Digital vs. Traditional: Comparing Sales Students' Initial Post-College Career Search Preferences Before and After COVID-19

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Digital vs. Traditional: Comparing Sales Students' Initial Post-College Career Search Preferences Before and After COVID-19

Linda G. Mullen
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ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the career search strategies of college students studying professional sales. The research consists of a post-pandemic study that is compared to a previous study conducted pre-pandemic in 2019. The paper investigates the preference of sales students for digital media versus face-to-face interactions in their career searches. The pre-pandemic study revealed that while sales students engaged with digital media, they still heavily relied on traditional methods. The post-pandemic results differed primarily in students’ interviewing preferences. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, students continue to utilize both online and traditional resources. The findings shed light on the perception and behaviors of sales students in the context of searching for career positions amidst the pandemic. These insights are valuable for educators, career service professionals, and employers seeking to understand and support students’ evolving needs in a rapidly changing environment.

Keywords: Students, Sales, Career search, Digital media, COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

Rising demand for sales employees has increased the need to find people to fill these positions. This has led companies to look 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. This growing need for sales positions has universities including and/or increasing the number and variety of sales classes (i.e., advanced sales, sales analytics) (Chaker et al., 2020). As newly graduated students have not always seen sales as a career choice, universities are working to change these perceptions via career services and other support mechanisms (Cummins, Peltier, Erffmeyer, & Whalen, 2013).
Career seekers have two general job search tools, digital and traditional. Research suggests that most job seekers use digital sources in their searches (Jobvite, 2020; Sakurai & Okubo, 2017; Smith, 2015) and that using the internet streamlines the job-seeking process and provides numerous benefits (Karaoglu, Hargittai, & Nguyen, 2021). Additionally, 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. This enables job seekers to communicate with professional contacts and discover career opportunities (Karaoglu et al., 2021). While millennials may prefer digital searches, it is important to consider traditional methods such as family and friends, professors, and career services. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted many areas of society and presents a unique opportunity to investigate how it may have changed how graduates conduct their job searches.

This research examines how sales students navigated their career searches both before and during the COVID-19 era and assesses changes in their approaches to finding entry-level career positions. To achieve this goal, a subsequent 2021 post-pandemic study was conducted and compared to a prior 2019 pre-pandemic study. The participants, who were enrolled in sales classes, were surveyed to uncover the career search options they used. Specifically, this paper examines the following research questions (collected via a survey) regarding the use of digital, and traditional methods of career searches. Additionally, this research investigates whether the pandemic has had an impact on the comparative outcomes:

1. What resources do graduating sales students use to find their first career-oriented job? Specifically, what activities do sales students engage in during their career searches?

2. Who are the influencers deciding 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?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature is abundant with discussions about essential skills for obtaining career positions. However, limited consideration has been paid to investigating the particular tools that students preferred during the pandemic. The career search environment options encompass a plethora of choices. Each option offers marked strengths and weaknesses within both digital and traditional media.

Digital Media

Digital technology has become a normal mode of consumer searching. Van Rooy, 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” (p. 170). In this paper, digital media refers to company websites, video conferencing, social media, job placement websites, and online career services.

With the proliferation of digital media and the millennial generation’s widespread use of online platforms in tandem with the restrictions placed upon face-to-face interaction due to COVID-19, reasonable speculation is that individuals may prefer online sources for job hunting. Based on this assumption, more traditional methods of face-to-face interaction should be replaced by digital media communication. This might suggest that soon-to-be college graduates would prefer digital career searches to more “traditional” face-to-face methods of seeking their first post-college positions.

Digital media outlets and technology are increasing. This in turn aids graduating students in finding careers online. Research suggests that 79% of people searching for employment use digital media as a starting point. Forty-five percent use mobile devices every day to search for jobs and 86% of millennials seek employment using online media sites (Economy, 2015). More recently, a study showed that 70% of job hunters engage in online searches (Karaoglu et al., 2021).
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). In step with the model, job applicants begin their search broadly to identify as many opportunities as possible, then they make choices after sorting from this pool and then go about gathering more information to make a more informed decision (Barber, Daly, Giannantonio, & Phillips, 1994). Therefore, students in sales classes would likely start their searches by exploring websites broadly at first, then narrowing and refining the search to a preferred evoked set of potential employers before gathering more information to support their choices.

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 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, relatives and friends are significant sources of career information (Zondag & Brink, 2017). Job searchers are most effective when they utilize sources from within their immediate social circle (i.e., family, and close friends) due to the wealth of information that may not be available in more formal channels (Karaoglu et al., 2021).

These findings are consistent with the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE)’s “Student Survey Report” (2018) which found that the most used methods (company websites, family, friends, relatives, and career fairs) were the most valuable to students. This finding was further confirmed in another study that found that 50% to 75% of new job placements are linked to a strong personal connection (Kero, 2019). The article also suggests different ways and channels of networking both through online networks (i.e., LinkedIn) and “off-line” networking (mentoring). For the purposes of this study, traditional sources consist of professors, friends, family, in-person career fairs and services, and face-to-face interviewing.

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 online. Findings suggest otherwise with students still placing more value on face-to-face interactions such as career fairs. Students do not prefer “virtual career fairs” hosted by companies/colleges/universities as students still see the value of face-to-face interaction with company recruiters (Scott, 2016).

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; however, faculty may not be as well informed about available careers as recruiters due to a lack of communication from employers about these positions (Weeks, Rutherford, Boles, & Loe, 2014). More communication between faculty and employers about open positions should be in order. The knowledge faculty should possess is critical not only to aid students in their career search, but 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 by having guest speakers in class and hosting
events such as lunch and learns. Both sales students and recruiters should be invited to participate. Additionally, faculty should attend career fairs to find firms ready to hire and inquire about 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. Internship completion has been found to be a useful tool in landing a post-graduation career position (Callanan & Benzing, 2004). Further, one study found that 67% of students shadowing in an advanced sales class were offered internships, interviews, or job offers (Mullen & Larson, 2016).

Mentors are excellent resources in students’ quest for career positions. Renna, Steinbauer, Taylor, and Detwiler (2014) suggest a positive relationship between students who participated in a university-sponsored mentoring program involving business professionals and career planning and success. Additionally, networking is a critical link in the job search process by providing both direct and indirect linkages to potential opportunities.

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, another study found that the number of undergraduate students visiting career service centers had dropped to less than 20% (Fadulu, 2018). The conclusion was that the 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. The literature review features the contrasting qualities of digital and traditional career search tools. In the setting of the pandemic's influence, the next section examines how sales students’ preferences align with these patterns to provide insights for effective strategies in traversing the evolving job market.

**METHODOLOGY**

In a pretest, using the Delphi method, the researchers asked 36 sales students to make suggestions on how to improve their experiences with career services and hiring firms. The pretest also examined participant understanding of the questions to ensure reliability. The answers to this pretest were used along with the researcher’s extensive knowledge from working with sales students, career services, and recruiters over the years to guide the development of a questionnaire to answer the research questions.

In the two main studies, a Qualtrics survey was used to investigate what resources sales students used in their career searches, who or what influenced those searches, and what suggestions students had to improve the search. This survey was administered to 193 students in 2019 (pre-pandemic study). Forty students, who were not sales majors, did not have a sales emphasis, or did not complete the survey were excluded from the analysis. Therefore, the final sample size consisted of 153 participants. The post-pandemic study was administered in late April 2021 and consisted of 174 sales students (all subjects were pre-verified as sales students prior to administration). Twenty-one subjects who did not complete the survey were removed from analysis leaving a subject pool of 153. (It should be noted that while identical sample sizes for each study are desirable, it was coincidental that both samples ended with the same number of participants). The exact same survey questions were used for both studies.

The survey questionnaire consisted of twenty-two questions, including demographic data. Participants were asked to respond to the semantic differential questions. Demographic data collected included gender, academic level, and other potentially relevant factors. Of the respondents, 53% were female in the pre-pandemic study and 51% were female in the post-pandemic study. Seventy-seven percent of the respondents were seniors with the remaining students replying they were juniors.

The survey sample was chosen based on convenience and consisted of students enrolled in sales classes at three public universities and one smaller private school in the United States. The selection of universities aimed to encourage regional diversity, with two schools located in the Midwest and two in the South. Three of the universities had undergraduate populations ranging from 23,000 to 33,000 students, and the other school had an undergraduate enrollment of 4,100 students. Three of the universities had dedicated sales centers and programs, while the fourth
smaller university offered only two sales classes. The demographic data was consistent between the four universities except that the smaller school had a larger percentage of females than the others in the post-pandemic study (80% female).

ANALYSIS, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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 highly 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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Online (%)</th>
<th>Face-to-Face</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Unlikely</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unlikely</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likely</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Likely</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>28.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 a job search to 10 being very likely to use in a 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 social 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) that the more technology options are added to the job search process the more individuals prefer face-to-face career fair interactions.

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 service centers (3.13). These findings suggest that the avenues sales students are using to acquire their first post-college graduation sales positions still lean slightly toward older traditional interactions. This is consistent with Zondag and Brink (2017) and NACE’s “Student Survey Report” (2018). Interestingly, many sales students feel that they are the primary career decision influencers (29.3); however, results (Table 2) suggest that family members are the leading influencer (42.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Influencer</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>42.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myself only</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor</td>
<td>.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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 student suggestions are found in Table 3 (subjects were asked to put the options in rank order).

Table 3. Recommendations on How Potential Employers Can Enhance the Career Search Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respond to applicants more quickly</td>
<td>49.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simplify the interview process</td>
<td>39.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliminate cover letters</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make job descriptions less confusing</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 (subjects were asked to put the options in rank order).

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More Networking Opportunities</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classes to focus on getting a job along with academics</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professors forwarding job opportunities</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers have a business background, not just an academic one</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry-related speaker presentations during classes</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 shift in interviewing preferences. In-person interviewing at the company site, while slightly less popular than before, is still the 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, still only accounts for 18% but is now the second most preferred interviewing method as opposed to being tied for the last method pre-pandemic.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewing Method</th>
<th>Pre (n)</th>
<th>Pre (%)</th>
<th>Post (n)</th>
<th>Post (%)</th>
<th>Change (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In-person at company site</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-person at career fair</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-person on campus</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>-24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video conference (Zoom)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>367</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 students to come in for services. Faculty members can use this information to encourage student participation in events such as lunch and learn 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. 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). Some recurring student suggestions were for employers to respond more quickly and to provide more networking opportunities. Lunch and learn, classroom recruiter presentations, and sales competitions are highly valued by students. 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 sales careers is universities’ career services, suggesting more of a need for investment in this area by schools. Universities’ career services put considerable effort into trying to get employers and students together; yet students indicated that they want more networking opportunities (Table 4). 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 the need to increase 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 to in-person interviewing at the company site because it is still the most preferred method; however, the results also indicate that the use of ZOOM and other online video techniques have grown in preference and should still be used to supplement in-person interviewing and possibly replace phone interactions. Perhaps the high rate of online classes, video conferences, and ZOOM interviews during the pandemic increased students’ comfort level with this technology such that it is much more preferred than before. The data shows that career fairs should be more informational rather than interview oriented as students prefer it the least.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study’s method to obtain the sample was imperfect and could limit its generalizability. As some subjects declined to complete the survey, some self-selection in 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. While the sample sizes for both studies are more than adequate for the analysis conducted, future studies should investigate the use of larger sample sizes.

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.

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 the narrowing of the professional sales supply gap. Simply, the current research does not inform an 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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