

MILLENNIAL JOB PLACEMENT IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY: WHAT YOUR STUDENTS DON'T KNOW MAY HURT YOU

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ABSTRACT

Student job placement upon graduation is a persistent factor in the assessment of both academic programs and individual student success. This study seeks to explore what strategies and actions can be taken to make hospitality students more competitive in the job search process. By identifying these strategies, attempts can be made to execute them in academic programs, resulting in an increase in student job placement success upon graduation. In-depth interviews with lodging industry recruiters yielded five emergent themes: (a) impression management; (b) interpersonal skills; (c) work experience value; (d) academic isolation; and (e) student accountability. Practical implications and remedies are explored for academics, industry, and the individual student. Further, the strategies offered may be applied to or modified for any student and/or job applicant in any job search situation. Possible benefits exist for academic programs, the individual student, the hospitality industry, and society as a whole.

Keywords: Job placement, industry recruiters, hospitality student, Millennial

INTRODUCTION

While the “Millennial” may be defined differently depending on the source, this term refers generally to individuals born in the 1980s or 1990s (Keith & Simmers, 2013) who have been shaped by a mixture of unique events and phenomena in society unlike those of previous generations (Kitterlin, 2013). This group is characterized as being tech savvy, self-confident (at times narcissistic) multi-taskers who enter the job market with significantly different work attitudes and expectations (Kitterlin, 2013). These generational differences may pose a challenge for both the job applicant and the potential employer, as they may result in communication gaps and misunderstandings during the interview process.

One of the continuous elements in academic program assessments is the job placement of graduating students. Some accreditation bodies include job placement in order to evaluate success with respect to student achievement consistent within the institutes’ mission (Southern

Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2012). Academics and industry professionals alike agree on the need for Hospitality and Tourism Management educators to command a thorough understanding of contemporary issues in the industry, so as to equip students with the skills, knowledge, and competencies essential to career success (Goodman & Sprague, 1991; Mayo & Thomas-Haysbert, 2005; Millar, Mao, & Moreo, 2010). With the unemployment rate of hospitality management students estimated at six percent (Carnevale, Cheah, & Strohl, 2013; United States Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013), job placement and strategies to increase job placement success would certainly fall into this realm of contemporary issues.

Purpose of the Study

Many studies to determine gaps between what industry expects of college graduates and what academic institutions are teaching have been performed (Downey & DeVeau, 1988; Kwok, Adams, & Margaret, 2011; Paraskevas, 2000; Walo, 2000). Few academic studies, however, have sought to understand what can be done to help Millennial students market and display their qualities, thus making themselves more attractive to hospitality industry recruiters. The unique characteristics of Millennial job seekers, combined with the unemployment rate of hospitality management students, indicates a need to examine what factors are critical to the enhancement of job placement for this subgroup of the overall population. Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify strategies that will enable hospitality students to be more competitive in the job search process. By identifying these strategies, attempts can be made to execute them in academic programs, with the end result being a possible increase in graduate job placement success. Possible benefits exist for academic programs, the individual hospitality student, the hospitality industry, and society as a whole. Further, these strategies may be used as is or reasonably modified so as to assist any graduating student seeking job placement in any industry.

Background

Hospitality Industry Recruitment. Recruitment is becoming increasingly multifarious and sophisticated (Ziegler, 2012), and industry is looking for graduates who have relevant internship or related work experience before interview (Zuber, 1997), and possess exceptional industry skills upon graduation (Chi & Gursoy, 2009). Moreover, recruiters expect students to be work-ready, they demand a range of qualities and capabilities of hospitality graduates (Spowart, 2011). Particularly, recruiters are demanding that student applicants to be able to take initiative, think for themselves, explore by asking questions, and have a willingness to learn (Yorke & Harvey, 2005).

University Job Placement Strategies. Hospitality and Tourism Management programs steadily compete to improve job placement rates for their graduates (Mintzer, 2011). In order to assist students in their job-searching efforts, some of the programs or schools choose to build their own career service centers (Chi & Gursoy, 2009). Others rely on career fairs and recruiter campus visits, or alumni's contribution (Spowart, 2011). For many Hospitality and Tourism Management programs, one of the best ways for students to enter the workforce is through the participation of an internship opportunity (Chuang, 2011); this also optimizes employment

opportunities through establishing long-term relationships (win-win) between the industry and the program (Walo, 2001). Similarly, management in training (MIT) programs offer additional choices for student job placement. This option is becoming increasingly important as Hospitality and Tourism Management programs attempt to reduce education and training costs and enhance profit while maintaining service quality (Huang & Lin, 2011).

Research Questions

There are a number of hospitality industry-related web sites to assist candidates do the mock interviews by offering advice on resume writing, interviewing skills, and general appropriate behavior during meetings with prospective employers (Harris, Kwansa, & Lattuca, 2006). There is also a great deal of research highlighting gaps that exist between industry and academics, and what the hospitality and tourism industry is seeking in a quality graduate (Downey & DeVeau, 1988; Kwok, Adams, & Margaret, 2011; Paraskevas, 2000; Walo, 2000). However, little academic research has been conducted on how to help these graduates market and display their quality so as to be more attractive and competitive in the job market. Based on a review of the relevant literature, and the purpose of the study, the following research questions were formed:

1. What are hospitality industry recruiters looking for when interviewing hospitality graduates?
2. What do recruiters believe could be done to improve hospitality student job placement?

Methodology

The insufficiency of current information available on job placement strategies of hospitality students combined with the adoption of ineffective strategies to date indicated that a qualitative approach was appropriate for this study. Specifically, an inductive thematic analysis was employed to identify the experiences of industry recruiters with hospitality student job applicants using a data-driven and systematic process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Contact information was obtained from a Hospitality and Tourism Management school career services center in South Florida for fifty potential interviewees who were currently working in recruiting positions in the hospitality industry. Twenty of these responded and agreed to participate in the study; twelve males and eight females, all from the lodging industry. Interviews lasted approximately thirty-sixty minutes, and were recorded after obtaining participants' written consent.

Interviews were performed in an open-ended and unstructured format. This allowed for the collection of foundational information, and prevented restriction of participants' responses. Guiding questions were used, but interviews were performed in a conversational manner. Each participant was asked the following questions, related to the research questions: (a) What are hospitality industry recruiters looking for when interviewing hospitality graduates? (b) What can be done to improve hospitality student job placement? While these served as guiding questions, participants were also asked clarifying questions during the interview to expand upon their answers.

Each participant interview was read and inductively coded separately by three researchers. Code agreements, discrepancies, and differences were compared and discussed by the researchers. Similar codes were then grouped together into categories, which were compared in a cycling process for differences and similarities, the goal being continuous analysis and synthesis of categories into themes. This analysis process has been used previously across disciplines with interview data (Liu & Tsaur, 2014; Mattson, Torbiörn, & Hellgren, 2014; Papastavrou, Andreou, & Vryonides, 2014).

Interpretive rigor was maintained during analysis through the use of within-design consistency, conceptual consistency, and consistency of inferences with each other within a study (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2002). Validity was strengthened by establishing a clear research framework, and by pattern matching through the use of research questions that were developed from the underpinning literature and defining constructs of the study. Reliability was strengthened in three ways: protocol was developed prior to entry in the field, which ensured that the questionnaire items and interview questions/measures were consistently presented to all participants, inter-rater reliability and a rigorous coding procedure were established through the comparison of initial coding results from the first interview, as each interviewer coded the initial findings separately and compared responses for agreement, and multiple researchers evaluated the questionnaire responses and interview transcripts to further ensure inter-evaluator reliability, agreement, and consistency (Crawford, 2013).

Data analysis resulted in the identification of five themes: (a) impression management; (b) interpersonal skills; (c) work experience value; (d) academic isolation; and (e) student accountability. Each will be discussed, with sample representative statements, in the following section.

Findings

Impression Management. Many of the participant responses to this first question addressed behavior that one may initially perceive to be ‘common sense.’ For example, many participants noted that the first impression is a key factor when assessing hospitality students during a job interview. Specifically, recruiters look for professional appearance and dress, a polished one-page resume, confident and outgoing personalities, and prompt arrival to the interview session. Many participants indicated that these qualities were more important than most other qualifiers, including academic accomplishments and work experience. Supporting statements included:

The quality I am looking for is you...the way you are, the way you dress. You should be very prepared. (Participant 6)

It's about how professional they are. They don't need to have experience for a lot of positions because we are willing to train them. (Participant 19)

The aforementioned aspects largely relate to an applicant's impression management tactics (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 2013). The findings in this study agree with the long history of

practice and milieu of literature supporting applicants' use of impression management tactics during interviews to give positive impressions to interviewers, resulting in recruiter hiring decisions (Chen & Lin, 2013; Kilduff & Day, 1994; Stevens & Kristof, 1995). Further, the development of impression management skills early on is a valuable trait that may benefit any individual who wishes to succeed in a customer service and people-oriented industry such as hospitality and tourism, as previous studies have found the use of impression management tactics to be positively related to hospitality job performance ratings (Su, Yang, Badaoui, & Cho, 2012).

Interpersonal Skills. Interestingly, every participant cited interpersonal skills, such as communication, as being of utmost importance. Interpersonal skills are those skills necessary for effective interaction with others, such as communication, oral presentation, telephone, conflict management, and negotiation (Sandwith, 1993; Sisson & Adams, 2013). Supporting statements include:

If you are in the frontline, definitely, communication skills will be a plus, you must know how to express yourself. Writing skills as well. (Participant 2)

It's all about your personality and how we get along. (Participant 5)

Attitude makes it different. Obvious teamwork, energy... (Participant 18)

Previous studies have also highlighted a need for the upcoming Millennial generation of workers to improve upon their interpersonal skills, especially in regards to communication, suggesting that communication style skills (i.e. style-typing and style-flexing skills), are the foundation for subsequent interpersonal skill development (Hartman & McCambridge, 2013). Studies of hospitality management graduates and professionals specifically have emphasized a need for strong interpersonal skills not just for obtaining a job, but for maintaining employment and excelling in the industry (Brownell, 1994; Lin, 2002; Sisson & Adams, 2013; Spowart, 2011; Tesone & Ricci, 2005). The findings of this study, similar to the aforementioned studies, indicate that greater value was placed in the hospitality industry on interpersonal skills than technical skills or the applicant's educational background and achievements. This generational deficiency may speak to a need for greater training in the interpersonal skills area within the academic environment before students enter the job market (Hartman & McCambridge, 2013; Kitterlin, 2013).

Work Experience Value. Every participant interviewed indicated that while GPA and education are important, they are not as important as work experience, thus work experience and work-related accomplishments should be emphasized over scholastic achievements:

Highlight your strength in your resume and recruiters can see it easier. GPA is not important; I don't look at it. (Participant 7)

Don't put education on the top. Always put experience on the top. Skills are plus, but not that necessary, but computer system skills is very necessary to have. (Participant 12)

This emphasis on the value of work experience for hospitality job seekers is not a novel concept; this finding concurs with that of similar research studies conducted with hospitality industry recruiters over the past decades that found GPA to rank at the bottom of a recruiter's priorities, and should strengthen the message that students should not "rest upon their academic laurels during the interview process" (Jones, Izzolo, & Christianson, 1993, p. 77).

Academic Isolation. When asked the follow-up question, "What can be done to improve hospitality student job placement," two major themes emerged. First, participants felt that academia can become somewhat isolated; meaning, there is a disconnect between what is being taught in the classroom and what is actually valued in industry. In addition to gaining parity between academic and industry values, participants felt that even more can be done on the part of the university/college to increase hospitality students' chances of job placement upon graduation. First, there was a consensus that students are graduating without having developed the professionalism expected of a job candidate. Suggestions for academics to help bridge this gap included increased opportunities to practice and develop professional behavior and interviewing skills:

Schools need to have more mock interviews. Also, make sure the school helps students to do one-on-one practice. (Participant 3)

Another area generally agreed upon was the need for more opportunity to interact with and recruit students:

[Programs] need a lot more job fairs. We don't just hire twice a year. (Participant 1)

Other recruitment and interaction opportunities cited by participants included classroom visits, improved career services interaction and support, and invited speaking engagements.

Student Accountability. While participants felt that more could be done on the part of the university, the general consensus was that job placement success lies more in the hands of the student. Again, while themes of professionalism emerged, universities can only offer so many opportunities for their students to refine themselves and to help the students learn the soft skills industry is looking for. It is imperative that students understand and identify the fact that they may be deficient in these soft skills and work to improve them by joining groups or visiting speech and writing labs. Supporting statements are as follows:

When you go to an interview, make sure you're prepared. Don't waste your time at a job fair if you don't prepare. Make sure you are the right candidate for the right position. Know what the company is about, know the history of the company, and make sure you have questions to ask. (Participant 11)

Students must also be realistic in their expectations for employment immediately following graduation. I just want students to know when you graduate you can't be a manager immediately. You need to start from frontline, such as front desk and food beverage. You should understand the hotel and should know how to sell the hotel. (Participant 2)

Don't expect to be a director without any experience when you just graduate. Worry first about horizontal growth, not vertical growth. If I were going to build a house, I'm not going to be worried about pretty granite counter tops before the foundation is done. (Participant 14)

Another poignant subtheme that emerged in relation to student responsibility came from the participants' insistence that students need to be more realistic in their job expectations upon graduation, as recruiters felt that this new generation of job applicants were under the impression that having a degree in Hospitality and Tourism Management would automatically rocket them to top positions within hospitality and tourism organizations without first working in and learning from foundational positions within the industry. The importance of realistic industry expectations for hospitality students has been documented in previous literature, as it will eventually impact job satisfaction, turnover, and organizational and industry commitment (AlBattat & Som, 2013; Wan, Wong, & Kong, 2014).

Implications and Future Research

Practical implications can be drawn from these findings for both the university and the individual student. First, it is clear that Hospitality and Tourism Management students need to improve their professionalism and soft skills, especially communication skills (both written and verbal). In this regard, participant responses echoed those of recent studies on what qualities are important in a hospitality graduate (Chung-Herrera, Enz, & Laukau, 2003; Huang & Lin, 2011; Kwok, et al., 2011; Lin, 2002; Millar et. al., 2010; Raybould & Wilkins, 2005; Tesone & Ricci, 2006; Tsai, Goh, Huffman, & Wu, 2006). This development of professionalism and soft skills is an area that can be improved upon on the parts of both academia and the individual student. It should be noted that while many universities currently offer opportunities for this development and growth; the ultimate responsibility falls upon the individual student to reach out for help.

Other opportunities that universities can provide to assist with the development of students' soft skills include classroom addresses or senior seminars in which academics and/or industry professionals educate students on professional behavior, with specific examples and emphasis on importance. Communication style classroom exercises focusing on style-typing and style-flexing abilities may also assist in the development of communication skills, while simultaneously providing a foundation for interpersonal skill development (see Hartman & McCambridge, 2011, for exercise examples). Other suggestions include increasing the opportunity for mock interviews, interviewing workshops, and workshops that offer students a glimpse into their own behaviors so as to increase self-awareness. Programs may also consider the inclusion of courses such as Organizational Behavior or Human Relations as a required part of their curriculum; as such courses address interpersonal skill sets.

Further, course professors may consider mandating that their students join groups such-as Toastmasters International, or require that a specified number of hours be spent at the universities writing or speech labs. Groups such as Toastmasters International help to build confidence in students and teach them how to think quickly on their feet and talk about a plethora of subjects (Toastmasters International, 2013). Many universities offer writing or speech

labs that are staffed with doctoral students who can help polish papers and give tips on how to present more naturally. Of course, all of this will also require the student to comprehend and embrace the importance of these attributes, as well as the self-motivation to invest the time and effort to develop their professionalism and soft skills.

Another major practical implication centers around the proposition that students need to not only obtain hospitality work experience, but they must learn to communicate and emphasize that work experience during the job search process. While education is certainly not without its merit, Hospitality and Tourism Management programs may see a benefit in pushing for more work experience hours, and being flexible with course offerings so as to encourage and accommodate the working student. Instead of emphasizing academic achievements and scholastic accomplishments, students may find greater success in emphasizing their actual industry involvement. Students should also be prepared to articulate their strengths, and what value they can add to the organization. Additionally, academic programs may offer coaching workshops for students on how to communicate and express the skills they have gained during their work experiences to recruiters during the interview process. Of course, while internships are required in many Hospitality and Tourism Management programs, students could be encouraged to seek out additional internship or job shadowing opportunities, so as to develop a portfolio of well-rounded work experiences.

Moreover, universities may consider increasing opportunities for industry to interact with and recruit their students. As was mentioned in the interviews, companies do not simply recruit and hire applicants on a biannual basis; thus, opportunities to interact with potential student job candidates should not be limited to once or twice a year. Hospitality and Tourism Management programs and university career services may realize great benefit in the regular offering of invitations to recruiters and industry professionals. These additional meetings and campus visits can help to increase communication between industry recruiters and hospitality faculty which may further help to bridge any existing gaps between education and industry. Correspondingly, faculty should be encouraging students to find a hospitality and tourism industry mentor, facilitate such connections, and assist with the attainment of mentee opportunities.

Finally, there seems to be a strong need for students to be more realistic in their expectations for employment in the hospitality and tourism industry upon graduation. Academics can assist in this area by attempting to paint an accurate picture of career paths and job expectations for students in their hospitality courses. Students must be made aware that sometimes in order to attain promotion and desired positions that there is a necessity of relocation and horizontal movements inside and outside of the organization. The solution for this phenomenon may also tie into increased industry interaction; recruiters should express to students what they should expect during the first years of their career path. Ideally, students can be provided with hypothetical one year, three year, five year, and ten year career plans of where they should be in their professional growth following graduation.

Of course, this study is not without limitations. The lodging-only representation makes it impossible to generalize findings to all hospitality industry recruiters. The qualitative nature of the study also lends itself to generalization limitations; future research should be conducted with

a larger sample, a sample more representative of each facet of the hospitality industry, and one which uses a quantifiable method. Further, future studies should seek to identify the method in which the aforementioned areas of student deficiency are being taught currently in Hospitality and Tourism Management curriculums, so as to identify any gaps or areas for improvement.

Next, it may be beneficial to investigate the Millennial generation's perception of proper impression management and interpersonal skills. For example, this next generation of the hospitality industry workforce may have very different ideas as to what constitutes "professionalism" and "appropriate communication." Thus, instead of there being a phenomenon of students failing to display appropriate behaviors during the job search process, perhaps this is indicative of a societal shift in behavior that will be seen across all facets of industry.

Finally, the finding that recruiters felt there was a disconnect between what academia was teaching and what was actually valued in the industry ('academic isolation') may be in actuality due to a lack of knowledge on the part of industry as to what opportunities students are being offered at the university level. Simply put, recruiters seemed to believe that academia does not know what is going on in industry, but perhaps recruiters do not fully understand what is being done in academia. A comparison could be made to identify any gaps in the perception on both ends of the spectrum.

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