups at the .001 level of significance. Also compared to non-education employers, staying power and stability, budgeting abilities, team management skills, entrepreneurial spirit, and competitive abilities were less valued at the .001 level.

From the preliminary analysis, the results are consistent with earlier studies which found communication skills and characteristics suggestive of future potential to be the most important applicant characteristics. What stands out, at this point, is not the differences, but rather the similarities between the employer groups. For students seeking employment with government agencies and educational institutions, there are subtle differences in what personal characteristics need to be demonstrated by job applicants.

While these characteristic ratings may accurately reflect what a company's chief personnel officer may use as a selection criteria, there is some concern that the recruiter's personal characteristics (Vecchiotti & Korn, 1980) and formal training (Posner, 1981) may influence job applicant selection. For example, while good looks constantly received low ratings, personal attractiveness is a dominant force in shaping society's expectations which cannot be easily dismissed. Students put a great deal of attention on appearance in preparing for interviews and some students who consider themselves unattractive are very anxious prior to interviews.

This study identifies some areas of conflict between the perceived needs of prospective graduates and recruiters. LaMarre and Hopkins (1982) have found that graduates place a high value on family life. While recruiters have expressed little interest in this feature of personal development. This is one of several examples of differences in personal preference that could lead to disenchantment over employment conditions; either leading to rejection of a job offer or rapid turnover (leave the organization) once hired.

These findings provide additional support to the need for adequate career preparation by faculty, particularly communication skills, improved career counseling, and continued emphasis on job previews (Wanous, 1975). Part of the recruiting process might be directed toward helping students better understand what particular employers want from an applicant and whether the employer's needs are consistent with what a student wants from a career within a particular organization.