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Campus Recruitment: Four-Year Program Profile

Abstract

A hospitality recruiter profile survey is replicated 18 years after the initial study and nine years from the last study to determine if recruiters and their opinions have significantly changed and what impact these changes may have on college students and the interviewing process.

Campus recruitment: Four-year program profile

by Thomas Jones,
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A hospitality recruiter profile survey is replicated 18 years after the initial study and nine years from the last study to determine if recruiters and their opinions have significantly changed and what impact these changes may have on college students and the interviewing process.

It has been almost a decade since the second,¹ and 18 years since the first study² that identified the traits and attitudes of recruiters at a four-year hospitality program. The second study in 1991-92 reflected a period of tremendous economic instability in the hospitality industry. The hotel industry was just beginning to recover from a \$15 billion loss in 1990, the greatest financial downturn in the history of the industry.³

It was decided in the spring of 2001 to once again replicate this study in order to determine if any significant changes had occurred in recruiters or the recruiting process in the years since the last study that would impact today's hospi-

tility graduates. The study was conducted prior to the tragedy of September 11, 2001, but the industry was lagging prior to this tragedy. The hotel industry experienced the effect of the country's economic slowdown in the first quarter of 1991; however, industry pundits were predicting a modest rebound in 2002.⁴ Today, some experts believe that the devastating impact of the World Trade Center has only served to deepen and prolong the industry recession that had already begun.⁵

This article presents the results of this third study and will compare these findings to the findings of the initial study conducted in 1983 and the 1992 study.

The survey instrument used in the current study was almost identical to the instrument used in 1992. A number of questions added to the 1992 study examined the impact of the 1990 recession on hiring practices. These were retained because of the specter of

an upcoming economic recession, but were slightly reworded to reflect an impending, rather than a current recession.

Sample not unbiased

In this study, as in the prior two studies, those surveyed do not represent an unbiased sampling of hospitality recruiters. Thus, no inference from this study should be made to the population of all hospitality recruiters. However, many of the companies are national in scope and recruit at dozens of other programs. Therefore, the results of this study should be of interest to hospitality schools throughout the country.

The questionnaires were distributed to 65 companies attending the Spring Career Fair at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. Recruiters were asked to complete the survey by the end of the day-long affair when they were collected; 51 companies did so for a response rate of 78 percent. There were no traits (e.g., age, gender, race, or company type) shared by non-respondents, so a separate survey of non-respondents was deemed not necessary.

The number of companies involved in the survey and the response rate significantly differed from the 1991-92 survey when 43 out of 44 companies returned the questionnaire, a response rate of 97.7 percent. It should also be noted that the 1992 survey spanned two semesters and the current study was conducted only during

the spring 2001 semester. In 1983, there were 62 companies on the campus during the time of the survey (spring 1983); 39 of those firms (65 percent) responded. The significant upturn (48 percent) in firms recruiting on campus in 2001 versus nine years ago was testimony to the corresponding recovery of business.

Profile continues to change

In 1983, the typical recruiter was male (87 percent); in 1992, 67 percent were male, but in 2001 63.8 percent were female. In 1983 77 percent were under 40; in 1992 a whopping 95 percent were under 40, but in 2001 that number fell to 80.9 percent.

The rise of women in the recruiter ranks could be indicative of increasing gender parity in a formerly male-dominated industry. The reversal of recruiter age reflects a progressively aging work populace as more of the baby boomer generation begins to hit middle age.

Another continuing, albeit disturbing, trend was the shrinking level of educational attainment among recruiters. In 1983, 94 percent of the recruiters had at least one college degree. In 1992, that number dropped to 88 percent. In the 2001 survey, that number slipped slightly to 85 percent. Interestingly, only 35 percent indicated the possession of a business degree and only 15 percent had a hospitality degree. Other degrees were widely dispersed and included broadcasting, law, journalism,

liberal arts, education, music, psychology, and sociology. The number of people representing operations had also decreased to near the levels of 1983 (86 percent).

The typical recruiter continued to be college educated, but the degree background had shifted somewhat over the decade, as Table 1 indicates.

Clearly, hospitality degrees continued to decrease in number and the "other" category proceeded to gain ground.

Hiring increases

It was reported in 1992 that there had been erosion in the recruiters' authority to hire applicants. This survey found a reversal of this trend. In 1983, 80 percent of recruiters could make offers to the candidates. In 1992, that number dipped to 70 percent, but in 2001 it bounced back to 79.2 percent. Perhaps the vast improvement in the business climate at the time of the study had liberalized hiring policies. Clearly, the typical recruiter's power and influence

Table 1
Backgrounds of recruiters

| 1983 college major | | |
|----------------------------|-------------|------------|
| Degree | # Reporting | Percentage |
| Hospitality Administration | 12 | 28.6 |
| Business Administration | 10 | 23.8 |
| Other | 20 | 47.6 |
| Total | 42 | 100.0 |

| 1991-92 college major | | |
|----------------------------|-------------|------------|
| Degree | # Reporting | Percentage |
| Hospitality Administration | 09 | 23.8 |
| Business Administration | 14 | 36.8 |
| Other | 10 | 26.3 |
| No Response | 05 | 13.1 |
| Total | 38 | 100.0 |

| 2001 college major | | |
|----------------------------|-------------|------------|
| Degree | # Reporting | Percentage |
| Hospitality Administration | 07 | 13.7 |
| Business Administration | 15 | 29.4 |
| Other | 26 | 51.0 |
| No Response | 03 | 05.9 |
| Total | 51 | 100.0 |

with candidates seemed to be on the increase.

Recruiting experience ranged from one to 18 years, with a mean of 5.4 years. This was an increase of 1.4 years over the 1992 study. The average length of tenure with the current employer declined from 6.5 years in the 1992 study to 4.85 years in 2001. Recruiter ranks continued to be populated with many seasoned professionals.

At UNLV, lodging corporations represented a plurality (33.3 percent) of all hospitality recruiters, with commercial food service firms in third place (27.1 percent). For the first time, the "other" category comprised the largest category (35.4 percent). Institutional food service and quick food service tied for last place, with each garnering 2.1 percent of the total. In the "other" category, casinos dominated, with airlines, health clubs, the public sector (U.S. Army), and private clubs all being represented. In 1992, hotel recruiters were in the

majority with 53.5 percent of the total. One potential explanation for the shift in recruiter representation was the college's recent expansion of majors and degree programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Recruiters rank attributes

In 1983 respondents were asked to rank-order the students' qualifications. They were, in descending order: verbal communication, work experience, personal appearance, and grade point average. In the 1992 survey, the original qualifications were maintained and two other options were added, extracurricular involvement, and prepared and enthusiastic about the firm. A ranking of "1" constituted the most important qualification and the category of "other" was offered as an optional category but was not included in the ranking. The 2001 study used the same qualifications as the 1992 survey (See Table 2).

Seven respondents chose to add

Table 2
Interview qualifications

| Attribute | Rank 1983 | Rank 1992 | Rank 2001 |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Personal appearance | 3 (2.36) | 3 (3.49) | 4 (3.31) |
| Work experience | 2 (2.30) | 1 (1.98) | 1 (2.17) |
| Grade point average | 4 (3.65) | 4 (4.70) | 5 (5.21) |
| Verbal communication | 1 (1.70) | 2 (2.17) | 2 (2.31) |
| Prepared and enthusiastic about the company | | 3 (3.49) | 3 (2.79) |
| Extracurricular involvement | | 5 (4.95) | 6 (5.24) |

responses in the optional "other" category provided in the 2001 survey. Responses in the "other" category included "attitude, flexibility, guest service skills, natural talent, positive attitude, qualification for the job, and supervisory experience."

These findings reinforced the results of the 1992 study. Work experience was still recognized as the most valuable student attribute, followed by verbal communication skills, while student grade point average, student involvement in clubs and other extracurricular activities were not perceived as being extremely relevant to the job by the recruiters.

Recruiters were also asked in a related open-ended question the one thing they most remembered about a candidate; 23 percent selected the candidate's communicative ability and 23 percent mentioned the candidate's personality. Personal enthusiasm and preparedness accounted for 21 percent of the responses, while others included such areas as the candidate's home and the level of professionalism shown during the interview by the candidate.

Another aspect of student preparation that appeared to be helpful was the ability to communicate in a foreign language, particularly Spanish; more than 85 percent of recruiters indicated that fluency in a foreign language would be helpful to the candidate, an increase of 4 percent over the 1992 study. Furthermore, 87.5 percent

chose Spanish as the most beneficial, a drop of 5.5 percent from the 1992 study. However, the message was still clear; Spanish fluency remained highly valued by the hospitality industry.

In the 1992 study, 23 percent of those responding indicated they would give preference to a candidate with a master's degree; that number fell to 13 percent in 2001. A disheartening trend, it seemed that hospitality educators had been unable to convince companies and their recruiters of the value of retaining those who possess a master's degree. The postulation made in the 1992 study that recruiters were only concerned with a candidate's immediate contribution to the firm appeared to continue.

Corporate package changes

A majority of companies continued to give students a preview through internship programs; 62 percent of respondents indicated that their firms sponsor an internship program, a 10 percent increase from 1992.

The number of graduates who will find themselves in a management training program declined from 79 percent in 1992 to 55 percent in 2001. The growth of direct placement was undoubtedly a reflection of the industry's focus on productivity. It should be noted that the lodging sector (e.g., hotels, resorts, and casinos) favored direct placement, but restaurant chains leaned more toward the management training approach. The

average management training program has remained at 22 weeks over the past nine years, but the range has increased dramatically. Some programs last less than a week, while others range to 15 months.

Today's hire can expect an average starting salary of \$29,858.54. The range in 2001 was from \$22,000 to \$40,000. On the surface this represented a marked contrast to an average starting salary of \$21,988.10 in 1992 and an even greater contrast to 1983 when 69 percent of the recruiters reported beginning salaries of less than \$16,000, with not one offering more than \$18,000.

However, when inflation was factored into the salary equation based on the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator, the average starting salary in 2001 was roughly equivalent to \$23,654.10 in 1992 and \$16,792.20 in 1982-84 dollars. It should be noted that these were real, albeit modest, gains. If this trend continues, perhaps the industry can attract better and brighter applicants who are drawn to industries that offer greater economic potential.

The prospect of an economic downturn was on the horizon in the spring of 2001, although few could even fathom the tragedy of the World Trade Center disaster. However, most firms were not ready to change their hiring practices. Only 11.4 percent indicated they were hiring fewer manage-

ment trainees than the prior year. Of those who indicated they intended to curtail hiring, most refused to provide either a number or a percentage. One company estimated it would be cutting back by 10 percent; another indicated 50 percent and a third was cutting back by 25 new hires.

In 2002, there were 29 fewer (40 percent) hospitality recruiters visiting UNLV than in 2001; 16 of these recruiters were not actively recruiting. Thankfully, the economy had started to rebound and many sectors of the hospitality industry were predicting stabilization in 2002 and 2003. This should also bring about a corresponding increase in job growth in the years ahead. The average number of campus visitations reported in 2001 was 11.7, with firms reporting a broad range of one to 100.

Much remains the same

The 2001 survey was witness to a number of significant changes from the 1991-92 survey. Perhaps the greatest change in the profile of the recruiter was the fact that women finally appeared to have achieved parity in this arena. Recruiters seemed to be more seasoned (certainly older) and were wielding more influence in the hiring decision. Unfortunately, the educational level declined, which will undoubtedly make it even harder to convince this group of the value of hiring candidates who have demonstrated a mastery of

valuable skills as indicated by graduate degrees and high grade point averages.

Student preparation needs for the interview were also remarkably similar to the prior studies. The need for students to have demonstrable interpersonal skills was readily apparent. The ability to communicate, show enthusiasm and energy, know something about the company, and present a professional appearance was as important in 2001 as it was in 1992 and 1983.

The growth in starting salaries in real dollars was one of the most positive trends noted in the study. Not only will this trend have an impact on the newly hired, but also it should enhance future earning as careers progress. Student candidates should be cautioned, however, that they are going to be expected to "hit the ground running" in this new era.

Formal training programs continued to shrink. New hires can no longer anticipate the prospect of

extensive probation programs and a wait and see attitude on the part of their employers. They can expect to be constantly measured against the results they achieve. The world of work has not gotten any easier in the 21st century.

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