

THE WORKPLACE PERCEPTIONS OF MARKETING MAJORS VS. OTHER B-SCHOOL MAJORS

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ABSTRACT

B-School graduates have the greatest propensity for employment following graduation of any college/university majors. Because of increased employment opportunities, greater numbers of students are vying for undergraduate and graduate business degrees. As a major component of the educated workforce, many B-School students are viewed as lacking in a work ethic when contrasted with previous generations. But, little is known or in extant literature about how B-School students feel about work and the workplace.

This study investigated the workplace perceptions of 332 junior- and senior-level business majors. Data was collected by way of a questionnaire and the results were tabulated and statistically treated. Marketing majors were contrasted with other B-School majors and when appropriate gender and racial/ethnic differences in the population were noted.

INTRODUCTION

According to Francese (1993) about one out of every four bachelor's degrees conferred during the 1980s were in business administration, the most of any field of study. Also, one in four master's degrees are in business administration, and over half a million people obtained MBAs during the 1980s. This mushrooming of business majors may have been caused by students reading the writing on the wall – that there are jobs waiting for them after graduation. Edmondson (1997) supports that assumption in his claim that students with a degree in business are the most likely college major to go straight to a full-time job after they graduate. That trend is likely to continue according to documents of the Labor Market Information Division of the Employment Development Department (1996). That organization maintains that until at least 2005, trends indicate that business administration career paths will have the fastest growth, showing the highest percentage increase of new job openings.

While the increase in business majors may have been caused So, if Americans psyches are ingrained with the concept that hard work pays off, then what's the problem with college students? Robinson (1995) thinks he knows the answer with the observation that today's college/university student comes up short when contrasted to students of past generations. He maintains that these students are "[M]arginal in their literacy, smug in their ignorance [and] self-indulgent in their conduct." Robinson maintains that a big part of the problem is their

by the number of job opportunities available to them, the growth in business degrees may also be a function of student perceptions that the field of study can lead them down the path to financial wealth. Supporting this contention, Mendelsohn Media Research, Inc. (1997) found that education and the work people do are what makes the real difference between Americans who are average or wealthy. Mendelsohn discovered that the "average" wealthy person is more likely to be a salaried or self-employed executive manager. Obviously, the skills and techniques learned in B-Schools helped many graduates become rich.

The U.S. has never had so many people in the workplace with business administration degrees. While the number of B-School graduates have grown, a number of higher education faculty who teach today's students frequently complain about the wane of their work ethic. The other day over lunch, for example, when discussing mid-term examination results a colleague of one of the authors remarked that "My students are doing poorly because they just don't know how to put their shoulders to the grindstone anymore." Another colleague contributed, "It seems that in our modern society, people, in general, simply don't work as hard as they used to." Everyone at the table nodded in agreement.

The great American work ethic may now be mellowing but it is a well-founded U.S. proposition. As evidence, in the late-nineteenth century, Horatio Alger wrote nearly a 100 popular books with titles like "Rise from the Ranks," "Strive and Succeed," "Ben the Luggage Boy," and "From Canal Boy to President." Through his books Alger sent a simple message to America's youth -- work hard, live clean, play fair, and you will be richly rewarded. Whole generations of Americans were raised with Alger's main theme that in America, there is a payoff for hard work. That message has been subsequently communicated to and passed on to successive generations.

professors who positively reinforce their students' minimal output by inflating their grades.

Higher education faculty who have been teaching for a long time have likely noted a definitive shift in students' feelings toward work. This shift may highlight a trend inherent in a populace with increasing educational achievements. Along with the mass media, education and the credentials it

bestows may be raising expectations faster than the economic system can meet them. Moreover, it could be that much of what is interpreted as anti-work attitudes on the part of youth may be their appraisal of the workplace itself. It seems self-evident that young people, armed with a business degree and who are preparing to enter the work force, have been shaken by workplace dislocations resulting from employer downsizing, right-sizing, higher demands on productivity, longer working hours, etc.

Research Questions

Surveying college/university students is not new. Generally recognized as members of a society's *avant garde*, students are a well-established and revealing source of useful information. From this study, the authors sought to answer the following research questions with respect to B-School majors and marketing majors in particular:

1. Is there a proportional gender difference among majors?
2. Are they optimistic or pessimistic about the number of job opportunities available?
3. Do they see a connection between success at school and in the workplace?
4. Is there a perceived linkage between personal attributes/hard work and success?
5. What role do they see between doing a good job and workplace promotions?
6. Do they believe that executive success will be determined by their hard work?
7. Does Horatio Alger's ideals exist – is it possible to start off poor and become rich by working hard?

METHODS

A questionnaire was constructed to gather data to answer the above stated research questions. It comprised two sections.

The first section queried respondents as to their demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age, race/ethnicity, etc.) that serve to paint a demographic portrait of the study population.

The second section focused on respondent perceptions of the work place. The instrument was modified from an instrument devised by Scott, Nelson & Scott (1988) that was employed and females are attracted to majors in Information Systems and Accounting, respectively. Yet Management and Other majors are almost equally appealing to both genders. Interestingly, the Marketing majors in this study are precisely equally distributed.

to explore how Anglos and Hispanics differed in their perceptions of the workplace.

Individual questionnaires were used as input data into a Bio-Medical Data Processing (BMDP) statistical software package. The data set was cross-tabulated by gender, race/ethnicity, and educational level. Cross-tabulations were also treated by Pearson ChiSquare techniques and, where necessary, by Yates Corrected ChiSquare. For the purpose of this study and ease of understanding for lay people, the findings obtained from the statistical treatment of the data set will be discussed both by the number of respondents and as a percentage of the total respondents by their B-School major.

FINDINGS

Description of Sample

The population selected for this study consisted of 332 U.S. college students selected by their convenience. Of the total number of participants, all were business majors and mostly (92.2%) in their junior or senior year of study. About two-thirds of the sample were in the 17-30 age group. The sample consisted of 77 Accounting majors, 75 Information Systems majors, 79 Management majors, 30 Marketing majors, 71 Other majors.

In terms of the racial/ethnic make-up of the respondents, Whites made up the largest segment (81.4%), followed by Hispanics (10.3%), Blacks (5.1%), Asian (0.3%) and Undeclared (2.9%). Almost half came from a family where at least one parent was university-educated and a majority (76.6%) reported family annual incomes greater than \$35,000.

A profile of the sample by their gender and academic major is detailed in Table 1. It is interesting how males

Table 1: Percentage Distribution of Respondents (by Gender and Business Major)

| | ACT | MIS | MGT | MKT | OTH | TOT |
|--------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Males | 24.7 | 61.3 | 57.0 | 50.0 | 52.0 | 48.4 |
| Female | 75.3 | 38.7 | 43.0 | 50.0 | 48.0 | 51.6 |

The results in Table 2 were obtained from the question, "Are you optimistic or pessimistic as to the number of jobs that you expect will be available for you after graduation?" Considerable optimism exists that job opportunities will be

plentiful to B-School majors post-graduation. Interestingly, marketing majors felt more optimistic than other B-School majors. Surprisingly, a larger percentage (83.4%) of females were optimistic than were their male counterparts (71.7%). Most surprising, however, is that Blacks felt more optimistic (93.8%) than did Whites (76.3%) to this question.

Table 2: Percentage Perceptions of Job Opportunities

| | ACT | MIS | MGT | MKT | OTH | TOT |
|-------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Optimistic | 81.8 | 79.5 | 69.6 | 86.7 | 74.0 | 77.4 |
| Pessimistic | 18.2 | 20.5 | 30.4 | 13.3 | 26.0 | 22.6 |

The results in Table 3 were obtained from the question, "Do you agree or disagree that a positive relationship exists between your success in higher education and your future success in the workplace?" From the results in the table it is obvious that the vast majority of B-School majors feel that there is a linkage between one's success in college and how one will do in the workplace after graduation. Further, agreement is almost uniform across the spectrum of B-School majors delineated in this table with each of them agreeing close to the 85% range. With respect to gender, more females (88.8%) felt there was a carry-over of success from school to work than did males (79.7%). Across ethnic lines, Asians were in total agreement (100%) in the linkage. Hispanics trailed them slightly (90.6%), followed by Blacks (87.5%) and Whites were last in agreement at 82.9%.

Table 3: Percentage Correlation of Views Between Educational and Workplace Success

| | ACT | MIS | MGT | MKT | OTH | TOT |
|----------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Agree | 85.3 | 87.7 | 84.6 | 86.7 | 84.0 | 85.3 |
| Disagree | 14.7 | 12.3 | 15.4 | 13.3 | 16.0 | 14.7 |

The results in Table 4 were obtained from the question, "Do you agree or disagree that your ability to "climb the ladder of success" will be mainly determined by your personal attributes and by working hard?" From the data entries in the table, the majority of respondents felt that the combination of

The results in Table 6 were obtained from the question, "Do you agree or disagree that if you "really put your heart into it" you can rise to whatever heights you desire in the workplace?" Marketing and Management majors are sure that there is a connection between one's efforts and what one achieves in the workplace. A majority of the other B-School majors agree with this proposition too, just not to the same level of intensity of Marketing and Management majors.

working hard and one's personal attributes will cause one to be elevated in the workplace. Marketing and Management majors seem more assured of the relationship than do Accounting and Information Systems majors. Further, when contrasting the responses by gender, similar results were achieved with agreement for males at 77.1% and females, 74.7%. Looking at the results by race/ethnicity, Blacks see less probability that personal attributes and hard work led to workplace rewards with 1/3rd of them disagreeing with the connection than when contrasting it to Asians (100%), Whites (75.8%) and Hispanics (75%).

Table 4: Percentage Correlation Between Personal Attributes and Hard Work

| | ACT | MIS | MGT | MKT | OTH | TOT |
|----------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Agree | 68.9 | 70.4 | 85.7 | 83.3 | 80.0 | 76.6 |
| Disagree | 31.1 | 29.6 | 14.3 | 16.7 | 20.0 | 23.4 |

The results in Table 5 were obtained from the question, "Do you agree or disagree that as long as you do a good job and "keep your nose clean" you will be recognized and promoted at work?" There seems to be remarkably less agreement with this question than the one from which the data in Table 4 were obtained. Marketing majors led all B-School majors in their agreement that by doing a good job and playing by the rules one will be rewarded by workplace promotions. Other B-School majors are not so sure of this connection. Roughly half of the males and half the females polled felt that there was a connection. Across racial/ethnic lines most Whites and Hispanics felt similarly (55.6% and 56.3%, respectively) that a connection exists while a vast majority (75%) of Blacks, however, rejected that proposition.

Table 5: Percentage Correlation Between Doing a Good Job and Workplace Promotion

| | ACT | MIS | MGT | MKT | OTH | TOT |
|----------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Agree | 51.9 | 45.9 | 57.7 | 66.7 | 49.0 | 52.8 |
| Disagree | 48.1 | 54.1 | 42.3 | 33.3 | 51.0 | 47.2 |

When looking if there are gender differences to this question, there were none found. Both males and females were at the 85% level of agreement on this question. However, when checking the data for racial or ethnic differences, some were found. While Asians led in agreement to the question, followed by Whites (87.4%), and Hispanics close on their heels (84.4%), fully one-fourth of Blacks disagreed that a linkage exists between one's efforts and rewards.