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Use of Online or Traditional Job Search Tools: Which Do Sales Students Prefer When Searching to Begin Their Post-College Graduate Careers-A Study Revisited

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ABSTRACT

In 2019, a study was conducted to see if college students who studied/majored in professional sales, preferred digital media over face-to-face interactions for post-graduation careers searches. Results showed sales students used multiple methods during these searches. Although sales students engaged with digital media to land entry-level career positions, they still relied heavily upon traditional methods (i.e., college/university career fairs/services, internships, etc.). In March of 2020, as Covid-19 moved just about everyone online, the authors were interested in seeing whether the increased use and familiarity with digital media changed sales students' preference for and use of job search tools. This follow-up study investigates the use of online and traditional resources for sales students' career searches as graduation approaches. Results suggest sales students use multiple methods during their first career searches. They engage with digital media to land entry-level career positions while still relying heavily upon traditional methods. This research provides insight into the perceptions of sales students while searching for career positions.

Keywords: *Students, Sales, Career search, Digital media*

INTRODUCTION

Rising demand for sales employees has increased the need to find people to fill these positions. This demand has led companies to fill these positions by looking toward entry-level college sales graduates (Chaker, Dixon, & Hill, 2020). To address this "supply-and-demand gap," universities are investigating ways to drive increased interest in sales careers for their students. This growing need for sales positions has universities including and/or increasing the number and/or the variety of classes/courses (i.e., advanced sales, sales analytics) in their sales programs (Chaker et al., 2020). As newly graduated students have not always seen sales as a career choice, universities are also working to change these perceptions (Cummins, Peltier, Erffmeyer, & Whalen, 2013). The Sales Education Foundation (SEF) (Who We Serve, 2019) finds that

university sales programs report job placement rates at greater than 92%. While not all students who enroll in sales classes end up in sales related careers, more than 60% of all business college graduates will hold an initial career in an entry level sales position, and 50% of all college graduates will also find themselves in sales positions (Who We Serve, 2019).

With the explosion and proliferation of digital media and the millennial generation's propensity to use online media and the increased use of this media due to COVID-19 restricting face-to-face interaction, one might assume that sales students predominantly use online sources to procure their first post-college graduation positions. Karaoglu, Hargittai, & Nguyen found: "…job seekers increasingly turn to online resources to search for employment and around 70% engage in online job searching (Jobvite, 2020; Sakurai & Okubo, 2017; Smith, 2015). Using the Internet for job seeking improves the speed with which people find jobs, offering a significant benefit."

Job-hunting services (e.g., Monster.com and Glassdoor) are some of the digital paths to finding a career for students (Kauflin, 2017). Other digital options include professional social network sites like LinkedIn which allow users to access diverse information about organizations and enables job seekers to communicate with professional contacts and discover career opportunities (Karaoglu et al., 2021). This follow-up, post-COVID-19 Qualtrics study, surveys students enrolled in sales classes and which career search services they are or will engage in to find entry-level positions. Results suggest that, while online services are used, students still prefer traditional methods of career search.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While research finds an abundance of information on the skills needed to secure career positions, few studies have examined the specific tools students use to secure these career positions. Numerous career search options exist in both the digital/online and traditional areas, each with their own advantages and disadvantages.

Digital Media

The evolution (some might say revolution) in career searches has taken place, and the use of technology has become a normal mode of consumer searching. VanRooy, Alonso, & Fairchild (2003) state:
'The advent of the Internet, and its subsequent resources, provides applicants with many new outlets to use in the search for employment. As such, the Internet forever changed the way people search for employment when the first career boards began to appear on the Web' (p. 170). With the explosion of digital media and the millennial generation's prolific use of online media and the increased use of this media due to COVID-19 restricting face-to-face interaction, researchers may assume online sources may be a more preferred choice for job hunting. Based on this assumption, more traditional methods of face-to-face interaction should be replaced by digital media communication (i.e., Snapchat, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.). This might suggest that soon-to-be college graduates prefer digital career searches to more "traditional" (i.e., networking, career fairs, internships) methods of searching for their first post-college positions.

Digital media outlets and technology are increasing, thus, aiding graduating students to find careers online (Economy, 2015). Research suggests that 79% of people searching for employment use digital media as a starting point, 45% use mobile devices every day to search for jobs and, finally, 86% of millennials seek employment using online media sites (Economy, 2015). More recently Karaoglu et al., (2021) study showed that 70% of job hunters engage in online searches.

The consumer needs model suggests that first, the need is discovered; next, a broad search is done; and, finally, the search is narrowed down to an evoked set (Marshall, 1890). Barber, Daly, Giannantonio, & Phillips (1994) found "applicants first search broadly (to identify as many opportunities as possible), select and sort from this pool, and then devote energies towards acquiring more specific information about the opportunities still at hand" (p. 742). Newly graduating college graduates employ a similar pattern. Therefore, students in sales classes start their searches exploring websites broadly at first, then narrowing and refining the search to a preferred evoked set of potential employers.

As students in professional sales classes approach graduation and begin their career search, the avenues to pursue these opportunities are equally important to firms. Sales recruiters are intensifying their firms' visibility to university students by increasing their online presence as well as maintaining the face-to-face interactions (Deeter-Schmelz, Dixon, & Erffmeyer 2018). Unlike before, companies can now reach a wider audience of recruits than by merely advertising in the local press. Today, students can find open positions not only locally, but also nationally and internationally (Zusman & Landis, 2002). The use of digital recruitment tools by students creates several advantages for firms. Companies can launch a wider web of potential recruits with substantially reduced costs versus traditional methods (Crispin & Mebler, 1997).

Digital media offers sales students, recruiting firms, and university career services centers more information than was primarily available from predominately physical sources in the past (Peterson & Merino, 2003). This presents an important opportunity for job seekers as sales students can funnel down mass amounts of company information quickly and efficiently to arrive at an evoked set of employers to contact (Cober, Brown, Keeping & Levy, 2004).

Traditional Methods

When using traditional methods of job search tools as Zondag and Brink (2017) found, relatives and friends were significant sources of career information. Karaoglu et al., (2021) also found: "Drawing on people in one's social network has been considered one of the most effective job-search strategies. It can be advantageous due to the possibility of accessing varied types of information that are not shared through formal channels especially if the seeker utilizes weak ties, i.e., acquaintances, as compared to strong ties such as one's close friends and family." These findings are consistent with the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE)'s "Student Survey Report" (2018) in which the NACE Executive Summary states:

"Overall, the same resources that were used the most in the job search were also considered the most useful to all students. Employer websites, family, friends, relatives, and career fairs were considered the most used and most useful resources for responding students" (p. 3).

Additionally, NACE found "Digital media is considered one of the least popular resources for searching for job openings and for researching employers. Only 40% of students reported using digital media in this way" (pg. 3). This finding was further confirmed in Kero's (2019) "Grad's Guide to Getting Hired" stating, "50% to 75% of all new hires arise from friendships and former co-workers." The article also suggests different ways and channels of networking both through on-line networks, (i.e., LinkedIn) (and stresses the importance of mentoring) and "off-line" networking.

Other important sources for career searches are college professors and college courses, followed by career fairs/company visits, and internships (Zondag & Brink, 2017). Career fairs appear to still be an important avenue for job searches. This is an interesting finding as one might think that career fairs have become "outdated" with the millennial generation's preference to communicate on-line. In an op-ed piece for NACE, Scott (2016) noted:
"What I find intriguing is that the more we introduce technology into the recruitment toolkit, the more value students place on the type of face-to-face interactions that occur at career fairs." She suggests that students do not prefer "virtual career fairs" put on by companies/colleges/universities, as students still see the value of face-to-face interaction with company recruiters.

Faculty members may have more interaction with and know students' preferences better than schools' career services centers. Therefore, faculty members need to be the "knowledge brokers" for students regarding the types of positions available in the marketplace (Weeks, Rutherford, Boles, & Loe, 2014). Weeks et al, (2014) suggest that faculty members need to be the "knowledge brokers"; in fact, however, recruiters may have better knowledge of what student's desire in a position. Faculty members may not be as well informed about available careers as are recruiters due to a lack of communication from employers about these positions (Weeks et al, 2014). More communication with faculty by employers about open positions should be in order.

The knowledge faculty should possess is critical not only to aid students in the career search, but as Weeks et al. (2014) found, recruiters are relying more on faculty to assess and connect sales students with suitable companies. Zondag and Brink (2017) contend it is critical for faculty to provide sales students with up-to-date knowledge of current jobs and careers. With knowledge of what recruiters are looking for in entry-level sales, faculty can best serve sales students as "knowledge brokers" by having guest speakers in class and hosting events such as lunch and learns, inviting both sales students and recruiters to participate. Additionally, faculty should attend career fairs to find firms ready to hire and inquire what opportunities are available for graduating students. A synergy between career services, faculty, and hiring firms could prove a great resource for graduating college students.

Traditional internships and shadowing experiences have been shown to be positive experiences for sales graduates. Callanan and Benzing (2004) found "…completion of an internship

assignment during the undergraduate years is a useful strategy in helping secure a career-oriented position for after graduation" (pg. 86). The authors further suggest that "…the completion of an internship as the most significant variable in terms of influence on the ability to obtain a career-oriented position" (p. 86). Further, Author & Larson, (2016) found that 67% of those students shadowing in an advanced sales class were offered internships, interviews, or job offers.

Mentors are excellent resources in student's quest for career positions. Renna, Steinbauer, Taylor, & Detwiler (2014) suggest a positive relationship between students who participated in a university-sponsored mentoring program involving mentoring by business professionals and career planning and success. The authors suggest, "Networking with others that may provide direct and indirect linkages to job opportunities is a critical part of searching for a job" (p. 425). In addition to other traditional modes of career searches, career service centers are available for students to aid in their career search. DeRuy (2016) reported that approximately 50% of college graduates took advantage of their schools' career services offices, but, sadly, few of those students found the centers helpful. More recently DeRuy's colleague, Fadulu's (2018) reported, regarding students' use of universities' career services, the number of undergraduate students visiting career service centers had dropped to less than 20%. Fadulu (2018) concludes that a way to improve the use of career centers would be to build, develop, and enhance relationships between students and the members of the career service centers.

STUDY

Methodology

A Qualtrics questionnaire was completed by 193 students. The lead author's institution granted IRB approval with participants providing written informed consent. The students who participated in the survey were enrolled in a sales class at four public universities throughout the United States (2 from the Midwest and 2 from the South). Two of the schools had undergraduate populations of fewer than 10,000 students, while the other two universities had undergraduate student populations between 23,000 and 32,000. Three of the universities have dedicated sales centers and programs while the remaining school has only two sales classes. Forty students were removed as these students were not sales majors or sales emphasis students. The remaining 153 were asked a total of 22 questions including demographic data. Of the respondents, 76 were male and 74 were female (the remaining 3 did not specify a gender). Seventy-seven percent of the respondents were seniors with the remaining students replying they were juniors.

Survey

The questionnaire asked participants what resources they used in their career searches and who influenced these decisions. It also asked what traditional and digital media sources students implemented to aid in their first post-college graduation job searches. In a pretest, using the Delphi method, the researchers asked students to make suggestions on how to improve their experiences with career services and hiring firms. The researchers examined the following questions related to the use of digital and traditional methods of successful career searches:

1. What resources students enrolled in sales classes from several universities who are studying or majoring in professional sales use for their first career-oriented positions? Specifically, what activities do graduating sales students engage in during their career searches?
2. Who are the influencers in deciding on where a sales student will go for help?
3. What suggestions do students have for university career services and potential employers to aid in this search?

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Pre-Pandemic Results

The pre-pandemic results suggest multiple methods were being used by sales students in their career searches. On a 5-point Semantic Differential Scale (with 1 being very unlikely to use in job search to 5 being very likely to use in job search), respondents said they used or would use traditional methods as shown in Table 1. Students were asked which method they preferred when or if they were looking for a job. The results suggest the students have a slight preference for face-to-face over online searching.

Table 1. Will Use Online vs Face-to-face Career Search

	Online (%)	Face-to- Face
No	3.5	1
Very Unlikely	8.4	10.1
Unlikely	12.9	9.3
Maybe	20.1	14.5
Likely	20.0	24.1
Very Likely	24.4	28.4

Further, the researchers asked students what specific sources they would use to find their first post-graduate career. On a 10-point Semantic Differential Scale (with 1 being very unlikely to use in job search to 10 being very likely to use in job search) respondents said they used or would use traditional methods such as professors/advisors (7.38), family members (7.1), and face-to-face university career fairs (7.05). Online digital methods used in these searches were employers' websites (7.59), online job sites (7.04), digital media (6.81), and online university career services centers (5.16). The findings are interesting in that face-to-face career fairs are rated higher in use than online job sites, digital media, and online university career services. These findings are consistent with the observation by Scott (2016): "What I find intriguing is that the more we introduce technology into the recruitment toolkit, the more value students place on the type of face-to-face interactions that occur at career fairs."

Results suggest that sales students were using a broad approach when it came to job searches before the pandemic. Regarding digital media, on a 5-point Semantic Differential Scale (with 1 being very unlikely to use in job search to 5 being very likely to use in job search), LinkedIn

(4.25) was greatly preferred for their job searches. The only other digital media outlets that sales students overwhelmingly said they would rely upon were online job search services such as Career Builder (3.33) and university online career services centers (3.13). These findings found that the avenues sales students are using to acquire their first post-college graduation sales positions still lean, although slightly, to older traditional interactions. These finding are in concert with Zondag and Brink (2017) and NACE's "Student Survey Report" (2018). Interestingly, sales students feel that they are the ones in control of their choices of entry-level sales positions (29.3); however, results (Table 2) suggested that family members are the leading influencers on first career job selection (42.1).

Table 2. When finding a career, who will influence your decisions

Primary Influencer	(%)
Family	42.1
Myself only	29.3
Company	12.1
Professor	8.6
Friends	7.1
Mentor	.7

Finally, subjects did not agree on how to enhance the job search process. Regarding potential employers, approximately 50% of the respondents suggest "Responding to applicants more quickly." Almost 40% of sales students would like to see potential employers simplify the interview process. The other suggestions are found in Table 3.

Table 3. Recommendations on How Schools/Career Services can Enhance the Career Search Process

	(%)
Respond to applicants more quickly	49.3
Simplify the interview process	39.6
Eliminate cover letters	8.3
Make job descriptions less confusing	2.7

Suggestions from sales students in this survey to improve university career services centers include more networking opportunities and classes that focus on getting a job. All recommendations are found in Table 4.

Table 4. Recommendations on How Schools/Career Services can Enhance the Career Search

	(%)
More Networking Opportunities	39
Classes to focus on getting a job along with academics	27
Professors forwarding job opportunities	19
Teachers have a business background not just an academic one	9
Industry-related speaker presentations during classes	6

Post-Pandemic Results:

The post-pandemic results were not significantly different from the pre-pandemic results except in one crucial area: job interviewing preference, (One-way ANOVA significant at .05 level). An analysis of the means (Table 5) shows that there was a significant shift in interviewing preferences. In person interviewing, while slightly less popular than before, is still the greatly preferred method of interviewing (58% post-pandemic vs. 62% pre-pandemic), but almost all other areas were much less preferred (24% to 67%) than before COVID. The one exception was online video interviewing which was up by over 350% post-pandemic. Albeit, it still only accounts for 18% but is now the second most preferred interviewing method as opposed to being tied for last method pre-pandemic.

Table 5. Preferences on Where Students Prefer to Interview Pre- and Post-pandemic

	Pre (n)	Pre (%)	Post (n)	Post (%)	Change (%)
In person at company site	93	62	88	58	-5
In person at career fair	6	4	2	1	-67
In person on campus	28	19	21	14	-25
Phone	17	11	13	8	-24
Video conference (Zoom)	6	4	28	18	367

CONCLUSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Sales students are using both online and traditional methods of obtaining their first careers after graduation. This work suggests that students trust those that they know (i.e., family, friends, and professors) and prefer face-to-face job search methods. This holds true for career services where students are not as likely to take advantage of the center's opportunities. Centers are not as likely to come to the students as the center waits for the student to come in for services. Faculty members can use this information to encourage student participation in events such as lunch and learns hosted by businesses, career fairs, and sales competitions. In addition, recruiters should consider entering sales students' lives at an earlier stage than they do currently to build trust and

rapport with students. Recruiters should also be encouraged to provide as many face-to-face job searching activities as possible.

In the comment section of the survey, sales students made several suggestions regarding career service centers and company recruiters (Tables 3 and 4). Researchers could use this information to improve students' abilities to make smooth transitions into their careers.

The area that is waning regarding students searching for their sales careers is universities' career services, suggesting more of a need for investment in this area by schools. Universities' career services put a lot of effort into trying to get employers and students together; yet students indicated that they want more networking opportunities (Table 3). This finding seems counterintuitive as providing employer-student interaction is the mission of most career service centers. Further research into finding new ways to entice students to use these services should be examined in addition to a need for further investment in this area by universities.

COVID-19 has changed the horizon and future of career searches. Virtual interviewing may have been the norm during COVID-19, but the results indicate that recruiting should revert back to in-person interviewing at the company site as soon as possible as it is still the most preferred method of interviewing; however, the results also indicate that the use of ZOOM and other online video interviewing has grown in preference and should still be used to supplement in-person interviewing and possibly replace phone interviewing. Perhaps the high rate of online classes, video conferences and ZOOM interviewing during the pandemic increased students' comfort level with this technology to the point to which it is much more preferred than before. The data shows that perhaps career fairs should be more informational rather than interview oriented as students prefer it the least for interviewing purposes.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study's method to obtain the sample was imperfect and could limit its generalizability. As 40 students declined to complete the survey, some self-selection in completing this survey may have occurred. In some cases, students would receive extra credit for this online survey and may have just checked in and opted out only to get the extra credit. Web-based surveys have historically received lower response rates than in this study (Fan & Yan, 2010), and the higher the response rate, the greater the opportunity to minimize self-selection errors (Greenlaw & Brown-Welty, 2009). Further, the sample contained sales students from only four universities (2 from the Midwest and 2 from the South), which might differ from a larger, more geographically diverse sample. Future research must find a way to increase participation in this survey.

Future research should address where and when recruiters should enter a student's career search based on the consumer needs model. In addition, researchers should examine how COVID-19 has affected students' attitudes and use of digital versus face-to-face options. Longitudinal studies could also be done to discover possible shifting trends in behavior regarding career searches. Studies could also look at differences between millennials and generation Z in their career search. An investigation into which search methods are most successful in assisting sales students pursuing their first post-graduation position should be pursued with MBA sales

students. The information about how sales students use digital media for their career searches could also be valuable to recruiters and support services (i.e., career services and university sales centers). Future studies of how recruiters, support services, and sales centers could use information in this area will be beneficial.

Current work does not address narrowing of the professional sales supply gap. Simply, the current research does not inform understanding of how university sales programs can integrate and impact students' choices of specific employers after graduation. These areas should be explored in future studies.

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