Virtual Recruiting: The Impact of Virtual Interviews & Hiring Events on Construction Students

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Recruitment from college construction programs was drastically altered by not being allowed to gather in person in large groups for the majority of 2020. Companies could no longer recruit in person as they had at past college events, and instead connected and communicated with students virtually. The construction management department at California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo (Cal Poly), bridged this gap between recruiting companies and current students, at a virtual career fair using a collaborative hub built on Microsoft Teams. Data was gathered from students via a survey after attending this first departmental virtual fair, to measure impacts or changes in their experiences as a result of the transition to a virtual setting. Students' perceptions of the virtual career fair from the survey provided insight into the result that digitally required communication had on the student employer relationship, as well as other aspects of the recruitment process. Student recommendations, as well as existing research on regional career fairs, provide recommended improvements for possible virtual career fairs in the future.

Keywords: Virtual recruiting, career fair, college recruitment, digital hub, construction student

Introduction

Cal Poly's construction management program puts a high focus on being able to connect students with future employers. This is a program that has historically had its graduates experience recruiting success, "with nearly 100% [of students] finding full-time employment prior to graduation" as of 2020. The department places a high emphasis on its relationships with employers and the recruiting services that it offers. The pinnacle of the recruiting cycle in the construction management department is its bi-annual career fair. The fair typically hosts around a hundred companies, with ninety-five distinct companies attending the fall 2020 virtual fair, as well as many hundreds of students. The career fair was executed over one day and consisted of an open forum with a scheduled rotation of company booths which allowed students to directly communicate face to face with a broad variety of companies from all areas of the construction industry. Recruiters seek to hire for full-time positions, as well as temporary summer internship positions. Employee student interactions can occur in a multitude of ways, from informal chats about the company to more formal private interviews.

Concerns over the spread of the Novel Coronavirus pushed a majority of Cal Poly's classes and programs to a completely digital format in the fall 2020 quarter, and this transition included the 2020 construction management career fair. Instead of recruiters and students converging onto one physical location, participants attended remotely from all around the state and even the country. This situation was not unique to Cal Poly, as universities across the country and globe were affected. The university's solution to a ban on large in-person gatherings was to deploy a Microsoft Teams based

platform that stayed true to the past in-person format, companies still managed booths that were visited by students, and students submitted their resumes to companies through the online platform. Research on a past regional career fair in the hospitality industry showed that, "students' level of satisfaction with the career fair was attributed to current availability of jobs that appeal to them, willingness of employers' representatives to take their printed resume, and sufficient industry representation of the segment that the students were interested to pursue their careers." (Millman & Whitney, 2014, p.1) Student perceptions of any career fair, including a digital one, will likely be a result of these factors to some degree. In Norway, researchers found that a regional career fair is more likely to be successful with both employer-branding and in terms of student success and that niche career fairs will grow to be more important as more employers look to fill more specialized job roles (Vik, Norbech & Jeske p.12). The construction management department is a reflection of this statement, offering employers in a distinct market students with a specialized skill set. It will be important for the department to continually improve their virtual career fair to offer the most benefit to their students, as an important aspect of attending an institution for students is how well the university can connect them with potential employers.

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate a virtual career fair from a student's perspective, focusing on:

- Analyzing student perceptions and results after attending a virtual career fair
- Recommendations for future virtual based recruiting
- Understanding what adjustment job seekers could make to be more successful in navigating virtual recruiting in the construction industry
- Identifying student suggestions for modifications to benefit future virtual events
- Complete research of existing studies on virtual communication and job fairs for applicable strategies for the university and others in the future

The future likely holds an increase in the reach of technology and its utilization in schools and universities. Mass remote learning and work is a large change for many people and businesses, and it being on such a large scale means many areas of remote interactions are not well studied. Digital technology offered the ideal solution to spanning the gap between students and employers while maintaining social distancing, but what effects did the shift to purely digital communication have on student experience and success in recruiting at the college level? Additionally, what improvements could be made for later iterations of a virtual career fair within the department or at any other college or school?

Methodology

A survey was utilized to gather both qualitative and quantitative data to achieve the project's objective. The survey consisted of twenty questions, broken into sixteen multiple-choice questions and four free-response questions. It was electronically distributed and collected student responses anonymously. The survey was broken into three main sections. In the first section, four multiple-choice questions gathered demographic information including year in school, major, and past career fair attendance. Next, thirteen questions addressed the impact of the change to a virtual setting

on students. These included five multiple-choice questions that measured student time spent and company interactions both in person and at the virtual fair, as well as eight questions utilizing a five-point Likert scale to measure students' perceptions about various aspects of the career fair. The final three questions in the survey were free-response questions that asked students to share their opinions and recommendations. The free-response answers received from this portion were grouped into three main categories, positive perceptions, negative perceptions, and recommendations. The most recurring themes that were identified within the free-response, and were then noted as being the most relevant results. The survey was completed one time by students starting the week following the conclusion of the career fair. The survey was distributed to the key majors sought after by companies in industry to recruit construction professionals from, construction management and architectural engineering. To offer some student insight from other attendees in other departments and majors, the survey was also sent to construction management minors, heavy civil construction minors, and real property development minors.

Results

Thirty responses were received, with an average time to complete of six minutes and thirty seconds per response. The university year breakdown of the responses was 18% first year, 7% second year, 36% third year, 32% fourth year, and 7% fifth year or more. construction management students accounted for twenty-four of the 30 responses, with two architecture, one architectural engineering, and one civil engineering response.

The survey continued by asking respondents how many past Construction Management department career fairs they had attended. The breakdown in responses was about 40% first-timers, 25% second-timers, 20% third timers, and 7% each for fourth timers and five or more career fairs attended.

Respondents primarily attended the career fair to find summer internships (70%), with (25%) looking for a full time position, and (7%) attending for networking purposes.

Students were asked to remember how many interactions they had on average at past career fairs. Just under a quarter of the respondents had no past experience at career fairs, and of the remaining twenty-two responses, seven reported visiting one to three companies, nine each for three to six and six to ten companies, and two each for ten to fifteen and fifteen plus companies.
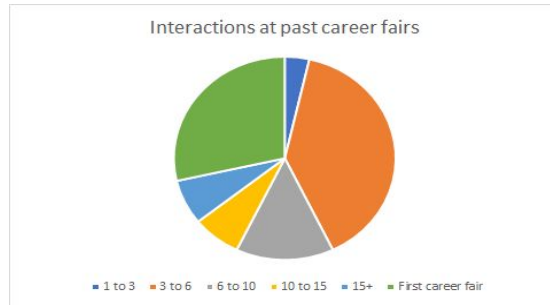
Figure 1: Past career fair interactions

For student interaction time with companies, the average interaction count at the virtual had the three largest responses of one to three, three to six, and six to ten about evenly splitting ninety percent of the answers. The remaining ten percent was half ten to fifteen and fifteen plus.
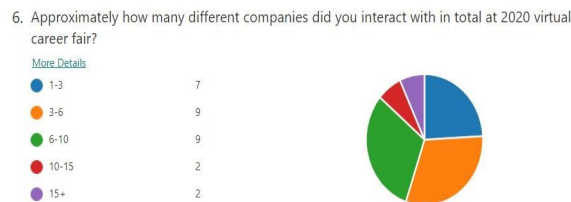

Figure 2: Virtual Career fair interactions

Students reported the average amount of time spent with individual companies at the fall virtual career fair. The results had the bulk of the data evenly split between five to fifteen minutes and fifteen to thirty minutes, with a couple of outliers.

Figure 3: Virtual Career fair interaction times

Students then reported the average time they remembered spending with individual companies at past in-person career fairs. Of the students reporting, the overwhelming answer was five to fifteen minutes, which made up eighty-five percent of the answers.

8. If you attended career fairs in the past what was the average length of time you spent with each company then?

More Details

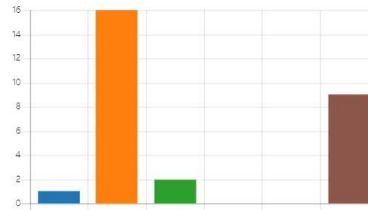|	
● Less than five minutes	1
● Five to fifteen minutes	16
● Fifteen to thirty minutes	2
● Thirty to minutes to an hour	0
● Longer than a hour	0
● Did not attend past career fairs	9

Figure 4: Past career fair interaction times

Respondents answered on how engaged they were at the virtual meetings and discussions they attended with companies. The results were almost evenly split across the five-point Likert response scale, with a little less engaged being the most frequent response.

9. Compared to your prior experience with in person presentations and meetings, how engaged were you at the virtual company info sessions?

More Details

● Much less engaged	4
● A little less engaged	9
● About the same	6
● A little more engaged	5
● A lot more engaged	4

Figure 5: Virtual career fair engagement

Respondents were asked to compare ease of communicating over the computer at the virtual fair and communicating face to face in person. The results showed that just over half of students viewed it as being a little harder to communicate, with the remaining half evenly divided between the remaining four options.

10. Compared to face to face communication, was talking to companies over the computer

More Details

● Much harder to communicate	4
● A little harder to communicate	16
● The same as face to face	4
● A little easier to communicate	3
● Much easier to communicate	2

Figure 6: Ease of virtual communication

Students compared the perceived strength of the connections they made with company recruiters over the internet to their experiences with connecting with people in real life. The most common response was connections were a little weaker, making up a third of the total results. The remaining responses were made up of twenty percent each for significantly weaker and about the same, and about ten percent total for other or significantly stronger.

Students were tasked with gauging how well they perceived company "brand" or "culture" from the presentations and discussions they had with recruiters at the virtual job fair. These results showed that

company culture or brand was perceived both neutrally or somewhat well by thirty-six percent of students each. Not well and very well made up the remaining percentage of results, with very well being eighteen percent of results and not well accounting for the last ten percent. No students chose the option that they perceived company culture extremely well from the survey.

To gain more insight into the student experience, respondents were asked to gauge their level of success at the fall career fair compared to their success at past in-person career fairs or recruiting sessions. The results showed that of the twenty-two respondents who had past career fair experience, five were a lot more successful, five were a little more successful, five had the same amount of success, three were a little less successful, two were much less successful, and one responded having no goals.

Students responded on how well they understood the format, organization, and platform of the virtual career fair before attending. Again answers were spread evenly across the five-point Likert scale, with ten students reporting having a basic understanding, seven having some understanding, five having a very good understanding, four having no understanding, two having an exact understanding, and one response for other.

Students evaluated the time they spent on preparation for the virtual fair in comparison to time spent preparing for past career fairs. Of the twenty-two respondents who did have past experience preparing for career fairs, six spent a little more time preparing, six spent about the same time, five spent a lot less time, two spent a little less time, and one response each for much more time spent and other.
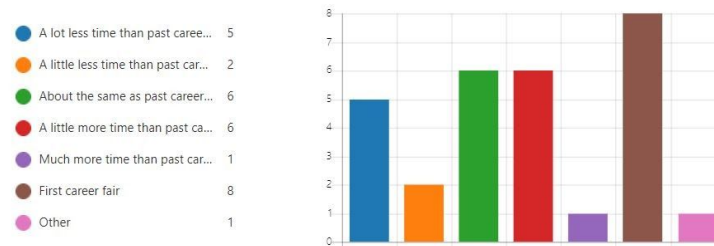

Figure 7: Preparation time spent

The second to last multiple-choice question in the survey was a yes or no question asking students' opinions on if there were any notable weaknesses or challenges that they faced due to the digital nature of the career fair. This resulted in an almost equal split, with forty percent not facing significant challenges and sixty percent saying yes they did face significant challenges or weaknesses.

The survey then transitioned from multiple choice questions to the three following free-response questions,
- If you answered yes to the last question, please provide examples of the weaknesses or challenges you experienced.

- Are there any advice or recommendations you have to be better prepared to attend a virtual career fair in the future?
- What are some changes you would make to improve the student experience? These could be format, schedule, platform, etc.

The most common themes of weaknesses or challenges that students faced due to the digital format of the career fair included: connectivity issues with twenty percent of respondents reporting problems, lack of direction and instruction with twenty-five percent of respondents mentioning this, situations where too many students were trying to talk at once with twenty-two percent of respondents finding this, feeling disconnected which fifteen percent of students mentioned, and lack of understanding on the company side in utilizing Microsoft teams to "breakout" students into more private chats which fifteen percent of respondents experienced.

The most common advice students had for being better prepared were things like research companies and develop priorities of who you want to talk to with thirty-five percent of respondents saying this, preparing questions and talking points which eighteen percent of respondents recommended, better review of the information the companies post on teams beforehand which was found in twenty percent of responses, and getting a company email to allow you to reach out to them instead of waiting for them to reach out via the resume you upload which twenty-two percent of students recommended doing.

Students responses in regards to changes they would like to see at future career fairs included having direct company emails for communication instead of having student driven resumes and elevator pitch uploads with twenty-eight percent of students recommending this, a bigger window for companies especially commercial builders with thirty-three percent of responses mentioning this, and just a better overall explanation beforehand of how the fair will work which twenty-five percent of students wanted to see.

The survey closed by asking respondents a yes or no question on if they would attend a virtual career fair in the future, which yielded an almost unanimous yes.

Analysis & Conclusion

While two of the most student comments were connectivity issues and lack of understanding of Microsoft teams from both sides, based on research, changing the platform from Microsoft Teams would not solve many problems. Even though a platform change could be an easy way to boost efficiency for example, "our study found that the network conditions did not significantly change user ratings, but Zoom had higher ratings than Microsoft Teams overall.. although network traffic for both services varied with network conditions, Zoom had a more constant bitrate than Teams " (Clopper, Baccie & Sel, 2020, p.3) However, a platform change should not be an option when looking to make improvements for students, because the existing work put into creating a recruiting hub by the department would not be worth abandoning for slightly better performance that exists with another host. Analyzing the student responses the data supported a few impacts.

First, when looking at how many companies students interacted with at past career fairs the bulk of the answers fell in the four to fifteen range, with only one respondent recalling visiting less than four companies. This contrasts with the virtual career fair data, which showed seven respondents or a quarter total visiting only one to three booths. Even while the virtual career fair data showed respondents had a higher average number of interactions compared to the past in-person data, almost a quarter of the students visited less than three companies. This could support a few conclusions, either more students were showing up intending to speak to a specific company, or students were just not as motivated to talk to a lot of companies and make connections virtually versus in person.

In terms of the amount of time students spent with each company, at past career fairs, the largest time reported was five to fifteen minutes with seventy-three percent of the votes and only fourteen percent of the votes for fifteen to thirty or less than five minutes. However, the virtual career fair survey data showed basically an even split in student responses between five to fifteen minutes and fifteen to thirty minutes each making up about forty-five percent of the responses. This could support several conclusions, either the digital format was fostering longer one on one talks with students and recruiters, or students had to take more time to make the same connections due to the digital format. The results of the next questions, which showed that virtual communication was on average "a little harder to communicate" and that connections made with companies over the computer were on average "a little weaker", would support the latter conclusion. This communication disconnect was also supported by the results of question twelve, which showed that few students perceived culture very well, and none extremely well.

One positive result was that a good portion of students were more successful in accomplishing their goals at the virtual fair than in-person. This matters because the goal of the majority of college students is to be prepared for a certain career, and they see making progress in their degree as increasing their employability (Payne & Sumter, 2005). Additionally, with this being the first virtual career fair in department history there is room to improve student understanding of the format which could lead to a decrease in negative factors. This is supported by the majority of respondents stating they only had, on average, a basic understanding of the format and also on average spent a little less time in their preparation.

Past research shows that some of the most effective strategies for student success in a virtual career fair were, "Providing career advice and speakers was seen as another way to draw the target groups to such events, while the use of ambassadors to promote the events was seen as another means to reach those target groups… involving student organizations and seeking continuous feedback from students for continuous improvement were seen as further steps towards success." (Vik, Norbech & Jeske, 2018, p.16) Both of these factors could be applied for greater success at a future construction management virtual event. One addition that could be made to the project's results would be a welcoming video meeting with a keynote speaker that all students and companies could attend at once. This would encourage connectivity, and reduce division.

Based on student recommendation, the elevator pitch and resume upload was not the way most students were looking to connect with employers. Students preferred to be able to reach out to the company themselves, as opposed to waiting for contact from the company. Vik, Norbech and Jeske (2018) also made a recommendation that would work well in the department, which is to involve student organizations. A possible application of this could be surveying the Associated Students of Construction Management club or other student clubs on the format, schedule, and process which would both give the more input into a fair designed to benefit them, as well as give club members a better understanding of the format.

Finally, the biggest weakness on the student end was their preparation. A way this could be improved is through a curriculum change consisting of adding an elective class. When analyzing how students choose what elective classes they take, it was found that they considered three factors in their analysis: perceived difficulty, perceived interest, and future career skills (Ting & Lee, 2011). The creation of a new elective class focused on professional preparation in terms of recruiting could balance these factors well, and would provide students an option to get career preparation help from industry-experienced faculty within their department. Another way to do this would be to provide more preparatory workshops prior to the career fair for students and include in these a focus on digital technology preparedness. One final note is that students should be aware of sites allowing peer based anonymous reviews on companies and their hiring practices. Two of the biggest examples, Glassdoor and Handshake, are one of the best ways for students to cross-reference their research on companies when preparing for a virtual career fair (Kelsey & Johnson, 2020). Preparation as the student must include utilizing all of the resources available to them to best achieve success in their recruitment goals.

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