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# ENTRY-LEVEL EMPLOYMENT IN INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETIC DEPARTMENTS: NON-READILY OBSERVABLES AND READILY OBSERVABLE ATTRIBUTES OF JOB CANDIDATES

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## Abstract

*Human resource management scholars and practitioners have recognized the importance of understanding the complexities of staffing personnel. This study focused on the perceived importance of attributes for entry-level applicants to collegiate athletic departments. A total of 315 NCAA athletic administrators who were randomly selected responded to a web-based survey. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of 10 easily observable attributes during the screening process, and 10 non-readily observable skills during the hiring process. Results indicated that career-related work experience was considered to be most important during the screening, followed by the applicant's recommendation, and leadership experience. While in the hiring stage, work ethic, communications skills and motivation were considered the most important attributes. This study adds to the literature in human resource management and athletic administration and has practical implications for prospective employees, athletic administrators and sport management faculty members.*

**Keywords:** Screening, Hiring, Observable, Non-Observable, Job Attributes, Collegiate Athletic Departments

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The increasing demand for entry-level jobs within the sport industry has created a heightened need for a more formalized hiring process for sport organizations. Each year, approximately 8,000 undergraduate and graduate students in the United States are ready to enter the job market with a sport-related degree that potentially qualifies them to begin a career in sport management (King, 2009). As more people become trained to work in the sport industry there is a continuous need for screening and hiring these potential employees. Human resource management scholars and practitioners have both recognized the importance of understanding the processes, limitations and complexities of staffing personnel (Saks, 2005). Moreover, the inherent complexity of these tasks becomes even more evident in times of economic adversity as the supply of qualified talent typically exceeds the number of jobs available. As a result, it is not uncommon to find hundreds of applicants competing for the same position, a situation that is more pronounced when applicants compete for entry-level positions. While the literature on recruitment of personnel seems abundant across most disciplines (Ahadiat & Smith, 1994; Chew & Teo, 1993; Emenheiser, Clay, & Palakurthi,



1986; Flaherty & Pappas, 2004; Moy, 2006), less research has been conducted in relation to screening and hiring criteria within sport organizations and specifically related to managerial jobs in college athletic departments.

The hiring process is vital to the success of every NCAA institution and most are seeking candidates with character and integrity, strong leadership and organizational skills, competitive instincts, communication skills, education and relevant experience and a commitment to their organizational mission and values (Tuite, 2010). DeCenzo and Robbins (2007) identified the following steps as important when selecting a job candidate: a) initial screening of candidates; b) completion of job applicants; c) employment testing; d) comprehensive interviews; e) background examinations; f) medical examinations; and g) the job offer. At some colleges and universities, candidates for high-profile athletic department jobs are quizzed by fans in public forums (Carey, 2005). The average tenure for major college athletic directors is only three and one half years (Carter, 2002) and the hiring practices of NCAA institutions are constantly under scrutiny, especially in terms of racial and gender equity (Wieberg, 2006, 2008).

The responsibilities of athletics directors along with the profile of individuals who are now being hired have changed from previous years. While coaches have traditionally been hired as athletic directors, Snider (2004) reports the financial impact of athletics at most institutions has been evident since the 1980s when lawyers, accountants and business executives started to take over athletic departments. For example, the University of Michigan recently hired the former CEO of Domino's Pizza as their athletics director (McCoy, 2010). The financial impact of collegiate athletics is evident when considering the athletics program at Louisiana State University has an economic impact of \$110 million on the state of Louisiana. Unlike government or industry jobs, the career ladder for athletic administrators is often circuitous as each institution may be looking for different traits in their candidate pool (Shuster, 1991). The screening and selection process in intercollegiate athletics also differs from most industries due to the heavy emphasis placed on the use of search committees by institutions of higher education.

The job market has become increasingly competitive due to the increasing supply of sport management graduates around the country and the growth of demand that match this supply (King, 2009). It is likely that in the near future sport industry employers will become more selective as the supply of qualified candidates exceeds the availability of job openings. Also, as the pool of applicants increases, making this process effective and efficient becomes a major task for athletic departments who serve as primary sources of employment for graduates in sport management. As a result, there is a need to better understand factors that influence hiring selection which are useful and timely for both prospective applicants and college athletic administrators.

This study is important because it highlights how to make the entire staffing process more efficient and effective as it focuses on the key aspects within the screening and hiring step of the staffing process. In addition, the study highlights the most important attributes, skills and traits sought by athletic administrators. Students benefit from these results by understanding what matters to employers when they apply for jobs in athletic departments. The study seeks to answer four research questions: a) What are the most salient observable attributes that matter to athletic administrators during the screening process of entry-level applicants for jobs in collegiate athletics?; b) Which non-readily observable skills and traits are considered to be the most critical for athletic administrators during the hiring process?; c) To what extent



does the perceived importance of the applicants' attributes, skills and traits differ based on the raters' positions and divisional affiliations?; d) What job candidate qualifications are commonly lacking when applying to entry-level jobs in collegiate athletics?

### *Staffing*

Staffing is a multi-faceted process that should be efficient and effective. Olian and Rynes (1984) outline a five stage staffing process: a) choice of selection criteria; b) selection of recruitment method; c) development of marketing strategy; d) choice of selection technique; and e) final decision. Chelladurai (2009) noted that staffing can be seen under two perspectives: the person-task fit in which the emphasis is to find applicants who possess the right technical skill to do the job; and the person-organization fit in which the emphasis is on finding an individual who most shares the organization's values. Considering the complexity of how organizations function, both perspectives seem critical to succeed. That is, during the overall staffing process, organization's must strive to hire employees that not only possess the skills to do the job, but also the traits, attitudes, dispositions and competences that are critical to succeed in the specific cultural environment of the job and the organization.

Staffing effectiveness has been linked to factors such as labor market conditions (Malm, 1955), structure, size and strategy (Schneider, 1983; Snow & Miles, 1983), type of vacancy (Schwab, 1982) and the characteristics of the persons involved in the hiring decision (Arvey, 1979). Tomkovick, Erffmeyer and Hietpas (1996) highlight the investment in recruiting, selection and training that hiring firms make in collegiate applicants as they transition from the academic environment into the business environment. Pre-screening is a vitally important part of the selection process for organizations, and when not properly conducted, can render the final selection process ineffective (Keenan, 1987).

An effective search is conducted in an efficient manner when the best candidate is chosen within a reasonable amount of time and when the organization has invested a reasonable amount of resources. Accordingly, the organization should be effective in terms of both recruiting and retention. This would save replacement costs which often surpass the costs for hiring (Hinkin & Tracey, 2000). As a result, the process of recruitment is seen as an important strategic step within the company's mission because it contributes to the organization's strategic objectives (Saks, 2005). Thus, hiring the best candidate in an effective manner is not only important due to tightening budgets but also because failing to do so inhibits the organization's growth and development.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that hundreds of applications are often submitted to college athletic departments for entry-level job openings. However, as is often the case, not all of the applicants fit the profile of the organization or fulfill the expectations of employers. If the process of selecting a candidate is not conducted in an adequate and efficient manner this can result not only in hiring the wrong individual, but it also absorbs significant time and money from the organization. In most cases, higher education institutions must comply with legal procedures and protocols that require they abide by certain laws and regulations that ensure the overall screening process is run fairly for all applicants before selecting those who will be invited for an interview. Prior to their hiring, candidates are typically brought to campus for one or two days to be interviewed by the search committee.

A company's direct and indirect costs related to recruitment may include advertising, recruiter and search committee time, applicant travel and accommodation, personnel



administrative function, and administrative miscellaneous costs such as correspondence, telephone and courier (Hinkin & Tracey, 2000). Karamarz and Michaud (2010) noted that hiring costs for an individual who gets an indefinite contract are much larger than for those workers who only get a short term contract (cited in Dube, Freeman & Reich, 2010). A study conducted by the Research on Labor and Employment at the University of California at Berkeley estimated that in 2003 the costs of hiring across industries ranged from \$11,411 for a production worker to up to \$30,793 for a salaried worker. They also noted the cost of hiring a college graduate could reach up to \$5,776 during the same year. Variations of these costs include the different levels of training conducted for new hires which is often dependent upon the sophistication of the particular industry (Dube et al., 2010).

#### *Observables and Non-observables Attributes*

Many organizations have had the recruitment goal of attracting a large number of applicants, but some researchers have questioned this practice and instead suggest a strategy of considering a wider range of possible recruitment objectives (Breaugh & Starke, 2000). One of these recruitment objectives would be to require candidates to submit proof of a number of observable attributes within their application materials. The literature suggests that a number of factors influence the perception of the suitability of an applicant in the mind of the recruiter. Considering that industries place differing levels of importance on certain attributes when hiring new employees, scholars have attempted to simplify this process by categorizing the attributes, traits and skills. Judge and Cable (1997) noted the importance of appropriately weighting observable and non-observable attributes to predict a candidate's fit within the organization.

Moy (2006) suggests that recruiters may use easily observable traits possessed by candidates to make inferences on less easily observable traits, such as work ethic and maturity. Huang and Capelli (2010) stressed the importance of focusing on an effective screening process because it helped recruiters to predict critical attributes like work ethic. Spence (1973) uses the term observable attribute to refer to a "plethora of personal data in the form of observable characteristics" (p. 357). Spence referred to the staffing process as an investment of uncertainty because what an individual shows in an interview or during the screening process corresponds only to signals that partially explain an individual's capabilities or future fit within the organization. For example, findings by Cole, Rubin, Feild and Giles (2007) suggest that academic qualifications, work experience, and extracurricular activities predicted recruiter perceptions of an applicant's employability for recent graduates.

While the terms *observable* and *non-observable attributes* have been commonly used by human resource scholars (Bell & Orr, 2002; Cole, Feild, Giles, & Harris, 2009; Judge & Cable, 1997; Moy, 2006; Rynes & Barber, 1990), these studies have not indicated when, during the staffing process, these attributes should be identified. For example, Rynes and Barber (1990) noted that certain observable attributes, like *word-processing skills* and *computer programming*, can be related to productivity or quality but they do not suggest when these attributes would be seen. These authors also noted that certain observable attributes like *education* and *experience* act more like signals of the degree of quality of an attribute. Cole et al. (2009) also noted that aspects of *personality* like *extraversion* and *open to experience* were less challenging to assess because these were observable traits as opposed to less observable traits like *neuroticism*. Moy (2006) suggested the most common observable attributes are *extraversion*, *appearance* and *related work* could be assessed during the interview. While *extraversion* and *appearance* can be identified during an interview,





attributes like *related work* can be identified during the screening process by checking a candidate's vitae. Thus, it is most likely that a company will first check a candidate's work experience before it selects a candidate for an interview. Considering that the literature does not provide an encompassing definition for observable and non-observable attributes, we expand the meaning of these attributes and provide a definition for each type.

In this study readily observables or explicit attributes are those that are based on evidence and are relatively easy to confirm without the presence of the candidate (e.g., academic achievement, or work experience). We posit that readily observable attributes can be better identified during the screening process. Examples of readily observable attributes include among others: career-related work, recommendations, leadership experience, reference person, undergraduate education, graduation studies, sport participation, general work experience, professional involvement and academic achievement within the application materials. During the screening process, these factors can be easily verified and observed by the recruiter from examining the resume or through the examination of other documents that provide evidence of the existence of a particular attribute.

Non-readily observables or implicit attributes refer to those that are not based on evidence and thus their identification requires an interaction between the recruiter and the candidate. It is in this interaction that the candidate will signal imperfect information to create an impression in regards to the existence or the absence of a particular trait (i.e., motivation, people skills, appearance). These attributes and traits can be better identified during the interview process.

While observable attributes are critical during the screening process, the actual selection and hiring of an applicant involves the investigation of non-observable or implicit attributes. As candidates arrive on-site for interviews, a recruiter may evaluate factors such as work ethic, communication skills, enthusiasm, maturity, conceptual and decision-making skills, technical skills, advancement potential and entrepreneurship. Chew and Teo (1993) noted the importance of the following factors when selecting a candidate: integrity, future potential, intelligence, maturity, communications ability, personality, health, future ambitions, personal appearance and sense of humor. When hiring, Ahadiat and Smith (1994) highlighted the importance of the following list of attributes: professional conduct, reliability, ethical standards, communication skills, maturity, appearance, personal disposition, congeniality, advancement potential, compatibility and overtime disposition. All these attributes can be classified as non-readily observables or implicit because they cannot be observed during the screening process and many of them can be totally or partially observed during the interaction between the candidate and the recruiter.

## **Method**

### *Instrument*

A twenty-item questionnaire was developed to measure the importance of: a) 10 easily observable job candidates' attributes during the screening process, and, b) 10 non-readily observable skills and traits during the hiring process. Based on the literature review, a pool of 135 items was generated for both observables and non-readily observables items. The items that were generated stemmed from these studies, including skills, traits, abilities and other attributes deemed to be important when recruiting entry-level positions from a variety of areas in the service and manufacturing industries of general businesses, sales, accounting,



restaurants and hospitality (Ahadiat & Smith, 1994; Chew & Teo, 1993; Cole et al., 2007; Emenheiser et al., 1986; Levenburg, 1996; McDaniel & White, 1993; NACE, 2005 [as cited in Hoff, Kroll, & Fletcher, 2007]; Raymond, Carlson, & Hopkins, 2006; Tomkovick et al., 1996). Many of the items described in these studies were similar, but they were stated in slightly different terms (i.e., congeniality and ability to work well with others). As a result, researchers conducted a second review with the purpose of eliminating those items duplicative in meaning, thus reducing the numbers of items to forty-one.

The next step was to ask a panel of experts, comprised of five athletic administrators and five sport management faculty, to categorize the forty-one items into two groups (18 observables vs. 23 non-readily observables). Given that respondents to the questionnaire were current administrators, the number of items was reduced due to concerns that a lengthy questionnaire may have a detrimental effect on the response rate. Consequently, the panel of experts refined the instrument from forty-one items to twenty-items (i.e., a set of ten items for each group). Thus, ten readily observable items were included in the screening section of the questionnaire, and ten non-readily observables items were included in the hiring section of the questionnaire (see Table 1 and 2). Respondents to the questionnaire were asked to evaluate the importance of each attribute or skill on a five-point Likert-type scale (1= 'not at all important' to 5= 'very important'). In addition, the questionnaire included an open-end question to investigate the three most commonly lacking qualifications of job candidates.

### *Sample*

From a sample frame of 1,061 NCAA schools a total of 427 NCAA athletic departments were selected using a stratified random sampling procedure. Athletic departments were stratified in three groups based on NCAA divisional affiliations. From each of the 427 athletic departments a maximum of 13 athletic administrators were chosen representing three levels: Athletic Directors; Associate ADs, and other titles (e.g. Director of Ticketing). A total of 2,076 athletic administrators were selected and asked to respond to a synchronous web-based survey (Kehoe & Pitkow, 1996). A total of 315 administrators responded to the survey for a response rate of 15.2%. This rate of return is within the 15% accepted rate for surveys submitted to organizations (Baldauf, Reisinger, & Moncrief, 1999) and within the expected rate of return for web surveys (Churchill & Iacobucci, 2005). Of the total responses, 167 were from D-I, 48 from D-II, and 85 from D-III institutions (15 non-responses). In terms of positions held, there were 48 ADs, 101 associate ADs, 67 assistant ADs, and 35 departmental directors while 50 respondents were classified 'others' and 14 did not reveal their position. The average age of respondents was 42.1 years old ( $SD = 11.04$ ) with an average industry tenure of 11.5 years ( $SD = 8.59$ ). The majority of respondents were male ( $n = 198$ ; 65.3%) and Caucasian-Americans ( $n = 263$ ; 87.7%).

### *Results*

#### *Importance of Job Candidates' Attributes*

As reported in Table 1, *career-related work experience* was considered to be most important attribute in the screening process ( $M = 4.68$ ), followed by *recommendation* (4.07), *leadership experience* (4.03), *reference person* (4.03) and *undergraduate education* (3.75). It is not surprising that *career-related work experience* was the most important observable attribute due to the importance that athletics departments place on the need for understanding NCAA rules and regulations.

As shown in Table 2, *work ethic* was considered to be the most important in the hiring process ( $M = 4.85$ ), followed by *communication skill* (4.68), *motivation* (4.63), *maturity* (4.62), and *conceptual skills* (4.54). Like most jobs within the sport industry, employees in collegiate athletics work long hours and must exhibit a strong work ethic.

Table 1  
*Readily observable attributes*

No.	Observables	M	SD	%					
				1	2	3	4	5	(4 & 5)
1.	Career-related work	4.62	(0.62)	0.0	1.0	4.4	26.7	67.9	(94.6)
2.	Recommendations	4.07	(0.81)	0.3	3.5	16.8	47.6	31.7	(79.3)
3.	Leadership experience	4.03	(0.80)	0.3	2.9	20.3	47.0	29.5	(76.5)
4.	Reference person	4.03	(0.86)	0.6	4.8	17.1	46.3	31.1	(77.4)
5.	Undergraduate Education	3.75	(0.88)	1.3	5.7	29.5	44.1	19.4	(63.5)
6.	Grad studies or certificates	3.73	(0.88)	2.5	4.8	26.3	49.8	16.5	(66.3)
7.	Sport participation	3.43	(1.03)	3.8	15.6	28.3	39.0	13.3	(52.3)
8.	General work experience	3.29	(1.05)	3.8	17.5	40.0	23.5	15.2	(38.7)
9.	Professional involvement	3.37	(0.92)	2.5	13.3	39.0	35.2	9.8	(45.0)
10.	Academic achievement	3.07	(0.97)	7.0	17.5	41.9	28.6	5.1	(33.7)

Table 2 *Non-readily observable attributes*

No.	Non-observables	M	SD	%					
				1	2	3	4	5	(4 & 5)
1.	Work ethic	4.85	(0.42)		0.3	1.3	11.4	87.0	(98.4)
2.	Communication skills	4.68	(0.53)		0.6	1.6	27.0	70.8	(97.8)
3.	Motivation / enthusiasm	4.63	(0.61)		1.0	3.8	27.0	68.3	(95.3)
4.	Maturity	4.62	(0.55)		0.3	2.5	32.1	65.1	(97.2)
5.	Conceptual skills	4.54	(0.69)	0.6	0.6	5.7	30.5	62.5	(93.0)
6.	Decision-making skills	4.27	(0.76)	0.6	1.3	11.1	44.4	42.5	(86.9)
7.	People skills	3.96	(0.82)	0.6	3.8	20.3	49.2	26.0	(75.2)
8.	Technical skills	3.92	(0.81)	1.3	2.2	22.9	50.5	23.2	(73.7)
9.	Advancement potential	3.89	(0.91)	1.9	4.4	23.2	44.1	26.3	(70.4)
10.	Entrepreneurship	3.66	(0.90)	1.9	7.3	29.5	45.4	15.9	(61.3)

*Raters' Characteristics on Candidates' Attributes (Rater Bias)*

To investigate the influence of raters' positions, gender, and divisional affiliations on the perceived importance of job candidates' attributes and characteristics, the data was analyzed using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with independent variables of divisional affiliations (D-I = 167; D-II & III = 133), gender (male = 196; female = 104), positions (higher = 164; lower = 136) and dependent variables of two sets of employee characteristics. Due to the missing values, the sample size included in the MANOVA ( $n = 300$ ) was smaller than the actual sample size ( $N = 315$ ).





For the observable attributes in screening (see Table 3), the results showed that there was a main effect for positions, Wilk's  $\lambda = .93$ ,  $F(10, 283) = 2.10$ ,  $p = .025$  and gender, Wilk's  $\lambda = .94$ ,  $F(10, 283) = 1.94$ ,  $p = .04$ , but not for divisions. Univariate analysis of variance indicated the effect of raters' positions was significant for *career-related work experience*, *graduate studies*, and *sport participation* while raters' gender was significant for *academic achievement*. In regard to raters' positions, higher-level administrators rated greater on *graduate studies* and *sport participation* while lower-level administrators reported greater importance on *career-related work experience*. In comparison to female administrators, male counterparts rated greater on *academic achievement*.

Table 3  
MANOVA for Gender, Position, and Divisional Affiliations on Observables

Source	DV	Wilks' $\lambda$	F	df	p	$\lambda^2$	Group mean diff.
<i>Multivariate</i>							
Gender		.94		10, 283		.064	
Position		.93	1.94	10, 283	.040	.069	
Division		.95	2.10	10, 283	.025	.050	
			1.50		.138		
<i>Univariate</i>							
Gender	Academic achievement		4.21	1, 292	.041	.014	Male (3.17) > Female (2.92)
Position	Career-related work exp.		4.15	1, 292	.043	.014	Higher (4.54) < Lower (4.72)
	Graduate studies		8.78	1, 292	.003	.029	Higher (3.86) > Lower (3.58)
	Sport participation		9.34	1, 292	.048	.013	Higher (3.54) > Lower (3.26)
Division	Sport participation		5.69	1, 292		.019	DI (3.27) < DII&III (3.59)
					.018		

Note: All non-significant findings from univariate analyses were not reported ( $p > .05$ )

For the non-readily observable traits and skills (see Table 4), the results showed a main effect for *gender*, Wilk's  $\lambda = .93$ ,  $F(10, 283) = 2.08$ ,  $p = .026$ , but not for *divisions* and *positions*. Specifically, the effect of participants' gender was significant for *maturity*, *conceptual skills*, *decision-making skills*, and *technical skills*. In comparison to male administrators, female administrators reported greater importance on all four employee traits and skills



Table 4  
*MANOVA for Gender, Position, and Divisional Affiliations on Non-observables*

Source	DV	Wilks' $\lambda$	F	df	p	$\lambda^2$	Group mean diff.
<i>Multivariate</i>							
Gender		.93	2.08	10, 283	.026	.069	
Position		.95	1.39	10, 283	.184	.047	
Division		.97	0.44	10, 283	.928	.015	
<i>Univariate</i>							
Gender	Maturity		9.17	1, 292	.003	.030	Male (4.55) < Female (4.75)
	Conceptual skills		8.22	1, 292	.004	.027	Male (4.46) < Female (4.70)
	Decision-making skills		6.29	1, 292	.013	.021	Male (4.20) < Female (4.42)
	Technical skills		15.18	1, 292	< .001	.029	Male (3.79) < Female (4.16)
Position	Entrepreneurship		5.51	1, 292	.020	.019	Higher (3.78) > Lower (3.52)

*Commonly Lacking Qualifications*

Results from an additional open-answer question revealed that approximately 60% ( $n = 188$ ) of the 315 respondents who were athletic administrators considered *communication skills* as one of the three most commonly lacking attributes of job candidates, followed by *related work experience* ( $n = 129$ ; 40.9%), *work ethic* ( $n = 69$ ; 21.9%), and *maturity* ( $n = 45$ ; 14.3%). See Table 5 for more information.



Table 5  
*Commonly Lacking Attributes*

No.	Attributes	Lacking # 1	Lacking # 2	Lacking # 3	Frequency Total
1	Communication skill	82	70	36	188
2	Related work experience	80	28	21	129
3	Work ethics	27	18	24	69
4	Maturity; Integrity	13	17	15	45
5	Critical & analytical ability	9	15	13	37
6	Knowledge about the job and org.	3	22	8	33
7	People and team work skill	7	10	15	32
7	Technical skill (including computer skill)	7	16	9	32
9	Enthusiasm and dedication	5	11	13	29
10	Decision making; problem solving skill	10	6	10	26
11	Creativity & Initiative	3	8	14	25
12	Appreciation of hours required	5	12	6	23
12	Realistic job expectation	7	9	7	23
14	Motivation to advance	6	4	11	21
15	Professional appearance; Dress	6	3	11	20
16	Self-esteem; Confidence	6	4	5	15
17	Self-directed; Work under limited supervision	2	4	5	11
18	Education; Proper degree	1	6	2	9
19	Manners; Attitude	3	5	0	8
20	Application materials; Reference	1	3	2	6

Discussion

From a theoretical perspective, the study adds to the literature in human resource management and athletic administration. The study also has important practical implications for administrators within intercollegiate athletics. The findings from this study can help prospective employees in college sports including sport management students to better prepare during the job preparation and job seeking process. The study also assists athletic administrators in setting criteria for screening and hiring entry-level employees. In addition, the study provides valuable information to sport management faculty members in terms of which skills they need to emphasize in their curriculum.

*Readily Observable Attributes for Screening*

Results revealed that among the observable attributes when screening, athletic administrators view *career-related work experience, positive recommendations, leadership experience* and *reference person* as important attributes during this stage. These attributes relate to experiences that will mostly take place outside of the classroom. For an entry-level position, this might suggest that administrators are more prone to considering applicants that are already in the industry as opposed to graduates with no experience. Furthermore, the results suggest that athletic administrators are not only interested in the candidate's work experience, but more specifically are interested in candidates with prior experience within the



sport industry. The observable attribute of *general experience* was rated at the bottom of the ten attributes that were presented to them. It is possible to argue that the applicants' *recommendations* and *reference person* should also derive from within the sport industry, leaving *leadership experience* as the only attribute that candidates may gain while still enrolled in college (i.e., team captain, president or member of the student association, sport management club, etc.). This suggests that recent graduates may find it more difficult to be finalists for sport-related jobs when competing against applicants with existing industry experience.

In regards to the predictable value of an *observable* attribute as an indicator for a *non-observable*, results of this study need to be interpreted with caution as these results do not involve any inferential or correlational analysis. Although some studies suggest that observable traits could serve to infer less observable traits (Moy, 2006; Raynes & Barber, 1990), it is important to note the meaning of observable in these studies suggests the attribute can be observed during the interaction which occurred between the recruiter and the candidate. In the present study, the meaning assigned to observable attributes is exactly the opposite, suggesting the attribute must be observed without the need to interact with the candidate. Accordingly, the definition of observable attribute in this study is more functional as it aims to identify attributes that are relatively simple to observe when facilitating the process of screening. Hence, we cannot interpret that a candidate who brings *work related experience* (an observable attribute) will correlate with any other of the non-observable attributes listed in the results of this study.

Results from this study indicate the need for *career-related experience* and underscores the importance that sport management educators should place on practicum and internship requirements and the necessity of stressing volunteering and trainee programs to students. Sport management students must understand the need and practicality of mandated practicum and internship programs. This study highlights the importance that students should place on the internship, practicum and volunteer experiences and their impact on the student's ability to secure a positive reference from an established practitioner. Furthermore, a recruiting manager is more likely to hire a student with a strong reference from a known and trusted source. Not unlike other jobs in sport, candidates landing jobs in intercollegiate athletics rely upon their networks based on who they know and who knows them (Parks, Quaterman, & Thibault, 2007). Results from this study also point to the importance of the undergraduate education received by applicants. The increasing demand for jobs and the growth of sport management programs has caused some students to be more selective in their choice of an institution. In addition, students are increasingly being encouraged to secure minors or double major in various disciplines to enhance their resume. Students who engaged in high school or college athletics should be encouraged to highlight their participation. Teams in professional sport leagues such as the National Basketball Association place great value on the leadership, decision-making and team-building skills that are gained through participation in athletics when hiring front office staff.

Sport management educators can help facilitate observable attributes such as *leadership experience* by helping students create student run sport management clubs. Furthermore, educators should consider developing graduate studies and certificate programs such as those at SUNY Cortland, Ohio University and University of Memphis in an effort to attract current practitioners. Sport management educators should also assist students by pointing out skills that can be transferred from general work experiences to sport-related work experiences.



Students should have information and access to professional involvement at various conferences such as the annual NCAA conference, various sport industry networking conferences and more scholarly conferences such as NASSM. Finally, it should be noted that academic achievement by students may be a good indicator of the candidate's work ethic and knowledge of the industry.

#### *Non-readily Observables*

In terms of non-observable traits, results suggest that at least six of the ten non-readily observables attributes are seen as very important (rated 4.0 and higher) by athletic administrators. In particular, *work ethic*, *communication skills* and *motivation/enthusiasm* are the top three traits. Work ethic is defined as "a set of beliefs and attitudes reflecting the fundamental value of work" (Meriac, Woehr & Banister, 2010, p. 316). As such, *work ethic* is also associated with being reliable, having initiative and disposition to do the best effort at work. This result is consistent with Huang and Capelli (2010) who noted that while several attributes play important roles when hiring a new employee, the most crucial of all attributes is *work ethic*. Similarly, the importance of a strong work ethic relies upon the notion that an employee not only does his/her job in a conscientious way but also he/she is motivated and exhibits strong job performance. Sport management educators should emphasize the importance that work ethic plays within the industry by talking about it in class. In addition, rigorous curriculums should be developed that challenge students and enhance their work ethic. Finally, curriculums should require in-depth experiential learning activities (e.g., role plays, service learning activities, conferences) that provide students with practical learning opportunities. Cuneen and Sidwell (1988) evaluated the characteristics of outstanding students and noted that good students possessed a strong work ethic.

Oral and written *communication skills* were also important non-observables within the study. This finding is consistent with a study on competencies needed for sport managers in Germany which listed among the most important, interpersonal communication (Horch & Schutte, 2003). Intercollegiate athletic administrators must be capable of using communication skills to sell sponsorships, plan events and to communicate with internal and external stakeholders. The study also suggests communication skills were more important than *conceptual skills* for entry-level employees. This finding is consistent with Katz (1974) who noted that *conceptual skills* were deemed more critical in the higher positions within the organization. Communication skills are also vital to the interview process and critical for entry-level sales positions, which is one of the best ways to break into the industry.

#### *Raters' Characteristics on Candidates' Attributes (Rater Bias)*

Results from this study suggest there are possible rater biases or differences concerning prioritized candidates' attributes. Higher-level administrators prefer job candidates who are able to see the bigger picture of college athletics because such preferences were revealed in their relative emphasis on *graduate studies*, *sport participation* and *entrepreneurship*, meanwhile, lower-level administrators seem to prefer those who have hands-on experiences whose experiences can be readily utilized with minimal training.

While there are some gender differences, those differences were found with relatively less important attributes. The findings suggest that more important attributes are considered to be consistently important regardless of the raters' gender. However, job candidates should notice that female raters, in comparison to their male counterparts, may pay more attention to non-readily observable attributes. The findings from this study suggest that gender had a





significant effect in terms of non-observable traits such as *maturity*, *conceptual skills*, *decision-making skills*, and *technical skills*, whereby female administrators reported greater importance on all four employee traits in relation to males.

#### *Commonly Lacking Attributes*

Athletic administrators suggested that *communication skills*, *related-work experience*, *work ethic*, and *maturity* were the most commonly lacking attributes by entry-level applicants. At the same time, it is not surprising to learn that these attributes were deemed as the most important attributes by administrators. Sport management faculty may consider implementing realistic mock job interviews to help students in these areas along with providing students with the resources to assist in applying for jobs in the industry.

As mentioned earlier, sport management curriculum (or course content) should emphasize students' class presentations, practicum and internship, group assignments, and case-based learning in order for students to be better equipped in terms of *communication skills*, *related work experience*, and *team work skills*.

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# ENTRY-LEVEL EMPLOYMENT IN INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETIC DEPARTMENTS: NON-READILY OBSERVABLES AND READILY OBSERVABLE ATTRIBUTES OF JOB CANDIDATES



Gonzalo Bravo, Doyeon Won, & David J. Shonk

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## *MANAGEMENT WHITEPAPER*

### **Research Problem**

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of collegiate athletic administrators regarding observable and non-observable attributes, skills and traits of applicants for entry-level managerial positions. To our knowledge, this study is the first of its kind to describe the types of attributes collegiate athletic administrators consider when staffing. The study has practical implications for athletic administrators, sport management faculty and prospective applicants. For athletic administrators the study provides guidance for screening and hiring entry-level employees. Prospective employees and sport management graduates also benefit by understanding the most important attributes sought by employers and thus better prepare them for the job seeking process. The study also provides valuable information to sport management faculty members in terms of which skills and activities they need to emphasize in their curriculum.

### **Issue**

The job market within the sport industry has become increasingly more competitive due to the increasing supply of sport management graduates around the country and the demand by applicants for entering the industry. Anecdotal evidence suggests that collegiate athletic departments serve as one of the primary sources of employment for sport management graduates in the United States. As the pool of qualified applicants increases, making the staffing process effective and efficient becomes a challenging task for athletic departments.

An effective search is conducted in an efficient manner when the best candidate is chosen within a reasonable amount of time and when the organization has invested a reasonable amount of resources. The scholarly literature suggests that a number of factors would influence the perception of the suitability of an applicant in the mind of a recruiter. While the terms *observable* and *non-observable attributes* have been commonly used by human resource scholars, these studies have not indicated when, during the staffing process, these attributes should be identified. In the current study, readily observable or explicit attributes are those based on evidence and are relatively easy to confirm without the presence of the candidate (e.g., academic achievement, or work experience). We suggest that readily observable attributes can be better identified during the screening process. During the screening process, these factors can be easily verified and observed by examining the resume or through the examination of other documents that provide evidence of the existence of a particular attribute. Non-readily observable or implicit attributes refer to those that are not based on evidence and thus their identification requires an interaction between the recruiter and the candidate (i.e., communication skills or appearance). It is in this interaction that the candidate will signal imperfect information to create an impression regarding the existence or the absence of a particular trait. Non-observable attributes and traits can be better



identified during the interview. This study is important because it highlights how to make the entire staffing process more efficient and effective as it focuses on the key aspects within the screening and hiring step of the staffing process. In addition, the study highlights the most important attributes, skills and traits sought by athletic administrators.

### **Summary**

This study was drawn from the literature on personnel psychology and human resource management. The first step was to identify critical factors to the staffing process as related to athletic administration. Based on the literature review, a pool of 135 items was generated for both readily and non-readily observables items. The items stemmed from these studies, including skills, traits, abilities and other attributes deemed to be important when recruiting entry-level positions from a variety of areas in the service and manufacturing industries. In many instances, items described in each study were similar but stated in slightly different terms (i.e., congeniality and ability to work well with others). A panel of experts comprised of athletic administrators and sport management faculty conducted a second review with the purpose of eliminating duplicate items, thus reducing the questionnaire to two groups of ten attributes each. A total of 10 observable items were included in the screening section of the questionnaire, and 10 non-observable items were included in the hiring section of the questionnaire.

Respondents to the questionnaire were randomly selected from 1,061 NCAA athletic departments across the United States. A total of 315 athletic administrators ranging from athletic directors ( $n = 48$ ), associate and assistant athletic directors ( $n = 136$ ) to directors and other ranks from various units (i.e., director of sport information) ( $n = 85$ ) from division I, II, and III were asked to evaluate the importance of each attribute, trait and skill on a five-point scale. In addition, an open-end question was included for the three most commonly lacking qualifications of job candidates.

The most important observable attribute was *career-related work experience*, followed by *recommendation*, *leadership experience*, *reference person* and *undergraduate education*. *Work ethic* was the most important non-readily observable trait, followed by *communication skill*, *motivation*, *maturity*, and *conceptual skills* (see Table 1 and 2). In addition, a multivariate analysis of variance was conducted with the purpose of investigating differences (or bias) amongst evaluators' position, gender, and divisional affiliations. Regarding observable attributes during the screening process, the results revealed differences in regards to evaluator's position and gender, but not for divisions. These findings suggest there were differences in regards to the perceived importance of the attributes of *career-related work experience*, *graduate studies*, and *sport participation*, but it was dependent upon who was evaluating. The attribute of *academic achievement* was perceived differently based on the gender of the evaluator. In regard to raters' positions, higher-level administrators placed greater importance on *graduate studies* and *sport participation* while lower-level administrators reported greater importance on *career-related work experience*. In comparison to female administrators, male counterparts rated higher on *academic achievement*. Results from an additional open-answer question revealed that approximately 60% of athletic administrators considered *communication skills* as one of the three most commonly lacking attributes of job candidates, followed by *related work experience* (40.9%), *work ethic* (21.9%), and *maturity* (14.3%).

Table 1: Readily observable attributes

No.	Observables	M	SD	%					
				1	2	3	4	5	(4 & 5)
1	Career-related work	4.62	0.62		1.0	4.4	26.7	<b>67.9</b>	94.6
2	Recommendations	4.07	0.81	0.3	3.5	16.8	47.6	31.7	79.3
3	Leadership experience	4.03	0.80	0.3	2.9	20.3	47.0	29.5	76.5
4	Reference person	4.03	0.86	0.6	4.8	17.1	46.3	31.1	77.4
5	Undergraduate Education	3.75	0.88	1.3	5.7	29.5	44.1	19.4	63.5
6	Grad studies or certificates	3.73	0.88	2.5	4.8	26.3	49.8	16.5	66.3
7	Sport participation	3.43	1.03	3.8	15.6	28.3	39.0	13.3	52.3
8	General work experience	3.29	1.05	3.8	17.5	40.0	23.5	15.2	38.7
9	Professional involvement	3.37	0.92	2.5	13.3	39.0	35.2	9.8	45.0
10	Academic achievement	3.07	0.97	7.0	17.5	41.9	28.6	5.1	33.7

Table 2: Non-readily observable attributes

No.	Non-observables	M	SD	%					
				1	2	3	4	5	(4 & 5)
1	Work ethic	4.85	0.42		0.3	1.3	11.4	87.0	98.4
2	Communication skills	4.68	0.53		0.6	1.6	27.0	70.8	97.8
3	Motivation / enthusiasm	4.63	0.61		1.0	3.8	27.0	68.3	95.3
4	Maturity	4.62	0.55		0.3	2.5	32.1	65.1	97.2
5	Conceptual skills	4.54	0.69	0.6	0.6	5.7	30.5	62.5	93.0
6	Decision-making skills	4.27	0.76	0.6	1.3	11.1	44.4	42.5	86.9
7	People skills	3.96	0.82	0.6	3.8	20.3	49.2	26.0	75.2
8	Technical skills	3.92	0.81	1.3	2.2	22.9	50.5	23.2	73.7
9	Advancement potential	3.89	0.91	1.9	4.4	23.2	44.1	26.3	70.4
10	Entrepreneurship	3.66	0.9	1.9	7.3	29.5	45.4	15.9	61.3

## Analysis

Results revealed that athletic administrators view *career-related work experience*, *positive recommendations*, *leadership experience* and *reference person* as the most important attributes during this stage. These attributes relate to experiences that are mostly developed outside of the classroom. At least three conclusions can be drawn from this result. First, collegiate administrators believe that career related experience in the industry is a

defining attribute that draws their attention to certain applications and often leads to an interview. This attribute was perceived as most critical by administrators and identified as the second most lacking attribute for new hires. To make the screening process more efficient, it is important that administrators include terminology concerning career related experience in job descriptions. Second, *career-related experience* underscores the importance that educators should place on practicum and internship requirements and the necessity of stressing volunteering and trainee programs to students. Third, sport management students must understand the need and practicality of mandated practicum and internship programs. This study highlights the importance that students should place on the internship, practicum and volunteer experiences and their impact on the student's ability to secure a positive reference from an established practitioner. However, the reality is that recent graduates without this type of experience find it difficult to reach the final cut of applications. We suggest that academic programs continually strive to make every effort possible to interact with industry professionals to help link theory and practice within the classroom.

In terms of non-observable traits, results suggest six of the ten non-readily observables attributes are perceived as very important by athletic administrators. Within this list, *work ethic*, *communication skills* and *motivation/enthusiasm* comprise the top three. This finding is consistent with previous studies in personnel selection which noted that while several attributes play important roles when hiring a new employee, the most crucial of all attributes is work ethic. If this attribute is seen as the most critical, then recruiters must concentrate on finding ways to observe the presence or absence of an applicant's work ethic when interviewing. Sport management educators should emphasize the importance of a strong work ethic within the industry by talking about it in class, developing rigorous curriculums that challenge students, and providing in-depth experiential learning activities (e.g., role plays, service learning activities, conferences). Oral and written *communication skills* should be observed during the interview stage and faculty may require that students complete a mock 10-minute presentation of a given project related to college athletics. Sport management students need further training to assist with public speaking and presentation skills which are so vital within the industry. Finally, faculty must emphasize assignments that require students to articulate their ideas in writing.

Results suggest there are possible rater biases or differences concerning prioritized candidates' attributes. Higher-level administrators prefer job candidates who are able to see the bigger picture of college athletics because such preferences were revealed in their emphasis on *graduate studies*, *sport participation* and *entrepreneurship*. In contrast, lower-level administrators preferred those with hands-on experience who need minimal training. Assuming this is true, it would be helpful for perspective applicants to know what should be highlighted dependent upon the type of position. While there are some gender differences, they were less important attributes. What was found is that more important attributes are considered to be consistently important regardless of the raters' gender.

Athletic administrators also suggested that *communication skills* and *work ethic* were among the top most commonly lacking attributes by entry-level applicants. To help develop these attributes in students, sport management faculty should consider implementing realistic mock job interviews to help students in these areas along with providing students with the resources to assist in applying for jobs in the industry.

## **Discussion**

This study highlights the importance of efficiency and effectiveness within the staffing process. Anecdotal evidence suggests that hundreds of applications are often submitted to college athletic departments for entry-level job openings. However, as is often the case, not all of the applicants fit the profile of the organization or fulfill the expectations of employers. If the process of selecting a candidate is not conducted in an adequate and efficient manner this can result not only in hiring the wrong individual, but also in taking significant time and money from the organization. We propose that recruiter's categorize attributes in terms of what could be assessed during the screening process and what can be observed during the interview. It is during the screening

process that recruiters must put attention to identify critical attributes when reviewing an applicant's material. Therefore, it is crucial to identify the most important attributes. We categorize attributes that are possible to be observed or checked without the presence of the applicant. During the interview, we propose that attributes be observed during the interaction that takes place. Although recruiters will observe or look for these attributes in the interview, we call these non-observable attributes, because they cannot be observed in the paper. Recruiters must focus on identifying these traits during the screening stage. One way of doing this effectively is by assigning different weights (i.e., scores) to applicants when reviewing their resume. Recruiters must also be efficient by clearly describing important attributes in the job description.