

# A COMPARISON OF COMPETENCIES NECESSARY FOR EMPLOYMENT OF FIRST-TIME COLLEGE, BUSINESS MAJOR, UNDERGRADUATES

James R. Ogden, Kutztown University  
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## ABSTRACT

This study was developed and designed to assess the relative importance of employment acquisition characteristics for first-time business, college graduates. Nine job acquisition dimensions were identified. Those dimensions included: (a) Communication Skills, (b) Personal Appearance, (c) Recommendations, (d) Scholastic Record, (e) Co-curricular activities, (f) Related Work Experience, (g) Non-related Work Experience, (h) Knowledge of the Company and/or Industry, and (i) Career Goals. Employers of first-time college graduates in the fields of marketing, management and accounting relied upon the dimensions of communication skills, scholastic record, personal appearance, and recommendations to the greatest extent.

## INTRODUCTION

There is a wide array of information that deals with the "tools" a student needs in order to secure that first job out of college. These data are important to both the student and college (or university) for purposes of increased placement. The study objective of this research is to assimilate and rank this information in order to assist the marketing student with job acquisition.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In order to secure a job, the student needs basic tools. In a recent research project, these tools were categorized into nine dimensions: communication skills, co-curricular activities, non-related work experience, related work experience, career goals, knowledge of the company and/or industry, personal appearance, recommendations, and scholastic record (Ogden 1987). Within each of these dimensions large amounts of research have been published emphasizing particular operational skills. Wyant and Vice (1979) discuss the importance of a well written resume. Other authors echo the importance of a well written resume (McDaniel 1978; Figler 1979; Coxford 1982; Eure and Halatin 1981). Additional research emphasizing communication

skills include areas such as cover letters, personal interviews, thank-you notes, phone calls and social settings (Shart 1982); Beaumont 1980; Porter 1981; and Tucker and Rowe 1979). The importance of personal appearance has been well documented through various studies (Carlson 1979; Douglas and Soloman 1983; Malloy 1977; Lydon 1981 and Holman 1980). Tinsley (1978) and others have studied the impact of nonverbal communication. Overall, there have been hundreds of articles written (in the past twenty years) dealing with the "problem" of securing post-undergraduate employment (Manning and Reece 1984; Hafer and Hoth 1981; Downs and Tanner 1982; The College Placement Annual 1982; 1983, Ogden 1987, etc.).

## METHODOLOGY

Based upon an earlier work (Ogden 1987), the nine major employment dimensions of communication skills, co-curricular activities, non-related work experience, work experience, career goals, knowledge of the company and/or industry, personal appearance, recommendations and scholastic record, were utilized as a basis for comparison purposes.

For this research, twenty-two personnel recruiters representing twenty-two randomly selected Fortune 500 companies, and eight personnel recruiters representing each of the "Big Eight" accounting firms were utilized. "The N that forms the basis for (this) research has traditionally been the number of decisions that must be judged" rather than the total number of "judges" utilized (Thornton, 1974, p. 20; Postmand and Tolman, 1959).

The representatives were selected based upon the generation of a random number table. This table was then applied to the Fortune 500 companies and 22 representative companies were selected. The remaining eight judges were representatives of the top eight accounting firms.

For this study, forty-five bar graphs were developed. Each of the graphs depicts a hypothetical job applicant. On each graph there are nine bars. The nine bars represent the nine defined employment dimensions. Each bar depicts the relative strengths or weaknesses of that particular job applicant for the given dimension(s). A random number table was used to generate the ratings for each dimension (depicted in bar lengths). Thus, the hypothetical applicant depicted in Figure 2 would be generated by the random numbers of 6, 9, 3, 9, 3, 2, 9, 9, 1. The ratings are based on a nine-point continuum ranging from "among the lowest" to "among the highest". No attempt was made to develop any particular set of combinations for each profile. Each bar graph, thus, represented a particular hypothetical profile for a job applicant. The forty-five bar graphs (or job applicant profiles) were placed in plastic page covers. The plastic pages were put in a looseleaf binder. All profiles were randomly assigned using a random number table.

Thirty participants were used in this study. Eight participants were from accounting firms and twenty-two participants were from a random sample of Fortune 500 firms. These subjects were asked to respond to 45 profiles. For each of these subjects, a separate response was used as a method of acquiring the needed judgements. Of those thirty participants, ten were from each of the disciplines under study (marketing, management, and accounting) and were used for comparison purposes.

During a personal interview, each of the employers were given the forty-five (45) profiles of potential (hypothetical) candidates for employment. After looking through the profiles, the employers were asked to record their judgements of the forty-five hypothetical applicants on a response sheet containing a nine-point continuum ranging from "worst possible candidate" to "best possible candidate".

Correlations were calculated for each of the subjects' judgements utilizing Pearson's Product-moment Correlation ( $r$ ), to show the extent the employers relied upon each of the nine dimensions. The results are reported immediately following this section. After the correlations were computed, and the output ranked, the rankings were shown to ten different Fortune 500 executives to further establish the importance of these rankings. The employers concurred with the rankings.

## RESULTS

The correlations showed both positive and inverse relationships of varying strengths. Of the 270 correlations (9 dimensions multiplied by 30 participants) 190 were positive 79 were inverse and 1 showed no correlation (0.00). Tables one and two graphically depict the overall correlation means and rankings for marketing and the overall correlation. Most of the correlations range for  $\pm$  .000 to .360 (83 percent), showing only a slight relationship; ten percent range from  $\pm$  .361 to .550, indicating a moderate but significant relationship; six percent range from  $\pm$  .550 to .775, indicating a dependable and significant relationship. Less than one percent range from  $\pm$  .775 to 1.00, which indicates an extremely dependable relationship. These results indicate the heaviest reliance on the dimensions of communication skills, scholastic record, recommendations and personal appearance.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The employers (utilized in this body of research) do rely on some employment dimensions, or characteristics, more than others. The dimensions or characteristics, more than others. The dimension of communication skills is extremely important for the marketing student, as is personal appearance.

Perhaps seminars could be utilized to educate marketing faculty on the importance of these dimensions. The faculty could then give this information to their marketing students. Faculty should emphasize, in class, the importance of each of these dimensions for students who want to secure employment upon graduation.

The results of this research should be made available to the students, as well as faculty and staff, earlier in the students' collegiate career to help them prepare for their job search challenge. Perhaps workshops or seminars could be established that utilize these findings. Emphasis in course selection and placement should reflect the importance of communication skills. Additional research to replicate these findings should be undertaken. Perhaps comparisons of large versus medium versus small employers could be undertaken to further segment important dimensions for types of employers.

FIGURE 1  
JOB APPLICANT'S PROFILE

When comparing this job applicant with other job applicants, this job applicant is:

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TABLE 2

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Brian van der Westhuizen, California State University, Northridge

The demand for marketing education is, like the demand for many products, derived. In the first instance, students "demand" marketing education, however, the reason is simply to prepare themselves for careers in marketing. This is a subtle manifestation of marketing at work, with students reacting to the laws of supply and demand. There is a demand for qualified marketing personnel and students are preparing themselves to meet that demand.

### 1. The Problem

Marketing students need to know specifically what prospective employers require. They should also be aware of the job opportunities available, since their expectations are frequently not in line with the reality of the marketplace. In this regard, the demand for salespeople is as strong as ever. Unfortunately, many college students have a negative perception towards selling as a career, or even as an entry level job in marketing. An empirical study conducted in October 1990 confirmed that the majority of entry level jobs, as well as the more senior jobs in marketing are in sales and sales management. It therefore behooves the teaching faculty of marketing departments in business schools to change the negative perception towards personal selling by ensuring that the courses in the curriculum for marketing majors are appropriate and that their own attitude is right.

### 2. The Study

There were three main objectives of the study, although the first, to convince teaching faculty of the importance of personal selling and sales management, could only be accomplished by using the results of the study. The second objective was to compare the perception of students and employers of the course offered in a typical undergraduate degree course offering a marketing major in terms of their importance in preparing students for a career in marketing. The third objective was to compare students' expectations of and aspirations to entry and senior level marketing jobs with actual job availability in the market. The four questions addressed by the study were: how students and employers ranked the courses offered; which potential course topics were considered beneficial; the entry level jobs expected by

students and the entry level jobs actually available; and the senior level jobs aspired to by students and the senior level jobs actually available.

### 3. Methodology

Two questionnaires were developed, one for students and one for prospective employers. The sample frame used for students was the 276 declared marketing majors in their junior and senior years enrolled at California State University, Northridge, (CSUN), in the Fall semester of 1990. A total of 129 usable questionnaires was obtained, a response rate of 46.7%. The sample frame for prospective employers was provided by the Career Center at CSUN. From it, a systematic, random sample of 475 firms was selected and 88 usable questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 18.5%.

### 4. Results of the Study

Both students and employers ranked Introduction to Marketing Management the most important course in preparing for a career in marketing. Students ranked Marketing Communications second, whereas employers chose Sales Management. Although both students and employers ranked Marketing Communications third, a much higher percentage of employers chose this course. Marketing Research was ranked fourth by both groups, although more students chose it than employers. Students ranked Marketing Management Seminar fifth, whereas employers ranked Marketing Communications fifth. Students ranked Introduction to Marketing Management sixth, but employers ranked Marketing Management Seminar sixth. The conclusion is that there is very significant divergence of perception as to the relative importance of the various courses.

Regarding the perception of the two groups of the relative importance of potential course topics, 80.3% of employers considered a course in Business Communication important and ranked it first. Only 55.8% of students considered it third most important. Employers thought a course in Professional Selling was second most important, but

students only ranked it fourth. Again, there were significant differences between both groups.

This study found that there are very serious differences between students' expectations and the availability of jobs in the market. The overwhelming majority of marketing jobs, both at the entry level (81.8%) and at the senior level (59.1%), are in the sales area. The implications for marketing educators are thus clear.

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Regarding the perception of the two groups of the relative importance of potential course topics, 80.3% of employers considered a course in Business Communication important and ranked it first. Only 55.8% of students considered it third most important. Employers thought a course in Professional Selling was second most important, but

students only ranked it fourth. Again, there were significant differences between both groups.

This study found that there are very serious differences between students' expectations and the availability of jobs in the market. The overwhelming majority of marketing jobs, both at the entry level (81.8%) and at the senior level (59.1%), are in the sales area. The implications for marketing educators are thus clear.