Cultural Fit and Personal Connections: Impact on Job-Finding Success

Supplemental Report to the 2002 Annual Survey of Journalism & Mass Communication Graduates

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Journalism and mass communication school graduates who have personal connections with those making hiring decisions are significantly more likely to receive job offers. Hiring is a highly uncertain and risky process, and personal familiarity reduces uncertainty.

Confidence in ability to present oneself in a professional way is significantly related to receiving job offers. The ability of job candidates to mold their behavior to the expectations of the professional culture during interviews is likely to reassure employers. This finding suggests students should seek internships, attend professional conferences and read trade literature for the exposure of the culture of the field as much as for the exposure to practical skills.

Having personal connections and having confidence in the ability to present oneself in a way that is consistent with the professional culture were more strongly related to job-finding success than the traditional, formal factors of GPA, internships, campus media involvement and curriculum sequence.

Perceived ability to get along with others was not related to job-finding success. This suggests that ability to adjust to specific personalities in different work environments is not as important to employers’ decisions as the ability to conform to professional and organizational norms.
A number of previous studies based on data from the *Annual Survey of Journalism & Mass Communication Enrollments* have been designed to explain job-finding success by journalism and mass communication graduates. To date the research has identified important predictors, such as internships and campus media activities, but has explained only a small amount of the overall variance in job-finding success. A battery of questions was added to the 2002 survey in order to improve the understanding of the factors that explain success in the journalism and mass communication labor market. These questions were designed to assess interviewing ability, cultural fit between candidate and the organization, and extent of personal connections in the field. Studies in the management and sociology literature on hiring suggest these factors influence later stages of the hiring process.

Prior research on hiring for communication jobs has focused on tangible, formal hiring criteria such as GPA, curriculum sequence, internships, involvement with campus media, software use and individual demographics. These studies show that job candidates who have tangible experience in the media fields they are pursuing – e.g., internships and campus media involvement – have more success finding work in these fields (Becker, Kosicki, Engleman and Viswanath, 1993; Becker, Lauf and Lowrey, 1999; Lowrey and Becker, 2001). Studies also show that graduates who specialize in the media fields in which they seek work have more success finding jobs than those with a more general background or than those who specialize in something other than the field in which they seek work (Becker, Lauf and Lowrey, 1999). Success in the classroom alone--as measured, for example, by grade point average--does not strongly influence job-finding success. Proficiency with computer software used in the field has proved to be a weak, but significant influence (Lowrey & Becker, 2001).

So far unexplored in the research are other possible predictors of success in the job market. These include the candidates’ confidence in job interviews, confidence in ability to interact on a professional level and ability and interest in socializing with other people. In addition, personality fit and perceived fit with the culture of a workplace should play a role in job-finding success, especially in final stages of the hiring process. Research shows that during early stages of candidate screening, formal and
measurable criteria are relied on more heavily, but in the final stages, employers rely more heavily on intangible and informal criteria such as the ability to “get along” well with a variety of people and the ability to speak the language of the profession in which the applicant seeks employment (Coverdill and Finlay, 1998; Marsden, 1996; Kanter, 1993). Employers look among the final pool of candidates for specific elements of skill, experience and personality fit called “hot buttons” (Coverdill and Finlay, 1998).

A hot-button match may be more a result of good fortune than of successful preparation by the candidate. Nevertheless, it seems likely that job candidates who are more confident in their abilities to present themselves in professional settings, and who are more confident in their general abilities to “get along” with others, should stand a better chance of showing employers they can adjust to a variety of conditions and demands. Employers are more likely to think such candidates would embrace the organization’s culture and easily co-exist with present staff. Such candidates would be less likely to inject uncertainty into the daily operations of the workplace.

Prior personal knowledge of a job candidate also reduces uncertainty for those making hiring decisions. A candidate who has connections to, or fits in well with, an employer’s social and professional circles should be perceived as being less of a risk. There is a comforting certainty in social sameness (Granovetter, 1995). It therefore seems likely that candidates who have more extensive personal connections with those currently working in the communication field should be more likely to receive job offers.

**Expectations Summarized**

- **T** Confidence in one’s ability to present oneself in a professional culture and setting should significantly improve one’s job-finding success.
- **T** Confidence in one’s ability to get along socially with others should significantly improve one’s job-finding success.
- **T** The degree to which one has informal social connections with those in the communication field should improve one’s job-finding success.

**Survey Methodology**

The *Annual Survey of Journalism & Mass Communication Graduates* is designed to monitor the employment rates and salaries of graduates of journalism and mass communication programs in the United States, including Puerto Rico. In addition, the survey tracks the curricular activities of those
graduates while in college, examines their job-seeking strategies, and provides measures of the professional attitudes and behaviors of the graduates upon completion of their college studies.

Since 1997, the *Annual Survey of Journalism & Mass Communication Graduates* has been conducted at the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia. From 1987-1996, the survey was conducted at Ohio State University.

Each year a sample of schools is drawn from those listed in the *Journalism and Mass Communication Directory*, published annually by the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, and *The Journalist’s Road to Success: A Career Guide*, formerly published and printed by the Dow Jones Newspaper Fund, Inc., and now available on the web at the following site: http://djnewspaperfund.dowjones.com/fund/pubcareerguide.asp. Schools list themselves in the AEJMC Directory. All U.S. programs accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications and all U.S. members of the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication are in the AEJMC Directory. To be included in the Newspaper Fund Guide, the college or university must offer at least 10 courses in news-editorial journalism and those courses must include core courses, such as an introduction to the mass media and press law and ethics, as well as basic skills courses such as reporting and editing. Selection of schools for the sample is probabilistic, so that those chosen represent the population of schools in the two directories. In 2002, 103 schools were drawn from the 463 unique entries of four-year programs in the U.S. (including Puerto Rico) in the two directories.

Administrators at the selected schools are asked to provide the names and addresses of their spring bachelor's and master's degree recipients. A questionnaire was mailed in November 2002 to all spring graduates receiving either a bachelor's or a master's degree from the selected programs. A second questionnaire was sent to nonrespondents in January 2003. A third mailing was sent in March 2003 to graduates who had not responded to the first two mailings. The questionnaire asked about the respondent's experiences both while a student and in the months since graduation. Included were questions about university experiences, job-seeking and employment, and salary and benefits.

In 2002, the survey was mailed to 7,416 individuals whose names and addresses were provided by the administrators of the 103 programs. A total of 3,148 returned the questionnaires by the end of May of 2003. Of the returns, 2,963 were from students who reported they actually had completed their degrees during the April to June 2002 period. The remaining 185 had completed their degrees either before or after the specified period, despite their inclusion in the spring graduation lists. A total of 520 questionnaires was returned undelivered and without a forwarding address. Return rate, computed as the number of questionnaires returned divided by the number mailed, was 42.4%. Return rate, computed as the number returned divided by the number mailed minus the bad addresses, was 45.6%. Of the 2,963 usable questionnaires, 2,798 (94.4%) were from bachelor's degree recipients and 165 were from those who received a master's degree.
The findings summarized in this report are projectable to the estimated 42,060 students who earned bachelor's degrees and the 3,700 students who earned master's degrees in academic year 2001-2002 from the 463 colleges and universities across the United States and Puerto Rico offering programs in journalism and mass communication. Comparisons are made with data gathered in graduate surveys back through 1986. Data on master's degree recipients have been available since 1989.

Funding for the 2002 graduate survey was provided by the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication, Cox Newspapers Inc., The Freedom Forum, Gannett, the Hearst Corporation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the National Association of Broadcasters, the Newsletter & Electronic Publishers Foundation, The Newspaper Guild–CWA, the Scripps Howard Foundation, and the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia.

New Measures

The 2002 graduate survey includes 21 new items that measure confidence in ability to present oneself professionally, ability to interview well and ability to "get along" with others. After conducting a factor analysis on all items to see if there were different dimensions within the overall set, two separate indices were created. One index (Professional Presentation) includes the nine items out of the 21 that specifically address ability to present oneself in a professional setting, such as during an interview (alpha = .82). A second index (Sociability) includes five items that address ability to easily socialize with others (alpha = .74). The other seven items measured other dimensions, according to the factor analysis, and are dropped from the analyses below.

Two other questions in the survey instrument measured the extent of the graduate’s personal connections in the field (Connections). One question asked whether the graduates knew people who interviewed them, and a second question asked how many people the graduates knew in the field.

Crosstab and correlation analyses were used to test the strength of relationship between these new factors and the ability of graduates to find jobs, as measured by the number of job offers received. Only BA recipients seeking full-time work were included in the sample (N = 1,394). The predictive strength of these new factors are examined in the context of more formal factors from previous studies. These formal factors include grade point average, curriculum sequence (PR, advertising, print journalism and broadcasting), internships and involvement with campus media.
The first expectation received moderate support. The greater the confidence respondents had in their ability to present themselves in a professional manner during interviews, the greater their chances of receiving job offers. The nine-item Professional Presentation index is moderately predictive of Job-Finding Success (Chart 1). Close to three-quarters of those who felt most confident in their abilities said they received job offers, in comparison to less than 60% of those who reported being least confident. Among the individual measures in the index, feeling prepared for the job market and confidence in talking the language of the profession were most strongly related to Job-Finding Success.

The second expectation received no support. Sociability—the perceived ability to socialize and communicate with others in a variety of settings—was not related to job-finding success. There was little change in number of job offers across the four categories from least confident in social skills to most confident (Chart 2).

The third expectation received support. Connections, or familiarity with people in the field, had a fairly substantial impact on job-finding success. Nearly 80 percent of those who knew people at the organizations at which they interviewed received at least one job offer, in contrast to 68.4 percent of those who did not know anyone at the organization (Chart 3). Over three-quarters of those who knew at least 20 people in the communication field received job offers, compared to 62.4 percent who knew no one in the field and 61.6 percent who knew fewer than 10 (Chart 4).

Professional Presentation, Sociability and Connections were compared to traditional predictors of job-finding success through a bivariate correlation analysis. All predictors were statistically significant, but most were weak. The bar chart based on this analysis shows a comparison of coefficients that express how strongly each predictor is related to Job-Finding Success (Chart 5). Perceived ability to present oneself professionally and knowledge of people in the field upon graduation were most strongly related to number of job offers received. Traditional formal predictors were not strongly related to Job-Finding Success.

It is possible that knowing people in the communication field is a result of having internships. In other words, the question measuring number of people one knows in the field may really be measuring whether the graduate had an internship in the field. The correlation between number of internships and number of people known in the field is only moderately high (.260), however, which suggests that though they are related, knowing people in the field is by no means only a consequence of having had an internship. It is the case, however, that knowing people in the field is slightly more important to job-finding success for those who have had no internships than for those who have had internships. This finding indicates the power of informal personal connections in the job hunt.
Data show that connections with people in the field and confidence in one’s professional presentation to employers have a moderately strong impact on finding work in communication fields. Findings suggest these factors, though only moderately predictive, are more important predictors than traditional formal factors such as having internships and GPA. It appears employers are keenly interested in reducing uncertainty during final stages of the evaluation of candidates, and that less formal, less tangible factors such as personal familiarity with the candidate are helpful in reducing this uncertainty. Having extensive connections helps a job candidate much more than having only one or a few connections. The ability of candidates to mold their behavior to the expectations of the professional environment during interviews is likely to impress employers. These findings suggest students should seek internships for the exposure of the culture of the workplace as much as for the exposure to practical skills. Students should also take opportunities to attend speeches and panels by working professionals, attend workshops and conventions sponsored by the industry and read trade literature.

Perceived ability to get along with others was not related to job-finding success. This suggests that ability to adjust to specific personalities in different work environments is not highly important to employers’ decisions. This finding is somewhat at odds with management and sociology literature on hiring. It may be that a more direct test—a survey of employers for example—would show stronger results from this factor. It could also be the case that employers are more concerned with candidates’ abilities to conform to professional and organizational norms (which is shown by the professional presentation index) than they are with their abilities to relate to specific individuals in the workplace.

This analysis explored predictors of job-finding success in a wide array of communication jobs. Future analyses should explore these factors for specific job types. Previous research has shown that internships and campus media involvement are more important to job-finding success when these activities are narrowly targeted at the field the graduate is pursuing. It may be that the strength of personal connections and interview performance are diminished somewhat in narrowly targeted analyses.
The return rate was nearly identical a year earlier (42.2% and 45.7% for the two measures.) The rates in 2001, however, were nearly 5% lower than in 2000. In general, return rates have been declining for this and other surveys. Analysis of return rates across time had not shown any linkages to the level of employment up until 2001. See Lee B. Becker and Wilson Lowrey (2000), "Monitoring US journalism and mass communication labor market: findings, history and methods of an ongoing survey project," Australian Journalism Review, 22 (1):20-36 (available at http://www.grady.uga.edu/annualsurveys/suprpts.htm).

References


Endnotes

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1. Percent of BA recipients receiving job offers by level of confidence in ability to present themselves professionally during interviews (N=1,264)
2. Percent of BA recipients receiving job offers by level of confidence in ability to socialize with others (N=1,344)

Percent receiving at least one job offer

- No confidence (N=334): 65.9%
- Low confidence (N=332): 68.1%
- Moderate confidence (N=278): 66.2%
- High confidence (N=400): 67.8%
3. Percent of BA recipients receiving job offers by knowledge of those involved in job interviews (N=1,086)
4. Percent of BA recipients receiving job offers by number of people known in the professional field (N=1,303)

- Knew no one in communication field (N=117): 62.4%
- Knew from 1-9 people in field (N=570): 61.6%
- Knew from 10-19 people in field (N=313): 70%
- Knew 20 or more people in field (N=303): 76.9%
5. Strength of relationships between job-finding success (number of job offers received) and factors predicting job-finding success (N=1,394)

Values are correlation coefficients from bivariate analyses. Scale in chart runs from 0 to .3, but highest possible value is 1.0.

- 0.133 Confidence in professional presentation
- 0.057 Confidence in sociability
- 0.143 Number of people known in field
- 0.09 Number of internships
- 0.06 Number of campus media activities
- 0.059 Grade point average
- 0.008 Broadcasting sequence
- 0.074 Print journalism sequence
- -0.048 PR sequence
- -0.049 Advertising sequence