

EMPLOYERS' AND ENTRY-LEVEL JOB SEEKERS' EXPECTATIONS: ARE THEY SIMILAR?

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ABSTRACT

The problem of unemployed graduates is not of recent origin. Every year thousands of fresh graduates leave their educational institutions for the world of work. The main purpose of this study was to examine whether the perceived values, skills and abilities of 180 final year accounting and management students are similar to those of employers. In addition, this study also sought to determine whether entry-level job seekers' perceptions were influenced by gender, ethnicity and major field of study. Using a questionnaire survey, this study found that employers and entry-level job seekers differed in their perceptions as per the most desired values and abilities sought in an entry-level job seeker. Whilst gender had no effect on the perceived abilities and skills of entry-level job seekers, there appeared to be some difference in the perceived values amongst gender.

INTRODUCTION

"New PR graduates cannot write well, including making Press releases. They do not even speak good English" (Lim, 2002); "... some of them were highly qualified with second class upper degrees but they did not know how to communicate or express themselves" (Vasudevan, 2002). The problem of local graduates who cannot speak or write well is not a recent one. In 1995, for example, 8.9 percent of the total unemployed persons had a tertiary education. In 1998, the figure swelled to 12.8 percent. In April 2000, the Ministry of Human Resources reported the existence of 40,000 unemployed graduates, translating into some 15% of the total of unemployed persons (Shamsuddin Bardan, 2000).

With the proliferation of tertiary institutions, both public and private, thousands of fresh

graduates enter the job market each year (Anonymous, 2002). In the past, a person who graduated from a university was said to have acquired a trained mind but this is no longer good enough today. Hence, only those who possess the "extra edge" will stand out (Ismail, 2002).

One of a graduate's major goals is to achieve an important life objective – to be employed (Thornburg, 1997). The majority embark on a process of identifying desirable entry-level jobs, either during their senior year or shortly after graduation. Some adopt a very professional job search process, whereas others pursue the search rather randomly (Golen, Grasso and Moeckel, 1995).

Values, Skills and Abilities from Job Seekers' Perspective

Students during the 1950s sought high salaries, job security and opportunities for promotion, all perceived as ample during an era of prosperity. In the 1960s, students generally espoused social responsibility, resolution of social problems and meaning of life, in accord with altruistic attitudes prevalent in society at that time. The perspective altered in the 1970s and 1980s, when students and society shifted goal orientation toward individual achievement and reward through careers. Students in the 1990s appeared to be refocussing on a combination of job attainment, job security and self-improvement to enhance their professional status (Anderson, Stanley and Parker, 1992).

A study by Philip, Philips and Cappel (1994) involved rating by management students on 23 factors potentially present in workplaces. The 23 factors were: opportunity for advancement; challenging or interesting work; positive organizational climate; job security; good training

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programme; good health insurance; good retirement plan; good pay; job autonomy; paid sick leave; region or city where job is located; location (actual job site); company reputation; good dental insurance; paid personal leave days; good life insurance; ability of spouse to find a job in or near city where they will work; flexible work schedules; financial support for future education; stock option or ownership programme; health or workout facilities; no travel; day care provided.

In examining how graduates reach decisions about applying to particular companies for jobs, Keenan (1985) reported that students at Heriot-Watt University (Edinburgh, Scotland) indicated preferences for career opportunities and training facilities. They also emphasized job security and the opportunity to make use of their academic training. About two-thirds of the subjects stressed salary prospects in the long term, but less than half thought that it was important that the initial salary be high.

According to Herzberg's (1966) two-factor theory, job satisfaction and dissatisfaction stem from different sources (Herzberg, 1966). In particular, dissatisfaction was associated with conditions surrounding the jobs (e.g. working conditions, pay, security, quality of supervision and relations with others) rather than work itself. The factors that prevent negative reactions, are referred to as *hygiene* or *maintenance* factors. By contrast, satisfaction was derived from factors associated with the work itself or to outcomes directly resulting from it, such as the nature of the jobs, achievement in the work done, promotion opportunities, and chances for personal growth and recognition. These factors which are associated with high levels of job satisfaction, are called *motivators*. Hence, the two-factor theory implies that steps should be taken to create conditions that help avoid dissatisfaction, i.e. by taking care of the hygiene factors (Greenberg and Baron, 2003).

Present day graduates have little patience with hierarchical roles and are not interested in "paying their dues". They want work that uses and continually expands their skills so that they can be entrepreneurial generalists rather than narrow specialists. The current generation of

college graduates has different expectations from that of a decade ago. Graduates of the nineties are less wedded to their jobs; they value their independence more and they are more willing to put their careers at risk (Moravec, Wheeler and Hall, 1989).

Values, Skills and Abilities from Recruiters' Perspective

Recruiters, on the other hand, look for people who can land running in an accounting or marketing slot, while Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) talk loftily of the need for visionary leaders with a broad cross-functional understanding of business and its place in the universe (Main, 1989). According to Robert Half (1987), graduates possessing communication skills have an advantage and will do a better job at the company in the long-run taking on more responsibility and advancing quickly. Nellermore (1992) stated that the kinds of education and/or preparation, which the managers felt to be the most important in order for new employees to work productively on the job, were microcomputer skills, communication skills, analytical skills and interpersonal skills.

Gaedeke and Tootelian (1989) reported that employers and students had different perceptions of the most desirable employee attributes. In their study, employers ranked (a) enthusiasm/motivation (b) interpersonal skills (c) initiative (d) oral communication skills and (e) maturity as the top desired attributes. Students, on the other, hand ranked oral communication skills, enthusiasm/motivation, self-confidence, ambition and entrepreneurship as the top five.

Raymond, McNabb and Matthaai (1993) reported that other than the lack of functional skills, current business graduates also lacked written and communication skills, as well as interpersonal skills. This finding was supported by Kelly and Gaedeke (1990) who cited "Poor communication skills and unrealistic expectations as the major weaknesses of business graduates". Based on the above literature, it is obvious that a gap exists between employers and entry level job seekers' perceptions as to the most desirable employee attributes. While the bulk of the studies

is confined to the United States, this study attempts to determine whether the above perceived attributes also exist in Malaysia.

Methods of Skills Acquisition

The project method provided students with valuable learning experience and was challenging and interesting to students (Haas and Wotruba, 1990; Williams, Beard and Ryder, 1991). According to Malhotra, Tashchian and Jain (1989), case analysis was found to be effective for developing problem-solving and managerial skills, as well as for examining ethical issues. However, the lecture method was not seen as effective for developing the above skills but was considered effective for studying ethical dimensions.

Internship generally refers to part-time field experience and encompasses a wider variety of academic disciplines and organizational settings. Internships are usually undertaken while concurrently enrolled in other academic courses and they appear to be modelled on the field of education, where teaching practice is a requirement for certification (Thief and Nell, 1997). A survey by Gault, Redington and Schlager (2000) found that undergraduates with internship experience had significant early career advantages over their counterparts without internship experience.

The advantages included less time expended to obtain first position, increased monetary compensation and greater overall job satisfaction. Gault, Redington and Schlager (2000) further stated that internships provided students and faculty with the means of bridging the gap between career expectations developed in the classroom and the reality of employment in the real world. Thus, Gault, Redington and Schlager (2000) concluded that internships provided a unique "win-win-win" opportunity for all the three constituents, namely the students, the university and the business community.

Objective

The main objective of this study is to determine whether a gap exists between employers' and entry-level job seekers' perception as to the most desirable employee attributes. In addition, it also

seeks to determine whether this perception is affected by gender, ethnicity and major field of study.

METHODOLOGY

Population and Sample

The targeted population consisted of all final year management and accounting students registered with a local public university; 50 identified personnel managers from various industries in Penang and the Klang Valley represented the employers. For employers, the questionnaires were administered via mail, and for students, convenience sampling was utilized.

Survey Instrument

Based on the literature by Vroom (1996), Raymond, McNabb and Matthaai (1993), Devlin and Peterson (1994) and Gustafson, Johnson and Hovey (1993), a questionnaire (Appendix A) consisting of four sections was developed to assess the values, skills, abilities and expectations most desired in entry level job seekers. Section I (13 items) was used to gather information on values, and Section II measured the skills using (5 items) and abilities using 9 items. Section III measured expectations while Section IV captured data on demographics.

In Sections 1 and 11, the respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement/disagreement, on a scale of 1 (Most Important) to 5 (Most Unimportant), for each value, skills and abilities. Hence, the closer the score is to 1, the more important is the perceived value, skills and abilities and vice versa. The demographic section gathered data on gender, ethnicity, age, hometown and academic major. The survey instrument was considered reliable as it had an alpha coefficient of 0.8630.

Data Collection and Analysis

300 questionnaires were distributed to management and accounting students registered for the Strategic Management course in a public university in Penang for the 2002 academic session. However, owing to high absenteeism, only 192 questionnaires were returned. Of these 192 returned questionnaires, 12 incomplete

questionnaires were discarded, leaving 180 usable questionnaires, representing a 60% return rate.

For the employers, 50 questionnaires were mailed to 50 identified personnel managers in Penang and Klang Valley, with a stamped return reply envelope enclosed. The questionnaire for employers only consisted of Section 1 and 2 of the developed instrument. However, only 12 completed questionnaires were returned, representing a 24 % return rate.

The demographic data were analysed using SPSS 10.0 software to provide frequencies. Using the independent t-test, ANOVA and Mann-Whitney test, the means of the two groups were tested for significant differences. Friedman's test was used to rank respondents' responses.

RESULTS

Demographics

Of the 180 respondents who participated in this study, 121 (67.2%) were females while the remaining 59 (32.8%) were males. The ages of the respondents ranged from 19 to 26 years, with an average of 22.5 years. The majority of the respondents in this sample were Chinese (47.8%), followed by Malays (43.9%), Indians (3.9%) and other ethnic groups (4.4%).

In terms of majoring, 65 out of 180 respondents (36.1%) were marketing majors followed by finance majors (26.1%), operations management majors (14.4%), human resource majors (13.3%) and accounting majors (10.0%).

Perceived Values

Students ranked salary and job security highest followed by opportunity for career advancement, working conditions, opportunity for self development, type of work and freedom on the job as the most important job values (Table 1). Employers, on the other hand, ranked opportunity for self development and challenge and responsibility as the most important values for entry-level job seekers although students ranked them as fifth and tenth place respectively.

However, the Mann-Whitney test value for *self-development* ($U=1051.5$) and *challenge & responsibility* ($U=932.0$) were not significant at $p=0.05$ level, suggesting that there is no difference

in the perceptions of students and employers with regard to these two variables (Table 2).

On the other hand, six out of the seven items ranked by students as the most important job values, viz. *salary* ($U=415.0$); *job security* ($U=431.5$); *opportunity for career advancement* ($U=609.0$); *working conditions* ($U=610.0$); *type of work* ($U=584.0$); and *freedom on the job* ($U=438.0$) were found to be significant at $p=0.01$ level (Table 3), suggesting that students and employers differed in their perceptions with regard to these values.

Perceived Skills

Both employers and students shared the same perceptions on the most sought after skills required of entry-level job seekers. Interpersonal skills and verbal communication skills were rated highest by both students and employers (Table 3). The Mann-Whitney test value was found to be not significant for all the five items at $p=0.05$ level, suggesting that employers and students did not differ in their perceptions on the most sought after skills required of entry level job seekers (Table 4).

Perceived Abilities

For students, the ability to motivate/influence and make decisions were the most important abilities, followed by the ability to organize and plan, manage projects, self-start and manage people. Enthusiasm, dependability and willingness to work long hours were rated lowest by students. Employers, on the other hand, perceived enthusiasm and self-start to be the most important abilities they expected of entry level job seekers (Table 5).

The ability to motivate/influence and make decisions was ranked very much lower by employers than by students. The Mann-Whitney test value found making decisions ($U=507.5$); managing people ($U=425.0$); enthusiasm ($U=672.0$); managing projects ($U=580.0$) and ability to motivate/influence ($U=712.5$) to be significantly different at $p = 0.05$ level (Table 6). The variable self-starter ($U=880.5$), which was ranked the second most important ability by employers was found to be not significant seen

Table 1. Ranking of perceived values by Students and Employers

Values	Students		Employers	
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank
Opportunity for career advancement	1.58	3	2.08	3
Opportunity for self development	1.59	5	1.58	1
Challenge and responsibility	1.92	10	1.75	2
Working conditions	1.58	3	2.17	4
Type of work	1.78	6	2.50	10
Training	1.84	8	2.25	5
Salary	1.47	1	2.42	9
Job security	1.47	1	2.25	5
Working with people	1.89	9	2.25	5
Freedom on the job	1.80	7	2.75	11
Location of work	1.95	11	2.83	12
Company reputation	2.09	12	2.33	8
Job title	2.23	13	2.92	13

Table 2. Mann-Whitney test of values for Employers and Students

Items Values	Students	Mean Rank Employers	Mann-Whitney
Career Advancement	93.88	135.75	609.0*
Self Development	96.66	94.13	1051.5
Challenge & responsibility	97.32	84.17	932.0
Working conditions	93.89	135.67	610.0*
Type of work	93.74	137.83	584.0*
Training	94.57	125.50	732.0**
Salary	92.81	151.92	415.0*
Job Security	92.90	150.54	431.5*
Working with people	95.14	116.88	835.5
Freedom on the job	92.93	150.00	438.0*
Location of work	93.32	144.25	507.0*
Company reputation	95.93	105.13	976.5
Job title	93.46	142.04	533.5*

*p < 0.01; **p < 0.05

Table 3. Ranking of perceived skills by Students and Employers

Skills	Students		Employers	
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank
Analytical skills	1.87	5	1.67	3
Computer skills	1.59	3	1.75	4
Interpersonal skills	1.43	1	1.58	2
Verbal communication skills	1.49	2	1.50	1
Written communication skills	1.79	4	2.00	5

Table 4. Mann-Whitney test of skills for Students and Employers

Skills	Students	Mean Rank Employers	Mann-Whitney (u)
Analytical skills	97.56	80.67	890.0
Computer skills	95.50	111.50	900.0
Interpersonal skills	95.86	106.17	964.0
Verbal communication skills	96.40	98.00	1062.0
Written communication skills	95.80	107.04	953.5

* p < 0.01; ** p < 0.05

at $p=0.05$ level. Thus, a gap obviously exists between employers and students perceptions as to what constitute the most sought after abilities required of entry-level job seekers (Table 6).

Gender

An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the perceived values, skills and abilities scores for males and females. Out of the 13 items used to measure values, only three items, namely *salary* ($t=-2.406$), *career advancement* ($t=-1.961$) and *challenge and responsibility* ($t=-2.173$) were found to be significantly different at $p=0.05$ level (Table 7).

As for the 5 items used to measure skills, there was no significant difference in the scores for males and females for all the 5 skills' items (Table 8).

With regard to abilities, other than *ability to motivate/influence*, which was found to be significant at $p=0.05$ level, all the other 8 items were found to be not significant at $p=0.05$ level (Table 9). Hence, other than values, males and females did not differ in their perception of the skills and abilities required of entry-level job seekers.

Ethnicity

To examine the impact of ethnicity and field of study on perceived values, skills and abilities, the mean scores for each of these variables were computed. Hence, *total value* referred to the mean score for the 13 individual items used to measure values, whilst *total skills* represented the mean score of the 5 items used to measure skills

and *total abilities* referred to the mean score of the 9 items used to measure abilities.

A one-way ANOVA between groups was then conducted to explore the impact of ethnicity on total values, skills and abilities scores. Subjects were divided into four groups according to their ethnic groups (Group 1= Malay, Group 2= Chinese, Group 3= Indian and Group 4= Others). "Others" denote all other ethnic groups that did not fall under the first 3 categories. The results showed no significant difference between the scores for all the three attributes, i.e. values, skills and abilities at $p=0.05$ level. In short, entry-level job seekers' values, skills and abilities were not influenced by their ethnic backgrounds (Table 10).

Field of Study

To explore the impact of major field of study on total values, skills and abilities score, a one-way ANOVA between groups was conducted. Subjects were divided into five groups according to their major fields of study (Group 1= Accounting, Group 2= Finance, Group 3= Human Resource, Group 4= Marketing and Group 5= Operations Management). As in the case of ethnicity, the results revealed no significant difference in the scores for all the three attributes at $p=0.05$ level. In other words, entry-level job seekers' values, skills and abilities were not influenced by their major fields of study (Table 11).

Skills acquisition

Based on the mean rank of the various methods for acquiring the required skills, the most effective

Table 5. Ranking of perceived abilities by Students and Employers

Ability	Students		Employers	
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank
Dependability	1.97	7	1.75	3
Enthusiasm	1.97	7	1.50	1
Making decisions	1.72	2	2.42	8
Managing people	1.84	6	2.67	9
Managing projects	1.76	4	2.33	6
Motivate/influence	1.68	1	2.17	5
Organise and plan	1.73	3	1.75	3
Self-starter	1.80	5	1.58	2
Willingness to work long hours	2.09	9	2.33	6

Table 6. Mann-Whitney test of skills for Students and Employers

Ability	Mean Rank		Mann-Whitney
	Students	Employers	
Dependability	97.84	76.42	839.0
Enthusiasm	98.77	62.5	672.0*
Making decisions	93.32	144.21	507.5*
Managing people	92.86	151.08	425.0*
Managing projects	93.72	138.17	580.0*
Motivate/influence	94.46	127.13	712.5**
Organise and plan	96.4	97.96	1062.5
Self-starter	97.61	79.88	880.5
Willingness to work long hours	96.16	101.54	1019.5

*p < 0.01; **p < 0.05

Table 7. Independent sample test for values by Gender

Items	Mean		t-value
	Male	Female	
Career advancement	1.46	1.64	-1.961**
Self development	1.56	1.61	-0.570
Challenge and responsibility	1.78	1.98	-2.173**
Type of work	1.76	1.79	-0.321
Training	1.85	1.84	0.043
Salary	1.32	1.55	-2.406*
Job security	1.41	1.50	-1.019
Working with people	1.93	1.88	0.485
Freedom on the job	1.73	1.83	-1.018
Location of work	1.90	1.98	-0.594
Company reputation	2.02	2.12	-0.849
Job title	2.15	2.26	-1.031

*p < 0.01; **p < 0.05

Table 8. Independent sample test for skills by Gender

Skills	Mean		t-value
	Male	Female	
Analytical skills	1.80	1.90	-1.286
Computer skills	1.56	1.61	-0.570
Interpersonal skills	1.44	1.43	0.132
Verbal communication skills	1.49	1.50	-0.050
Written communication skills	1.78	1.80	-0.248

*p < 0.01; **p < 0.05

Table 9. Independent sample test for abilities by Gender

Items	Mean		t-value
	Male	Female	
Dependability	1.90	2.01	-1.006
Enthusiasm	1.92	1.99	-0.770
Making decisions	1.63	1.77	-1.518
Managing people	1.78	1.88	-0.909
Managing projects	1.66	1.81	-1.566
Motivate/influence	1.56	1.74	-1.975**
Organise and plan	1.66	1.76	-1.084
Self-starter	1.71	1.84	-1.316
Willingness to work long hours	2.00	2.14	-1.154

*p < 0.01; **p < 0.05

method was industrial training ($M=2.33$), followed by group projects ($M=3.68$) as the second most effective method and other methods (e.g. role play, problem based learning, library search, computer lab exercise) [$M=3.73$] as the third most effective method (Table 13). Lectures and discussion ($M=4.72$) and case study ($M=4.88$) were perceived to be the most ineffective methods for acquiring the needed analytical, interpersonal, verbal and written communication skills (Table 12).

Students' Expectations

In terms of region, the Central region consisting of Kuala Lumpur, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Perak and Selangor was most preferred by students. The Northern region consisting of Penang, Kedah and Perlis was ranked second while the southern region consisting of Malacca and Johor came in

third. "Overseas" was ranked fourth, implying that some students were prepared to work in foreign countries. Eastern Peninsular Malaysia comprising Trengganu and Kelantan and East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak) were the work places least preferred by students (Table 13).

In terms of the work sector, 80.6% of the students prefer to work in the private sector rather than the government sector. The 5% who chose "others" were either still undecided or were contemplating setting up their own businesses (Table 13).

The expected entrant level salary ranged from RM 1,500 to RM 2,000. As far as fringe benefits were concerned, medical coverage ranked highest followed by insurance coverage, housing loan, car loan, educational loan and others (Table 13).

Table 10. Summary of Analysis of Variance: Impact of Ethnicity

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	P-Value
TOVALUE	Between Groups	8.987E-02	3	2.996E-02	0.240	0.868
	Within Groups	21.962	176	0.125		
	Total	22.052	179			
TOSKILLS	Between Groups	0.130	3	4.328E	0.324	0.808
	Within Groups	23.508	176	0.134		
	Total	23.638	179			
TABILITY	Between Groups	0.565	3	0.188	1.176	0.321
	Within Groups	28.177	176	0.160		
	Total	28.741	179			

E: Exponential

Table 11. Summary of Analysis of Variance: Field of study

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	P-Value
TOVALUE	Between Groups	.888	4	0.222	1.836	0.124
	Within Groups	21.164	175	0.121		
	Total	22.052	179			
TOSKILLS	Between Groups	.433	4	0.108	0.816	0.517
	Within Groups	23.205	175	0.133		
	Total	23.638	179			
TABILITY	Between Groups	.774	4	0.194	1.211	0.308
	Within Groups	27.967	175	0.160		
	Total	28.741	179			

Table 12. Methods of Skills Acquisition

	Industrial Training	Group Project and Assignments	TEACHING METHODS			Presentation	Others
			Individual Assignments	Case Study	Lecture & Discussion		
Mean Rank	2.33	3.68	4.19	4.88	4.72	4.47	3.73

Table 13. Summary of Students' Expectations

			PREFERRED WORK PLACE					
Mean Rank	Northern 2.23	Central 2.11	Southern 3.38	Eastern 4.52	East M'sia 4.59	Overseas 4.16		
				PREFERRED WORK SECTOR				
Frequency			Government 26 (14.4%)	Private 145 (80.6%)	Others 9 (5.0%)	Total 180 (100%)		
			EXPECTED SALARY (IN MALAYSIAN RINGGIT)					
Frequency	<1500 25 (13.9%)	1500 32 (17.8%)	1600 10 (5.6%)	1700 4 (2.3%)	1800 33 (18.3%)	2000 51 (28.3%)	>2300 25 (13.9%)	
			EXPECTED FRINGE BENEFITS					
Rank	Car Loan 4	Housing Loan 3	Insurance coverage 2	Educational loan 5	Medical coverage 1	Others 6		

DISCUSSION

Employers' and Students' Perception of Job Values

The results suggest that students considered both hygiene factors and motivators to be important but they were more concerned with the hygiene factors of salary, job security and working conditions. The motivators consisting of opportunity for career advancement and opportunity for self-development were ranked slightly lower (Table 2). The implication of this finding is that if employers fail to take care of the entry-level job seekers' hygiene factors (salary, working conditions and job security) and provide them with the opportunity for career advancement (motivators), the newly-hired recruits will definitely opt for better opportunities, when the opportunity arises.

This finding is in line with Philip, Philips and Cappel's (1994) study which states that "If applicants have multiple job offers, they would probably select the company that provides more

of the valued factors, viz. opportunity for advancement, job security, a good retirement plan, a good health insurance, good pay and good training programmes".

Employers, on the other hand, ranked opportunity for self-development, challenge and responsibility, opportunity for career advancement, training (motivators) and working conditions (hygiene factors) as the most important values for entry-level job seekers. The fact that employers placed greater emphasis on "motivators" rather than "hygiene" factors suggests that employers are taking the long-term perspective and want new recruits to stay. As mentioned by Herzberg (1966), hygiene factors alone would not lead to satisfaction and an unsatisfied recruit would sooner or later leave the organization.

The fact that employers ranked salary ninth whilst students perceived it as the most important value suggests that a huge gap exists between employers' and entry-level job seekers' values (Table 1).

Employers' and Students' Perceptions of Skills

The results of this study revealed that there was no significant difference in the mean scores on total skills for both employers and students (Table 5). Both students and employers rated interpersonal skills and verbal communication skills as the two most important skills required of entry-level job seekers (Table 3).

This finding is in line with Half's (1987) study which states that "Graduates possessing communication skills have an advantage and will do a better job for the company in the long run taking on more responsibility and advancing quickly". Lee (2002) further supported this finding when he stated that "Communication skills topped the list of the 22 skills surveyed. The results highlight the fact that project managers in the local industries overwhelmingly agree that communication and interpersonal skills are something that is very important for an engineer to possess".

Employers, however, placed greater significance on analytical skills than students did. There is a need for employees to see the broad perspective, to make logical judgments, to be able to see parts of the whole, and to be creative as part of the analysis function (Nellermore, 1992). Nellermore (1992) further suggested that analytical skills must become a larger part of the coursework given to students. These skills should be developed early in the educational forum and used with increasing intensity throughout the educational career of the student.

Employers' and Students' Perception of Abilities

Five out of the 9 items to measure ability, viz. *making decisions, managing people, managing projects, enthusiasm* and *ability to motivate/influence* were perceived to be different by the two groups. Whilst students ranked the ability to motivate/influence and make decisions as the most important perceived abilities, employers on the other hand perceived enthusiasm and self-starter to be the most important abilities required of an entry-level job seeker. Self-starter ($u=880.5$) was found to be not significant at $p = 0.05$ level. (Table 6).

One probable reason students ranked the ability to motivate/influence and make decisions highest is because they were eager to join the working world and could not wait to put their newly acquired skills into practice. Employers rated enthusiasm and self-starter as key factors because employers preferred employees who were enthusiastic, energetic and self-reliant, who possessed initiative and could perform well with minimal supervision.

Gender

Gender appeared to have had no effect on the perceived abilities and skills of entry-level job seekers. However, there appeared to be some differences in the perceived values. Salary, challenge and responsibility and career advancement were rated more important by males than females (Table 7). This finding confirms Maupin's (1992) study that career expectations differ between the sexes. Women are more concerned with self-improvement opportunities afforded by careers. In that study the opportunities included experience, job diversity, specialization, training and future opportunities leading to career promotions or prestige. Females viewed themselves as individuals who knew that sexism could exist on the job but that they have to advance despite such impediments (Maupin, 1992).

Ethnicity

The results revealed no significant differences in the mean scores for total values, skills and abilities amongst the four different ethnic groups (Table 6). One plausible reason could be that the respondents were enrolled in the same programme for three years and shared similar educational exposure and expectations of entry-level positions. The university's integration policy which encouraged students from different ethnic backgrounds to be put together in assignment groups and hostel living arrangements could have also contributed to this finding.

Major Field of Study

As in the case of ethnicity, the findings of this study also showed no significant difference in the mean

scores for total values, skills and abilities amongst the respondents of different majors (Table 12). The fact that the respondents were drawn from a common programme, that is, the Management and Accounting programme offered by the same school coupled with the university's policy of forced diversity in assignment groups could have led the respondents to share a common view of themselves as students of the management programme rather than as accounting, human resource, finance, operations management and marketing students per se.

Implications of Study

This study provides an indicator of the job attributes that employers might well be advised to take note of when calling on students to join their organisations.

When graduates fall short of the required skills and abilities desired by employers, critics are quick to point the finger at our Malaysian universities. Comments such as *"The only avenue of employment for arts graduates from local universities is with the Government. They have no usable skills needed in the private sector"* reflect the negative mindset of many employers (Bakri Musa, 2002). Whilst it is important for students to have the skills and abilities desired by employers, merely teaching these skills may short-change students. There should be continued emphasis on teaching methods that involve more learning by doing so that students can apply their knowledge and recognize the importance of strong communication skills. (Main, 1989; Malhotra, Tashchian and Jain, 1989; McNabb, Matthaiei, 1993).

A study by Tan (2001) entitled *"Employability of Graduates in Malaysia: The Employer's Perspective (cited in Faezah Ismail, 2002) found internship with an organization as the least important by employers"*. Our findings showed that students indicated that internships and projects were the most effective learning methods because they provided practical experience and gave students a chance to apply what they had learnt in the classroom. Internship is one avenue where employers can forge smart partnerships with local universities to supplement the skill

deficient competencies that universities cannot impart effectively. However, when the students are sent for their practical training, they are often treated as an extra pair of hands and given very routine and menial tasks with little responsibility that do not benefit their knowledge and training.

On the other hand, employers regarded internship with an organization as the least important partly due to the internship duration. 10-12 weeks of internship would not be sufficient for a prospective employer to assign an intern to handle/assist in a project. Hence, in most situations, interns are assigned to assist in administrative/grinding tasks, which do not need particular intensive training or supervision. The ideal duration would be a minimum of 6 months to 1 year. A longer duration would encourage the prospective employers to view the interns as a resource rather than of burden. Meanwhile, employers could also take the opportunity to attract/identify the right talent to work with them upon graduation. A six-month internship would provide a better unit of measurement of a candidate's values, skills and abilities rather than rounds of interviews.

On the other hand, a student who has gone through an internship would ideally have a better idea of the real business world. Perhaps, the work exposure gained would in some way affect a student's perception or his attitudes towards education. Those who are highly scholastic may realise that in the working world though smart academically they lack the soft skills which are essential for career success.

Meanwhile, those who are not academically sound would probably need to focus on what they can achieve and improve on in their last few semesters. Prospective employers need to be aware that placing students as interns in legitimate positions of responsibility in the business world is one way of helping them develop initiative, self-confidence, assertiveness, maturity and business related work experience (Kelly and Gaedeke, 1990).

This study has some limitations. Firstly, the student sample is limited to only one local university in Penang. In addition, the sample size for employers is too small for the findings to be

conclusive. A larger sample size might have helped to increase the validity of the results as well as to enable it to be generalized for public consumption.

Secondly, the method of data collection, which is convenience sampling, may have caused the data to be biased or skewed. Thus, the findings of this study should be interpreted with caution and cannot be generalised to cover the entire population of students and employers in Penang or Malaysia. Nevertheless, the present findings serve as an initial indicator.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

With increasing globalization, organizations now need to be world class organizations in order to compete on the world stage. Hence, future research should include other variables like innovativeness and leadership qualities in the model. In order for the results to be generalized in its scope, the sample size should be increased to cover the population of students in local universities and colleges as well as employers from various industries all over Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

This study provides students with an insight into employers' perceptions of work skills and their expectations from entry-level job seekers. Poor communication and analytical skills, unrealistic expectations and lack of experience are perceived by employers as the weaknesses of many local business school graduates. Therefore, students should strive to increase their own level of competency by enhancing their strengths and reducing their weaknesses and not be solely dependent on the university to provide them with knowledge, skills and abilities needed to succeed in the real business world.

As stated by Kelly and Gaedeke (1990), if students have a clear idea of what they can and cannot do in a reasonable period of time, then they will be in a better position to convince employers to recognise their long-term objectives and potential for the job in a competitive market.

In this study, it was found that opportunity for advancement, job security, a good retirement plan, a good health insurance, good pay and

good training programmes appear to be the most important aspects (beginning with the highest rated). Thus, if applicants have multiple job offers, they would probably select the company that provides more of the valued factors.

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APPENDIX I

SURVEY OF ENTRY LEVEL JOB SEEKERS' EXPECTATIONS AND SKILLS

Directions: Given below are some statements. Please read each statement carefully and tick the box which best represents your agreement or disagreement. (CHECK ONLY ONE BOX FOR EACH VALUE).

Section 1: Values

Values	Most Important (1)	Important (2)	Not So Important (3)	Unimportant (4)	Most Unimportant (5)
Opportunity for career advancement					
Opportunity for self-development					
Challenge and responsibility					
Working conditions					
Type of work					
Training					
Salary					
Job security					
Working with people					
Freedom on the job					
Location of work					
Company reputation					
Job title					

Section 2 : Skills and abilities

1. Please rate the skills and abilities which you think are important in your first job (entry-level position). (CHECK ONLY ONE BOX FOR EACH SKILL AND ABILITY).

Values	Most Important (1)	Important (2)	Not So Important (3)	Unimportant (4)	Most Unimportant (5)
Analytical skills					
Computer skills					
Interpersonal skills					
Verbal communication skills					
Written communication skills					
Dependability					
Enthusiasm					
Making decisions					
Managing people					
Managing projects					
Motivate/influence					
Organise and plan					
Self- starter					
Willingness to work long hours					

2. Rank the following methods that you think assist in acquiring the above mentioned skills, by ranking 1 as the most effective and 7 as the most ineffective method.

MethodRank

- Industrial Training
- Group projects and assignments
- Individual assignments
- Case study
- Lectures/discussions
- Presentations
- Others (Please specify)

Section 3: Expectations

1. Please indicate your choice of working sector. (CHECK ONLY ONE RESPONSE)
 - ☐ Government
 - ☐ Private
 - ☐ Others (Please specify)
2. Please indicate your choice of industry. (CHECK ONLY ONE RESPONSE)
 - ☐ Manufacturing
 - ☐ Finance
 - ☐ Marketing
 - ☐ Human Resource
 - ☐ Accounting
3. Please indicate your expected salary. RM _____.
4. Please indicate your expected fringe benefits. (YOU MAY CHECK MORE THAN ONE RESPONSE)
 - ☐ Car loan
 - ☐ Housing loan
 - ☐ Insurance coverage
 - ☐ Educational loan
 - ☐ Medical coverage
 - ☐ Others (please specify)
5. Rank your preferred workplace, by ranking 1 as your most preferred and 6 as your least preferred.

WorkplaceRank

- a) Northern (Penang, Kedah, Perlis)
- b) Central (Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Perak, Selangor and Kuala Lumpur)
- c) Southern (Johor and Malacca)
- d) Eastern (Trengganu and Kelantan)
- e) East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak)
- f) Overseas

6. If given a choice, which company would you work for?

Company name: _____

Reason: _____

Section 4: Respondent Profile

1. Please indicate your gender.
 - ☐ Male
 - ☐ Female
2. Please indicate your ethnic group.
 - ☐ Malay
 - ☐ Chinese
 - ☐ Indian
 - ☐ Others
3. Please specify your age _____
4. Please specify the state of your hometown _____
5. Please indicate your Major:
 - ☐ Accounting
 - ☐ Finance
 - ☐ Human resource
 - ☐ Marketing
 - ☐ Operations Management

Please ensure that you have not missed out any questions.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY.

Your time and opinions are greatly appreciated.