

STUDENT GRADE POINT AVERAGES AND VERBAL SKILLS  
AS DETERMINANTS OF SUCCESS IN THE JOB HUNT

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ABSTRACT

Oral communication skills are frequently cited as a prerequisite to business success. Surveys among recruiters invariably reinforce this suggestion. This study examined grade point average and verbal skills among a group of senior business students. Unexpectedly, grades proved a much better predictor of job seeking success than did verbal skills.

INTRODUCTION

What do employers want from students as prospective employees? Or, expressed differently, what particular skills should students attempt to enhance in order to increase their chance of success in the business world?

Perhaps the most consistent finding of management research concerns the importance of oral communication to a business career. Study after study yields near unanimous results. Typical is a recent survey by Gaedeke, et al. (1983). When asked to rank the relative importance of 34 potential hiring criteria, the respondent group rated "verbal communication skills" as second only to "motivation"; "written communication skills" ranked 11th, while "grade point average" could manage no higher than 17th place. Indeed, whether business student, academician, or corporate executive, "All . . . regard oral communication skills as extremely important" (AACSB Bulletin, 1980).

The demand by business for students with better communication skills is well documented (for example: Done 1979; Benson 1983; Hafer and Hoth 1981). There is also a good deal of evidence that business schools are listening. Numerous academics have experimented with a wide variety of pedagogical approaches in an effort to upgrade these skills (for example: Douth 1979; Kennedy and Lowry 1982; Brownell 1982). On the basis of this activity, it appears that few would disagree with Hart's claim that communication skills are, ". . . the leading requirement for success in the business world." (1976)

Against this background, this study attempts a rather modest goal; namely, to examine in an empirical manner the relationship between the oral communication skills of students and the hiring practices of employers. The literature would suggest that employers, who have long complained of poorly developed communication skills among college graduates, would be predisposed to select individuals with particular talents in this area.

How do employers determine whether recruits possess adequate oral communication skills? Although this process may vary, the series of personal interviews typically associated with

the selection process undoubtedly plays an important role in this assessment. Indeed, while the interviewing process enables the employer to evaluate numerous hiring criteria, the measurement of communication skills is particularly appropriate in this venue - especially for marketing majors who are often expected to "sell themselves."

One factor not directly measured during the interview process is academic performance. Grade point average is the typical measure of "success" in college, and all employers wish to ascertain the academic standing of prospective student recruits. Less evident is the importance of a student's grade point average in determining attractiveness to potential employers. Is a low average offset by interpersonal skills? Are quiet students with high averages more or less attractive than those fast-talkers who do less well in the classroom?

This study attempts to answer these questions through an examination of grade point averages and verbal skills as they relate to student success in the job recruitment process.

METHODOLOGY

This paper represents a confluence of two separate programs of research. The first program entailed a rather lengthy investigation of an instrument developed by Mortensen, Arntson, and Lustig which purports to measure "predisposition toward verbal behavior." (1977) This instrument is a Likert-type scale consisting of 25 items, each with seven response alternatives. Initial tests with the PVB scale were directed toward concerns of validity and reliability in a business school setting (Boyd and Dart 1981). The apparent sensitivity and administrative characteristics of the instrument allowed for other matters to be investigated including the role of classroom case discussion in developing oral communication ability. Subsequent work has been intermittent but has focused on identifying the components of such skills and developing more directive and appropriate teaching approaches.

The results reported for this particular study stem from a sample group of 174 students. The questionnaire was administered during the last week of a 13-week semester in five sections of a business policy course - the capstone class in the undergraduate program at the University of Saskatchewan. Scores were compiled for each student according to the procedure presented by the developers of the scale.

The second research study involved field survey of 106 employers who had recruited among the graduating class that semester. The primary

purpose of this exercise was to measure the attitudes of these employers toward the recruitment process at the University of Saskatchewan - especially possible areas of improvement. Also included on this survey form was a request to identify those students to whom they had extended job offers.

With information available from these two sources, the basic question emerged as to the apparent relationship between "getting a job" and communication skills. Subsequent investigation revealed that other relevant data were available, albeit in a form that required a good deal of manual transformation. Most recruitment activity among Commerce undergraduates at the University of Saskatchewan occurs under the auspices of the Canada Employment Centre, a campus branch of a government-operated employment agency. This organization maintains records as to the number of students who submit applications to a recruiting company as well as whether or not they were successful in attaining an initial job interview. Thus, the number of applications, initial interviews, and job offers were available for each student. Other information was available from student records including age, sex, and overall grade average.

In analyzing the data, it was necessary to distinguish between the student who, for example, applied for 20 positions and obtained five interviews from the student who received the same number of interviews but submitted far fewer applications. In order to account for such differences, three additional variables were derived, each representing a success rate or, in student terminology, "batting averages." The derived variables included: interviews per application; job offers per application; and job offers per interview.

Simple Pearsonian correlations were employed to relate grades and PVB scores to the various aspects of job seeking success. In addition, it was found useful to divide the sample into four sub-groups according to whether a student was above or below average on each independent variable. For convenience of communication, these groups soon acquired nicknames. That group displaying above average scores on each dimension were dubbed "stars." Those with higher than average grades but low apparent verbal dispositions were called "stills" - after "water that runs deep." The group with high PVB scores but lower than average grades were christened "tincans," while the final group, low on both dimensions, were referred to as "mice."

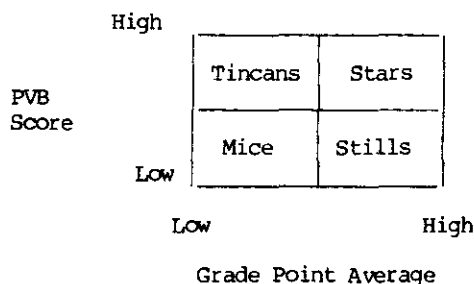


FIGURE 1 STUDENT GROUPS

Before proceeding to the results, it is important to emphasize that the data presented, in part because of its uncertain parentage, is subject to limitations.

1) The situation at the University of Saskatchewan may not compare to the other environments. There are a number of concerns in this regard even apart from the dangers of attempting to generalize from a single, rather remote geographic location. First, the College of Commerce operates under a tight student quota based primarily on high school grades. The effect of the quota translates into stringent entrance requirements - the highest on campus including engineering and premedicine. Further, neither the student mix, according to majors, nor the mix of employers may be typical. Because of the relatively low numbers involved, neither variable was examined in detail.

2) The data relating to job seeking behavior were collected from secondary sources which under-represent the full extent of this activity. For example, those students who augment their applications through the Canada Employment Centre with direct contacts are not adequately accounted for. In an effort to measure the magnitude of this problem, a convenience sample of recent graduates was contacted as were the counselors at the employment centre. Both sources indicated that a substantial majority of all job seeking activity - in the order of 90 percent - was accounted for by the data collected.

3) There was some non-response by employers on the mail questionnaire. This limitation is readily acknowledged although its magnitude is difficult to estimate. Many employers "pool" their recruitment activities to allow a single interviewer to screen for several different divisions and/or several locations of the organization. As a result, the person who conducted the preliminary interviews may not be aware of all the people eventually hired by the organization. Situations occurred where a single survey form was sent to an organization and three were returned. On the other hand, some 15 percent of employers did not reply. In total, the data referring to job offers is understated by: the cut-off date for collection of information; those students who conducted their own job search in whole or in part; non-response by some employers; and under-response by some divisions of some employers.

4) Finally, the results put a good deal of faith in the verbal predisposition instrument - a paper and pencil test - as a measure of actual oral communication skill. While this scale satisfies generally accepted levels for reliability and validity, the results still require a healthy dose of faith.

## RESULTS

Of the total population of 176 students, 149 availed themselves of the services provided by the Canada Employment Centre. The breakdown of job hunting by category is shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1

## JOB SEEKING BEHAVIOR BY GROUPS

Category	n	Number in Job Market	Percentage in Job Market
Stars	52	35	69.2%
Stills	37	34	91.9%
Mice	51	43	84.3%
Cans	36	36	100.0%
	176	149	84.7%

The lower participation rate of the top ranked "stars" category can be explained in large part by their desire to continue on to graduate studies. The "stills" category do not appear to contemplate graduate work to nearly the same extent. Perhaps the reputation of the M.B.A. graduate as being rather brash and extroverted is a disincentive to the intelligent but quiet undergraduate. The relatively low participation rate among "mice" was not investigated, but may simply represent a decision by some of this group to defer the time-consuming recruitment process in order to concentrate on much needed study.

The actual numbers of job applications, interviews attended and job offers obtained are shown in Table 2 for each category of student.

TABLE 2

## RECRUITMENT ACTIVITY BY GROUP

Category	Mean Job Applications	Mean Interviews	Mean Job Offers*
Stars	7.9	6.6	1.6
Stills	6.5	5.2	1.3
Mice	6.8	4.9	0.7
Cans	6.5	5.0	0.8
Mean values	6.9	5.4	1.1

\*Differences significant at 5%

The main feature of these statistics is the significant difference between groups in the number of job offers actually received. The star performers obtained twice as many job offers as the two groups whose grade point averages were lower than the mean. A clearer picture of success rates was obtained from examination of the "batting averages" of each group, as shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3

## SUCCESS RATIOS

Category	Interviews/ Application	Job Offers/ Application*	Job Offers/ Interview**
Stars	.78	.20	.25
Stills	.73	.21	.29
Mice	.70	.08	.11
Cans	.73	.17	.21

Significant at: \* 10%; \*\* 5%.

These results show that verbal facility and grade point average do not appear to materially affect success in obtaining initial interviews. In contrast the ability to turn applications and interviews into job offers does appear to differ between student groups. Predictably, students with low grade points and low verbal facility do more poorly than others. It appears that poor academic performance might be counteracted by verbal talents, as evidenced by the ratios for "tincans." The performance of high academic achievers with low verbal facility is unexpectedly high.

The separate influences of verbal predisposition and grade point averages on success rates are indicated in Table 4.

TABLE 4

## PEARSONIAN CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS

	Grade Point Average	Verbal Predisposition Score
Interviews/ Application	0.13*	0.01
Job offers/ Application	0.26**	0.00
Job offers/ Interview	0.30**	-0.02

Significant at: \* 10%; \*\* 1%.

These figures suggest that employers are not differentiating between students on their verbal skills. As a secondary check on this finding participation scores from case study classes were substituted for the PVB scores. This process yielded the same result. Further analysis revealed that students with above average academic marks received an average of 1.4 job offers compared to 0.8 offers per student for those with below average marks (significant at the 1% level). In contrast, students with above average communication scores received an average of 1.25 job offers compared to 0.9 offers per student for students with below average scores (not significant).

No other variables such as age, major or sex were found to be correlated with success rates in the recruitment process. Age was found to be

negatively correlated with the number of applications made and interviews attended (such that younger students had higher absolute numbers of interviews and applications); however, this did not translate into the receipt of higher than average job offers nor into higher than average ratios of performance.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Although this study has been limited to an analysis of only two criteria which were presumed to determine student success in the recruitment process, the findings are surprising. The study provides no support for the claim that employers recruit on the basis of the verbal communication skills of potential candidates.

It is possible that the findings represent an exceptional case - the result of artifacts of the situation or, perhaps, traceable to limitations in methodology. Such an interpretation argues strongly for continued attempts to gather empirical evidence related to employer behavior, as opposed to attitudes, in this topic area. On the other hand, if the results do have some validity, the question must be asked as to why employers apparently ignore verbal communication ability as a hiring criterion. Two of alternative explanations may be considered:

1. In responding to questionnaires, employers may simply be reacting to what they perceive as the most salient deficiency among recent graduates. In other words, intelligence, the work ethic, knowledge of discipline, etc. may already be present in "sufficient quantities" On the other hand, oral communication skills are multi-dimensional and include rate and frequency of verbal activity, language fluency, vocabulary, volubility, the tendency to initiate and maintain discussion, the ability to defend ideas, and so on. At least some of these dimensions develop over a lifetime; thus, it is not surprising that a 22-year-old moving from a university setting into a corporate environment may be deficient in such skills.

2. Employers may be uncertain as to how to evaluate verbal communication skills, especially in the tension charged atmosphere association with recruiting. Against the apparently objective measure of grade point average, frequently expressed to the precision of two decimal places, scoring verbal skills may well be seen as a highly subjective measure - too subjective, perhaps, to be relied upon to any major degree.

The findings do not suggest that business schools de-emphasize their efforts to develop communication skills. Undoubtedly communication ability is a vital lifelong skill. In contrast, grades may be a relatively poor indicator of success. Livingstone (1971) reported a study which found that successful M.B.A. students with high grades did not necessarily find success in their subsequent careers. He notes that "there seems little room for doubt that business schools and business organizations which rely on

scholastic standing, intelligence test scores and grades as measures of managerial potential, are using unreliable yardsticks."

Our overall conclusion is that verbal communication skills need to be examined in a much more meticulous manner than at present. Further, the preponderance of attitudinal studies in the area need to be augmented by further empirical work directed to behavioral considerations. Finally, you can tell your students to study hard - good grades do seem to translate into job offers!

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