The Ideal Job Candidate: What Recruiters Would Like to See

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Numerous studies have addressed the question: "What characteristics do recruiters seek when evaluating potential employees?" Results tend to suggest that recruiters are looking for a candidate who has earned solid grades throughout college, has engaged in a variety of extracurricular activities, has gained some practical work experience, and possesses maturity and a well-rounded personality. This ideal candidate may be hard to find; nevertheless students strive to attain this image.

Typically the recruiter is presented with a prepared list of characteristics and asked for a rating on the importance of each characteristic on the list. This approach's major weakness stems from recruiters being forced to make decisions on characteristics they might not normally consider. As a result, responses obtained in this context may lack validity.

More direct techniques could be used to determine what factors recruiters consider important. Recruiters can be asked to list freely (without any prompts) the characteristics they are seeking. Characteristics on this unstructured list can also be rated for each characteristic's importance in the recruiter's decision. This list can later serve a useful purpose in helping structure questions for future surveys.

As part of a larger study on how recruiters use candidate information, a list of ideal candidate characteristics were generated by recruiters. This study presents a compilation of the recruiters' lists and compares lists across a select group of academic majors. A companion piece to this paper will examine how recruiters process information.

Sample

During the recruiting period from October, 1987 to April, 1988 at Michigan State University, 360 recruiters were given surveys. Completed surveys were returned by 151 recruiters for a 42% response rate. Recruiters represented various public and private sector institutions. Only recruiters interviewing accounting, computer science, electrical engineering, selected business (marketing, general business, and merchandising), social science, communication arts and sciences, and arts and letters majors were asked to participate.
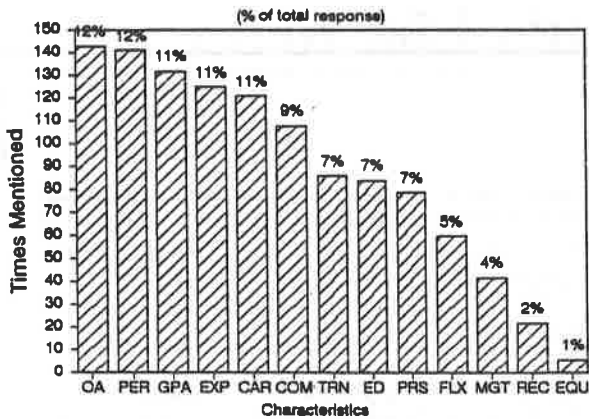
The Question

The recruiters were asked: "What would you ideally like to consider when reviewing candidates from Placement Services for possible interviews?" A recruiter could list up to eighteen desired characteristics. After listing the characteristic, the recruiters were asked to rate each characteristic from a scale: 1 as slightly important to 5 as extremely important in the decision to interview a candidate.
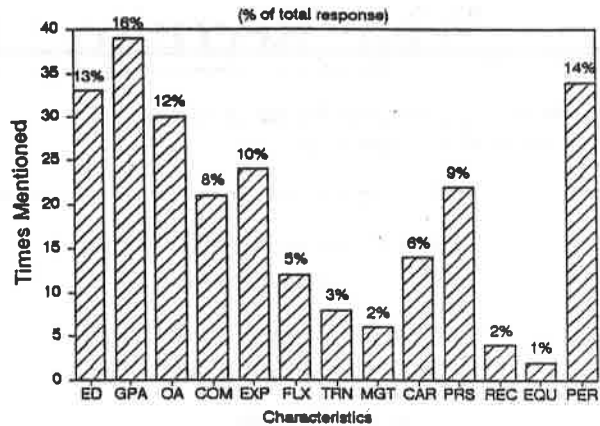
Desired Characteristics

Recruiters placed an average of eight characteristics on their list and mentioned over 56 different characteristics. The characteristics have been grouped into 13 general categories. The content of these general categories are listed in Appendix 1. The bar graph indicates the number of times each catagory was mentioned.

Most frequently mentioned were outside activities, personal traits, grade point averages, work experiences, and communication skills. The second tier of mentioned characteristics included educational preparation, specialized training, interview presentation, and flexibility. Least mentioned were management abilities, awards and recognitions, and equal opportunity concerns.

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Characteristics Mentioned by All Recruiters

(% of total response)

Bar chart — Times Mentioned (y-axis) vs Characteristics (x-axis):
OA 12%, PER 12%, GPA 11%, EXP 11%, CAR 11%, COM 9%, TRN 7%, ED 7%, PRS 7%, FLX 5%, MGT 4%, REC 2%, EQU 1%

Characteristics Mentioned by Accounting Recruiters

(% of total response)

Bar chart — Times Mentioned (y-axis) vs Characteristics (x-axis):
ED 13%, GPA 16%, OA 12%, COM 8%, EXP 10%, FLX 5%, TRN 3%, MGT 2%, CAR 6%, PRS 9%, REC 2%, EQU 1%, PER 14%
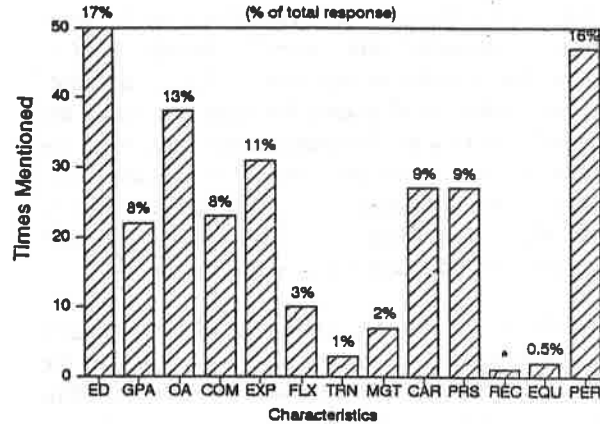
Key To Legends for Graphs

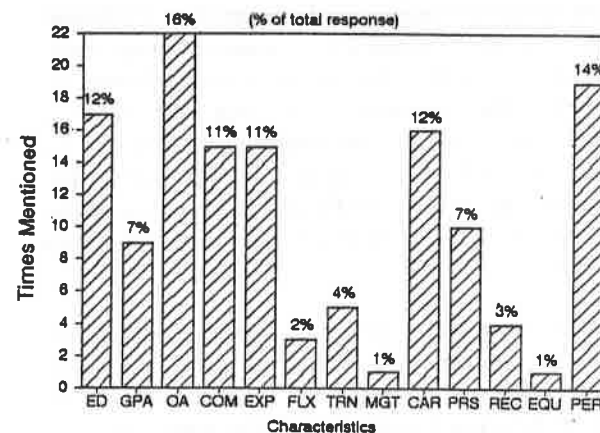|	
ED = Education	MGT = Management
GPA = GPA/Intelligence	CAR = Career Maturity
OA = Outside Activities	PRS = Presentation
COM = Communication	REC = Recognition
EXP = Experience	EQU = Equal Opportunity
FLX = Flexibility	PER = Personality Traits
TRN = Training	

The simple act of self-identifying characteristics produced a list very similar to those obtained in other research. For example, in Recruiting Trends 1986-87 (Shingleton and Scheetz, 1986), employers and corporate personnel managers (not necessarily those who conducted the recruiting) were asked to rate the importance of over 70 potential employee characteristics. Leading the list of important characteristics were academic program, grade point average, selected job skills, (i.e., ability to get things done, and willingness to accept responsibility), communication skills, and personality traits. Employers are expecting and recruiters are seeking the same general factors in "ideal" candidates. The self-generated list does, however, permit the candidate to be described in fewer terms.

Lists were extracted for each of the academic major groups and are presented in the accompanying charts. Recruiters seeking computer science and business majors tended to use about one more characteristic (on average) to describe their ideal candidate than recruiters for other academic majors. Generally, the lists were similar across majors. Nevertheless, there are some noticeable differences.
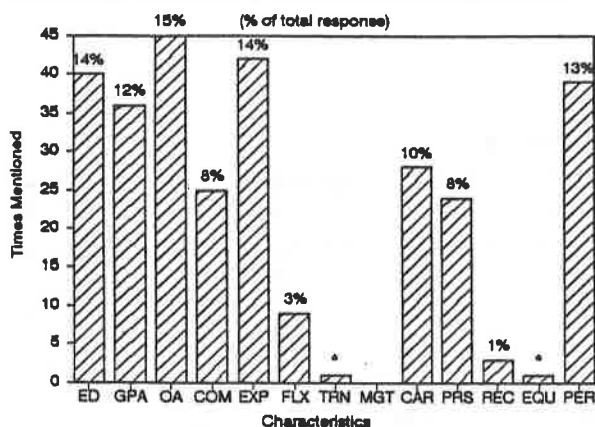
Characteristics Mentioned by Business Recruiters

(% of total response)

Bar chart — Times Mentioned (y-axis) vs Characteristics (x-axis):
ED 17%, GPA 8%, OA 13%, COM 8%, EXP 11%, FLX 3%, TRN 1%, MGT 2%, CAR 9%, PRS 9%, REC 0.5%, EQU —, PER 16%

Characteristics Mentioned by Computer Science Recruiters

(% of total response)

Bar chart — Times Mentioned (y-axis) vs Characteristics (x-axis):
ED 12%, GPA 7%, OA 16%, COM 11%, EXP 11%, FLX 2%, TRN 4%, MGT 1%, CAR 12%, PRS 7%, REC 3%, EQU 1%, PER 14%

Characteristics Mentioned by Electrical Engineering Recruiters

Characteristics Mentioned by Social Science Recruiters
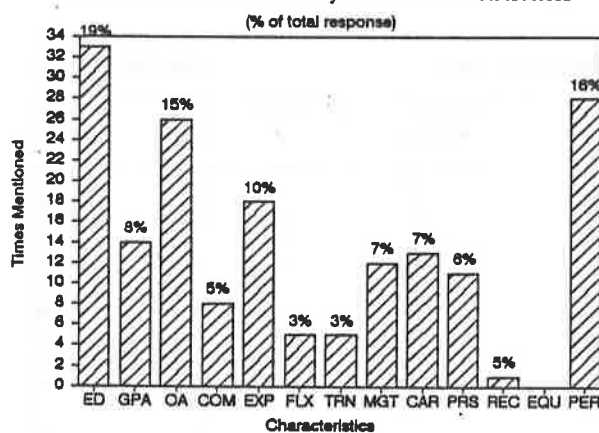
Using the percentage of the total number of characteristics mentioned as a comparative measure, the differences stand out a little more clearly. In summarizing the bar graphs, these findings provide the most interest:

1. A student's educational program tended to be mentioned more often by business and social science recruiters. Business recruiters frequently identified financing one's education as an important characteristic in this category.

2. Grade point averages were mentioned more often by accounting and electrical engineering recruiters. In fact, several accounting recruiters emphasized both major and minor GPA's (mentioned 39 times

for 33 recruiters). For the other majors, grade point average accounted for less than 10% of the responses.

3. Outside activities were alluded to more frequently by computer science, social science/liberal arts, and electrical engineering recruiters (more than 15%) than other majors. Even so, this category, like education, appeared consistently across all recruiter categories.

4. Electrical engineering recruiters mentioned actual work experiences more frequently (14%) than recruiters of other majors (around 10%).

5. Communication skills were mentioned at a relative constant rate of 8% (the exception -- computer science at 11%). As will be shown below, a high degree of importance was placed on this factor by those who mentioned communication skills.

6. A mix of personality traits appeared consistently on each recruiter's list. Initiative and self-esteem stood out as the two important characteristics in this group.

7. Other characteristics in the remaining categories did not appear as frequently. Career maturity and presentation, however, often received as high a percentage as communication skills.

Ratings

As expected, the importance ratings which are shown in the following table were high as participants only listed characteristics they considered important. Only 9% of all characteristics mentioned were rated as slightly or somewhat important to the decision. Characteristics that recruiters felt they must know were grade point average, communication skills (particularly verbal skills) and work experience. The standard deviations were relatively small for these three groups, indicating that the ratings recruiters gave these factors clustered closely around the same importance score. These factors were closely followed by personal characteristics -- a collection of personality measures -- where self-esteem, enthusiasm and initiative were key characteristics. The remaining categories were rated moderately to very important (between 3 and 4) to the decision.

Variations in importance ratings occurred across academic majors though, in most cases, the differences were small. Noticeable differences included:

Table 1

Characteristics Ratings Overall and By Major

	Overall			Accounting			Electrical Eng.		
	Mentioned N	% Total	Average Rating	Mentioned N	% Total	Average Rating	Mentioned N	% Total	Average Rating
Education	84	7%	3.87	33	13%	4.03	40	14%	4.03
GPA/Intelligence	132	11%	4.21	39	16%	4.33	36	12%	4.11
Outside Activities	143	12%	3.50	30	12%	3.57	45	15%	3.11
Communication	108	9%	4.22	21	8%	4.09	25	8%	4.20
Experience	125	11%	4.11	24	10%	3.92	42	14%	3.90
Flexibility	60	5%	3.87	12	5%	3.75	9	3%	3.56
Training	86	7%	3.76	8	3%	3.75	1	*	1.00
Management	42	4%	3.86	6	2%	3.50			
Career Maturity	121	11%	3.75	14	6%	4.00	28	10%	3.54
Presentation	79	7%	3.35	22	9%	3.54	24	8%	3.08
Recognitions	22	2%	3.50	4	2%	3.00	3	1%	2.33
Equal Opportunity	6	1%	3.50	2	1%	3.50	1	*	3.00
Personality Traits	141	12%	4.02	34	14%	3.85	39	13%	4.00

	Business			Social Science			Computer Science		
	Mentioned N	% Total	Average Rating	Mentioned N	% Total	Average Rating	Mentioned N	% Total	Average Rating
Education	50	17%	3.96	33	19%	3.50	17	12%	4.10
GPA/Intelligence	22	8%	3.77	14	8%	4.00	9	7%	4.67
Outside Activities	38	13%	3.68	26	15%	4.00	22	16%	3.45
Communication	23	8%	4.22	8	5%	4.60	15	11%	4.00
Experience	31	11%	4.26	18	10%	4.10	15	11%	4.07
Flexibility	10	3%	3.80	5	3%	4.00	3	2%	3.33
Training	3	1%	3.00	5	3%	3.60	5	4%	3.40
Management	7	2%	4.29	12	7%	4.25	1	1%	3.00
Career Maturity	27	9%	3.70	13	7%	4.00	16	12%	3.94
Presentation	27	9%	4.22	11	6%	3.91	10	7%	1.40
Recognitions	1	*	2.00	1	5%	5.00	4	3%	3.00
Equal Opportunity	2	0.5%	1.00				1	1%	4.00
Personality Traits	47	16%	3.89	28	16%	3.96	19	14%	3.58

* = Less than .5%

1. Accounting recruiters and those computer science recruiters who listed grade point average placed a very high importance on GPAs in the selection process. GPA was only moderately important for business and social science/liberal arts recruiters.

2. Content of a candidate's education program was rated slightly lower by social science/liberal arts recruiters than the other groups: 3.5 as compared to 4.0.

3. Outside activities were less important to electrical engineering recruiters and more important to social science/liberal arts recruiters than to interviewers for other academic groups.

4. Work experience was one of the highest rated characteristics by both business, social science/liberal arts and computer science recruiters. In business, work experience (mentioned by 31 of the 35

recruiters) was the highest rated factor among those characteristics mentioned more than 10% of the time.

A general finding was the consistently high rating for communication skills. While not all recruiters placed a communication skill on their list, those that did rated one of these characteristics highly across all academic majors.

The importance rating can assist in clarifying the selection of characteristics by recruiters. Those that were most frequently mentioned generally received the higher ratings. However, certain characteristics, particularly communication abilities, were viewed as critical to the decision by those who mentioned these traits. Comparisons by academic majors identified several subtle differences that suggest the use of information may vary by the type of candidate a recruiter may be seeking.

Candidate Characteristics

Each group of characteristics plays an important role in determining how a job search can be conducted. Several of these characteristics have been examined in other studies for their role in employment evaluations and job success. This section briefly reviews some of this research in the context of this study.

Grade Point Average

While there are several measures of intelligence and/or academic achievement, grade point average (GPA) is readily accessible or self-reported to most recruiters. GPA offers the recruiter one of the few, if only, quantifiable yardstick by which students can be compared. There are several disadvantages with using GPA as a comparative tool. First, grading practices are not consistent among universities. For example, a 2.75 at one university where grading is more rigorous will not necessarily compare to 2.75 at another university. Grading practices may also vary within universities (across major academic units). A situation where grades could correctly rank candidates would be where all candidates were from the some major at the same institution. The underlying assumption is that these students would follow a uniform curriculum.

Second, the usefulness of grades as a selection tool has been questioned by many researchers who have failed to find a significant relationship between grades and occupational success or performance,

however defined (Gardner, et. al, 1987). Ability to predict success through grades was somewhat higher for business and nursing and somewhat lower in teaching and engineering according to Samson and his colleagues (1984). Jencks and Riesman (1968) have argued that the grades - job success association has been influenced by the employer's belief that professional schools have conveyed the specialized knowledge necessary to participate successfully in the work environment.

In a recent study of the relationship between grades and employer rated performance skills, grades were highly associated with analytical thinking, and quantitative and complex problem solving skills (Gardner, et. al, 1987). Students with higher grades were perceived as better able to apply the knowledge acquired in school to their job. Grades were also associated with hard work which is consistent with findings that grades are best predicted by natural ability and motivation -- the latter implying hard work.

A characteristic closely associated with hard work, productivity, was not closely linked to grades by employers, however. Also not considered likely to be associated with grades were social, communication, leadership, and evaluation performance skills. These findings also appeared consistent with a priori expectations as there exist no psychological or theoretical bases for GPA relating to these factors.

If job performance cannot be predicted by grades, why the emphasis on grades by recruiters? Inundated with requests for interviews and general job inquiries, recruiters have been increasingly using GPA as a preliminary screening device. This sorting restricts the search to a smaller group of candidates from which an even smaller group of candidates can be extracted based on other selection criteria. Some care should be taken when sorting too finely on grades as statistical tests indicate there may be small differences between students with a 2.9 and a 3.1 grade point averages.

Communication Skills

The need for strong writing and verbal communication skills appears straight forward. Yet, to simply say that writing or speaking is important may be misleading. In a study of the career development of college graduates, writing and speaking skills were closely associated with reasoning skills as elements in career success (Gardner, Chao,

and Lien, 1988). This relationship suggests that a person needs to be able to extract from a body of information relevant facts to be reported or presented in a logical manner. Several recruiters in this study elaborated on communication skills in a similar manner.

Far too often it is assumed that colleges and universities successfully develop these skills in students. In the career development study, college graduates reported that their college education did not effectively prepare their communication skills to meet professional demands. This discrepancy does not necessarily mean that the teaching at our universities is in question; rather, it may suggest that students may be taking for granted that they are acquiring these skills.

Experience

Work experience really counts! And not only to recruiters. In a recently completed study on socialization, students who were actively involved in internships and other cooperative work experiences had a clear advantage when being assimilated into their work environment during the first six months of employment (Major, McKellin and Kozlowski, 1988). Such experiences offer graduates more realistic expectations on how to adjust to new and changing working conditions. Of course the enthusiasm for work experiences by recruiters may vary among companies. Organizations with intensive internal training programs may find it easier to assimilate new employers with few work experiences rather than train an employee who has learned other work methods (a good example may be accounting). The message to students reads that work experiences count but may not be a direct ticket to a job.

Educational Program

The content of one's educational program as defined by a candidate's major is a natural selection device for many recruiters. During screening, program content may be specified and interviews restricted to only certain majors, i.e., finance or marketing. For the majority of students this type of restriction presents no serious problem. Yet some students may be disadvantaged if they are in a major that does not have wide exposure. For example, a public affairs management major who has skills in economics, finance, evaluation, and statistics may never be considered because of the recruiter's unfamiliarity with the program. As numbers continue to increase in high demand fields, particularly in business, and institutions respond by limiting enrollment, more students may find themselves in less well-known majors. For these students, job search strategies may be quite different than those for students from traditional majors.

Implications

Two basic types of characteristics emerge from this study. Semi-quantifiable characteristics, such as grade point average, educational program and work experiences, permit recruiters to rank order prospective candidates. The other characteristics, including communication skills, personality traits, career maturity, and management skills, reflect interpersonal, non-measureable factors that are difficult to place on resumes and are better communicated in personal situations.

These two groups tend to be balanced in terms of what recruiters consider for an ideal candidate. Recruiters hope to find a graduate with excellent grades, varied extracurricular activities and work experiences, and a well-rounded personality. Some concern exists among placement officials that recruiters can actually find this candidate using current pre-selection techniques.

For the student planning a job search strategy, these results indicate that multiple strategies may be required. Students in the right majors with good grades have a higher probability of being selected through evaluation of their resumes. Others may want to approach employers differently in order to emphasize their strengths which may be communication skills, work experiences, or a subset of personality traits. For students the bottom line is to plan ahead and to be prepared to look very hard before finding that employment opportunity which best matches their aspirations.

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APPENDIX

Major Characteristic Categories
(Times Mentioned in Parentheses)

EDUCATION: educational program (43); finance own education (37); and number of educational transitions (changes of major, school, etc.) (4).

GRADE POINT AVERAGE (INTELLIGENCE) (132);

OUTSIDE ACTIVITIES: leadership roles (48); extracurricular activities (87); and hobbies (8).

COMMUNICATION SKILLS: writing (13); verbal (67); and social skills (28).

WORK EXPERIENCE: general work experience (110); internships (8); cooperative programs (4); summer employment (2); military (1).

FLEXIBILITY: willingness to relocate (26); graduation date/availability (13); location preference (2); flexibility (16); and ability & willingness to learn (3).

SPECIALIZED TRAINING: within the field (62); computers (6); quantitative/technical skills (12); science (2); research techniques (1); languages (1); and special training (2).

MANAGEMENT ABILITIES: management skills (4); organizational skills (5); team player (4); decision-making skills (10); time management (10); attention to detail (1); service-oriented (1); sales ability/persuasiveness (6); and risk-taker (1).

CAREER MATURITY: job/career interests (44); expected salary (8); knowledge of company (17); goal-oriented (25); maturity/common sense (25); and responsible (2).

INTERVIEW PRESENTATION: appearance /perception (39); prepared for interview (professional /resume) (11); confidence/poise (11); inquisitive (4); attitude (6); and references (8).

RECOGNITIONS: honors/awards (9); published articles (2); achievements (7); and extra projects (4).

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY: minority (3); age (2); and citizen status (1)

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS: self-esteem (22); initiative/drive (60); creativity (6); honesty/integrity (9); strong work ethic (5); openness/candidness (6); humor (4); enjoys people (4); tenacity (3); aggressiveness (5); assertiveness (8); sensitivity (6); commitment (2); and objective (1).

The Collegiate Employment Research Institute was established by Michigan's Legislature in 1984. The Institute is charged with the task of examining issues on career development and employment for college graduates. Various projects are underway, including the study covered in this report, to provide information to educators and counselors for program development. If you have any questions on this study or any Institute project, please contact the Institute directly.

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