

Exploring Factors for Improving Career Fair Experience for Management Students

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Abstract

The present research explores factors for improving the career fair experience among management students in eastern province of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The findings showed that while the access by the employer to the job seeker improved, other issues requiring attention emerged. The identified factors under consideration will help in increasing effectiveness of career fairs in providing greater access to job opportunities extending its advantages in rendering services to Islamic society especially its young people by redesigning curriculum for effective placement of potential female graduates.

Key words: Career fair; Experience; Redesign; Curriculum; Management students.

1. Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, with a total GDP of \$937.2 billion in the year 2015, has proved to be having one of the robust and rapidly growing economies in the Arab World. 90% of the Kingdom's income is from oil revenues which has contributed to around 35% of this GDP (Heritage foundation, 2015). There is a growing urgency of using fiscal policy as a stabilizing force for the economy by investing in Saudi Youth mainly through two initiatives: a) increasing admittance to quality education and b) Saudization which is the nationalization policy aimed at setting a hiring quota for nationals in all sectors (Maisel Sebastian, 2009). Regardless of major increase in female university admissions, rate of unemployment amongst female students has remained substantially higher comprising of 32% compared to 5.9% unemployed male students (CDSI, 2014). This has prompted a massive response on the part of companies and universities to host career fairs every year. These events, to a greater extent helps to bridge the gap between the education sector and the labor market. It also makes sure that female graduates have the right tools to enter the job market. The event is not just a career fair, it is an important corporate social responsibility and diversity initiative customized to create prospects and awareness among the potential graduates.

2. Trends in Career Services and Islamic Perspective

Career Fair, also mentioned as a job fair or career expo, is a fair or exposition for recruiters to meet with prospective job seekers. Job seekers attend these to make a good impression by getting advantage of speaking face-to-face with recruiters and submitting resumes. For human resource specialists and job-recruiters, career fairs are one of the instruments that allow for effective communication with prospective candidates. It also serves as an opening to attract the finest talent (Silkes et al., 2010) and to also increase the brand awareness and be the employer of the potential talent (Gordon, Adler et al. 2014). The educational institutes perceive the career fair as a showcase of its brightest talents to reputable firms, and also as a means to attract prospective students by these collaboration.

The mission of career services in educational institutes is to become part of lifelong learning. It plays a key role in helping labor markets and education systems meet their common goals. One key challenge for this changing service is to move from helping students decide on a job to the broader development of career management skills. In its contemporary forms, career guidance draws upon a number of disciplines namely psychology, education, and sociology and labor economics. Historically, psychology in general and differential psychology, developmental psychology in particular have had an important influence for entry route into the profession (OECD, 2003). In most countries today, career guidance is provided by people with extensive range of training and qualifications. The psychological testing now receives a reduced importance in many countries as counselling theories have shifted from stress upon the practitioner as ‘expert’ to as the ‘facilitator. Another tool can also be utilized other than personal interviews such as group discussions in recruitment.

In the 1980s, graduate recruitment was an anticipated event for all parties; students, employers and educational institutes. By the mid ‘80s, it was obvious that more groundwork was essential for transition to the workplace than delivered by careers services (Atkinson, 1985; Clutterbuck, 1985; Cold stream, 1994; Hawkins & Winter, 1995). Students compelled themselves to be proactive and self-reliant in dealing with their own careers (Bridges, 1995; Duncan & Oates, 1996). This resulted in career services focusing on the broader prospect of career planning and development, which gradually this has been incorporated into the curriculum (Ball & Butcher, 1993; Huster et al., 1998).

An analysis of careers service websites internationally divulges the popularity of the traditional careers fair as a means for providing a link between students and graduate recruiters. The Career Fair in 2002 at University of Melbourne, were attended by 2000 students and 40 recruiters. The University of Wollongong hosted two Career Fairs in 1999, it also encouraged their students to attend those of other universities. Most of the major universities in the UK host Career Fairs, for example University of Manchester, Huddersfield University and University of Liverpool, devote part of their website to providing information about the fair and tips for students on how to prepare and to make a positive imprint with the recruiters. According to the Association of Graduate Career Services in Ireland (AGCSI)

website, all the universities in Ireland provide career fairs. All of these fairs are put up over a period of around five hours and involve students, graduates, moving all over the booths in order to interact with recruiters for more details about their company, the vacancies and the recruitment process. The influence of the careers fair has been that students find themselves queuing at the company booths and often, leave the fair without interacting to all relevant employers (Christiane Brennan et al 2004).

Research on secondary school students from Bindura, Zimbabwe(Cuthbert Majoni et al 2014) revealed that there is a need to introduce career guidance and counselling programs in secondary schools too,with trained counsellors who assist students in career choices.The students from Ohio high schools felt that career day provided them with enough information to make an informed decision about a potential career in the field(Victoria Kaskey,2012). A theoretical model that explains the stages of transition into and out of Graduate School: has been framed (Melanie J. Greene, 2013) and tool kits which will serve as a Practical Guide for Organizing, Conducting, and Attending Job Fairs has been made available (USAID, 2007).

These reviews of literature indicate that in recent years, career service centers have undergone significant shifts in both structure and function. The establishments are increasingly striving for developing full-service with focuses on the complete delivery of services to students for the period of their undergraduate education from Mock interviews, Assessment testing ,Resume critique, Resume posting, Employer databases, Job listings, Career counseling, Job search training, Internship/Externship and placement assistance. Though graduating students may have the most immediate need for career services, research generally suggests that such services are most effective when implemented throughout the entire course of a student's educational experience. (Hanover research, 2012).

Carving a career path from Islamic perspective is not about choosing something that gives the highest financial returns but it is rather one that benefits the person and the Ummah (Society).Understanding the trends and perspective in career path will help in making a noteworthy contribution in the improving effectiveness of career fairs and helps in converting the profession intoIbadah (workship).

3. Rationale

The women in Saudi Arabia are encouraged to pursue higher education and professional careers as part of the objective of the Kingdom's development plans. The glint of career growth and the revenues earned is drawing the attention of numerous young Saudi female students to the university colleges (Asha et al 2013) a) The future economic climate would be characterized by more openness, high competitiveness, new economic trends, information and technology innovations and various numerous challenges in Human resource management. The threefold need analysis conducted by assessing demand of workforce, valuable feedback from industry and students survey, shows significance difference between the present and targeted situation analysis in Human resource management. The industry

conversed the growing importance of human resource in industries and the need to design the curriculum focusing on effective methods of managing people. (Asha et al 2015). Studies carried out with respect to analysis of the managerial competency in management students show the presence of high managerial competencies among them (Asha et al, 2013) b) To excel and advance in the today's competitive environment and to excel in different roles in dynamic organization, students are developed managerial competencies from the very first academic year of joining the management education (Asha Alexander, 2015). The changing nature of work demands the corporate world to hire people that possess the managerial competencies. This enables them to become extraordinary players. The career fairs help to create a database of high competence graduates, save cost by eliminating the need to hire through recruitment agencies and to be a vital part of 'Nitaqat' Saudization fulfillment process. But still many times, these exhibits have not been able to bring about 100% placements for female graduate students (Arab news, 2015). In recent years, business education has garnered much attention, but while widespread research has been conducted on the competencies of graduate students, scant literature has addressed discussing factors for improving career fair experience for management students. The process by which students make the decision to apply for various jobs has not been properly researched. The aim of this research is to add to the sparse literature on career fairs and to identify and present factors thought to play a vital role in a student's job placement through a variety of qualitative research methods. The data collection methods included female student's observation and narration, interviews with focus groups and secondary data such as websites, newspaper, brochures and publications. The research focused on Career Fairs held in eastern province of Kingdom and the female management students and graduates pursuing management education in this region.

The main research objectives were to:

1. Study the conduct of Career Fair in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia
2. Analyze student's perceptions towards effectiveness of Career Fair
3. To explore factors to be considered for improving the Career Fair experience

4. Overview of Career Fair in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia

The Career Fairs are popularly known as 'Career Day' in this region. In the recent times, the eastern province of Saudi Arabia has witnessed drastic increase in these career fairs. Some of the well-organized and popular fairs are as below:

The Society of Petroleum Engineers (SPE) hosted 'Upstream Career Day' on the 1st of February 2015 at Crystal Hall, Al-Khobar. The program was the first of its kind in the Kingdom, targeting nationwide university students from computer science and management disciplines for participating in a full day interactive program with human resource specialists from six petroleum companies. The petroleum giants namely Halliburton, Schlumberger,

Weatherford, Saudi Aramco, National petroleum Services and Baker Hughes had put up their respective booths. This was one of the unconventional methods of exposing the students to the various future opportunities available upon their graduation (SPE, 2015).

King Faisal University, a public university founded in the year 1975 in the eastern region of the country at Al Ahsa, has historically been symbolized for its excellence in the academia and research. It presented more than 60 major companies on the occasion of its fifth Career Day held on 11th February, 2015. The main objective was to offer more than 3000 job opportunities in various disciplines for the youth of the region. This event was in the Activity Hall in the building of the Deanship of student affairs in the new campus (King Faisal University, 2015).

The University of Dammam which was established over decades is a leading research university with 21 colleges spread throughout the eastern province and a student population of over 45,000. It continues to grow and develop, by assessing and improving its curricula and expanding its academic capabilities in all disciplines. It also simultaneously engages the public in addressing community challenges. It hosted its second 'Career Day' by inviting both the public and private sectors to participate in this popular event. The event was opened from 9th to 12th March, 2015. The university was successful in establishing and developing community partnerships with the public and private sectors through the delivery of career opportunities for prospective students. (University of Dammam, 2015).

Glowork is an association formed by young Saudi entrepreneurs with an objective of attaining women empowerment diversity in the workforce. It hosted its third annual Women's Career Fair "A Step Ahead" at Dammam's Sheraton Hotel on 12th and 13th of April 2015. The main objective of this fair was to bring together entities from the private and public sectors, universities and government bodies under one platform and to combat the disconnect between job opportunities and Saudi Arabia's potential female talent. The fair had participation of more than 22 companies, amongst them were Saudi Hollandi Bank, ExxonMobil and Bupa Arabia. The companies were provided with ready built booth with their respective logos printed on its walls. They also had the opportunity to have their company profile and job listings placed in Glowork's career fair magazine which was distributed to all attendees before and during the event (Saudi gazette, 2015).

The 13th Jubail Career Day 2015 was hosted by the Colleges and Institutes Sector of the Royal Commission in Jubail from 13th to 15th April 2015. The participating colleges were Jubail University college both male and female branches, Jubail Industrial College and Jubail Technical Institute. The event for the female branch was conducted at Al-Sadfah Women Center, Al-Fanateer. More than 62 participating companies joined the exhibit with representatives from the industries, government and private institutions from all over the Kingdom. The exhibit enabled the participating companies to present innovative ideas and solutions to several manpower constraints in many aspects of work and also provided face-to-face interaction of recruiters, graduating students and alumni (Jubail career day, 2015).

The Mahara Career Day was sponsored by PMPYD (Prince Mohammad Bin Fahd Program for Youth Development) and WIPRO. The Mahara Career day was held on 25th May 2015 as a part of Prince Mohammad Bin Fahd Program for Youth Development in the city Dammam. The firms participating in the Career day were recruiting for more than 1000 vacancies. 'Mahara' is a training program for Saudi Female Information Technology (IT) graduates intended to develop their English, soft Skills and IT competencies. The last cohort of Mahara program will complete training around 125 Female IT trainees in mid-July 2015 through the help of WIPRO. (PMFHD, 2015).

5. Perspective of the Management students attending the Career Fair

To understand the perspective of management students attending the Career Fair, we conducted interviews on focus group then compiled the observations narrated by the attendees with respect to the following aspects :

- The number of Career Fair attended by them
- The main objective behind attending the career day
- The positive experience of the career day
- The frustrating moments during the career day
- The role of their respective colleges
- Suggestion to make the career day more effective
- Any other observation

Inference: The main concerns raised by the students were as follows :

Time management: The career fair environment is commonly loud and crowded. This usually makes it challenging for interaction, enquiry or even fill out an application among students. They also find difficulty in prioritizing the booths to visit and they often get upset by long lines.

Data management: The information of the Job titles are not known prior nor are the names of the companies. Requirements of data vary from company to company. Filling up these requirements are highly tedious and confusing.

Personal Branding: Making an Impression in the environment of job fair is very difficult for quiet, shy or introvert but qualified job-seekers.

Follow up: The follow-up procedure is different for different companies, and noting down the gradations of each follow-up procedure is challenging. Most of the times they get offers that aren't their choice nor related with their major or with very low packages.

Factors for Improving Career Fair Experience for Management Students

The business education program in the eastern part of the kingdom have the duration of four academic years plus one academic year for the preparatory program. The four years spent as

an undergraduate at a university college are typically known as the freshman, sophomore, junior and senior. Each of the year comprises of two semesters, the second part of the senior has field training. There the continuous period of full semester is spent in a selected work place relating to the field of study. The following factors should be considered for improving Career Fair experience for management students.

Setting up of KPI and the Islamic perspective: The education sector from Islamic perspective believes in incorporating corporate social responsibility along with employability-related skills across management curricula. The Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) should be accordingly set up in student's learning outcomes. Validating the curricula, ensuring delivery on a regular basis and achievement of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) should be the prime responsibility of each faculty member.

Employability skill development activities: The education sector should clearly define the scope of employability skill development activities for attainment of students learning outcomes. It should include resume preparation, mock interviews, job interview, etiquette and manners, interviewing skills, job shadowing, internships, volunteering employment and paid part time employment. They should also be encouraged for participating in recruitment fairs, workshops, presentations, seminars and peer mentoring scheme. Today's students are visual learners and more focused, it should also be emphasis on field trip in each course so that the students are exposed to the outside world and get the feel of a corporate culture. This inturn will help in boosting their lifelong success.

Relationship with recruiter: The education sector should build high quality relationship with leading recruiters at local, national and international levels. Creating the brand image of the University as a leading talent pool of highly skilled and employable graduates should be one of the program objectives. The employer's valuable input obtained during the Program Advisory board meeting with respect to the labour market perspective should be integrated within the curriculum. There is also a need to establish professional partnerships, such as Association of Chartered Certified Accountants and the Chambers of Commerce.

Marketing of the Careers Services: Promoting career should consider using the advances in Information technology (IT). E-Bulletin should be available to students along with career web sites, Face book, Twitter and other effective promotion methods. The Faculty members should be kept updated on recent employment data pertinent to each subject area. Student feedback should be carried out regularly to evaluate the effectiveness of Career services provided.

Alumni mentoring: It is a great source for recruiting talent. Mentoring a student from your alma mater is a win-win for both mentor and mentee. There are already some common ground to get the relationship started. The benefits to the mentor and his organization is a chance to "try out" a potential new employee before hiring and to get a good feel of work ethics and personality. From the mentoree's prospective, having an alumni mentor allows them to tap into the mentor's network for potential job openings within the mentor's organization or within their network during career fairs.

Career planning office: Having career planning office in the universities will help to strive for new ways to deliver talent to the career fairs in efficient, practical, and effective ways. The office should be responsible for coordinating the career events and create awareness about the students. It should provide counselling service to understand the nature of the career day and to bring about skills required to participate and make the utmost use of the fairs. It can thus help and prepare students to realize their professional ambitions based on their area of specialization.

Preparation for Career fair: The four years spent as an undergraduate at a university college typically known as the freshman, sophomore, junior and senior. The objective of career fair for freshman, sophomore, junior students should be to educate students on a specific field. This will help them to review list of employers attending the career fair, carry out research in career fields and know vacant job titles in these firms for future considerations. While the objective of the career fair for senior students should be successful placements. These students should be encouraged to make the most out of a job fair experience by providing them and recruiters with a shared online portal in advance. The students can upload their resumes for the recruiters to set the time of their interview and inform them. During this process, the recruiters can also monitor the number of the students to be interviewed within a certain period.

While it is acknowledged that the factors identified are in no way exhaustive of the many concerns and issues graduate students face in gaining placement, it is hoped that these factors will stimulate further discussion and prompt exploration into the most influential factors that help to improve career fair experiences. This will help in redesigning curriculum by bridging the gap between labor market and education sector, encouraging more active methods of instruction, developing reliable methods of assessment, using technology to engage student interest, making learning fun and memorable for the management students and increase the rate of enrolments in university.

6. Conclusion

Traditionally focused on job placement and informational resources, current career service units are characterized by an increased commitment to holistic and ongoing career preparation and this is witnessed from the frequent occurrence of Career fairs. The research focused on analyzing student's perceptions towards effectiveness of career fairs in assisting them to choose a career and explore factors for improving the career fair experience. In that way we are not only preparing their career path but their future as a whole, which aims to benefit not merely themselves but the society as well; shaping it to endeavor it purposely aims from the beginning. The factors included are believed to be the most influential and can be considered while redesigning the management curriculum. It is hoped that the present study will stimulate further discussion on the issue.

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