

Recruiter Perceptions of Hospitality Career Fairs

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ABSTRACT

Attending career fairs is a tool companies utilize to meet recruiting goals and are an important part of college recruiting. The study examined the experiences of recruiters from companies in the hospitality and tourism industry who attended an annual university career fair sponsored by a hotel and tourism department. The purpose of the study was to ascertain recruiter perception of the value of attending career fairs as a component of their companies' recruiting strategy. Recruiters, who attended the annual career fair, completed questionnaires. Survey results are expected to show that recruiters perceive overall career fairs are important to their companies' recruiting strategies and therefore, a valuable use of their time.

Keywords: *career fairs, college recruiters, tourism, hospitality*

INTRODUCTION

Career fairs are one way for companies to meet recruiting goals, especially given the competition to attract the best talent (Silkes, Adler, & Phillips, 2010). Career fairs also allow students to learn about organizations and their recruiting needs (Brennan, Daly, Fitzpatrick, & Sweeney, 2004). Research exists on recruiter behaviors at career fairs, but very little research exists on the perception recruiters have of the value in attending career fairs. The purpose of this research was to study the value of career fairs as a recruiting tool as perceived by recruiters. The study attempted to reveal any changes in career fairs that recruiters feel would strengthen the career fair experience as well as aspects that they found useful. It is hoped that universities will use the findings to make improvements to career fairs so that companies will continue to attend them in order to recruit high quality candidates for positions.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The study looked at the experiences of recruiters from hospitality companies who attend career fairs held by hospitality and tourism programs. The objective of the study was to determine the recruiters' perceptions of career fairs in terms of value to their companies' recruiting strategies. The following research questions were developed to better understand perceptions of career fairs: Do recruiters feel that career fairs are a valuable component to company recruiting plans? Do recruiters feel that career fairs are a good use of company time? Do recruiters feel that career fairs are mainly a public relations activity to keep their company name out there? Are recruiters happy with the format of career fairs? Do recruiters feel that the students are well prepared to present themselves to recruiters?

LITERATURE

Throughout the 1990s, companies implemented extensive on-campus recruiting processes in order to fill a growing skills shortage with qualified candidates (Miranda, 1999). Companies expect students to have industry experience before graduation, as both a degree and experience are important in the hospitality industry (Miranda, 1999). Companies use career fairs as a means to find these highly qualified candidates while also reducing the time it takes to fill positions (Hansen, 2006). In turn, fairs allow students to learn about different companies and assess fit with the organization (Silkes, Adler, & Phillips, 2010). Through these fairs, companies can establish contact with younger students and fill internships in addition to hiring graduates for permanent positions (Hansen, 2006). Recent results from a poll conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers show expected improvement in hiring of college graduates (Occupational Outlook Quarterly, 2010).

Companies send between one and five people to career fairs for an average of two days (Silkes, Adler, & Phillips, 2010). These recruiters typically work in either human resources or operations (Silkes, Adler, & Phillips, 2010). From where within the company the recruiters will come varies from company to company, but one effective method is to use employees within the region of where the university is located as these employees can conduct on-site interviews at the school as well as establish on-going relationships (Morley, 2001). Companies also send recent graduates to career fairs at the universities they attended because these employees already have connections with current students which lead to a connection for the company (Hansen, 2006). Alumni enjoy giving career advice and students sometimes feel more comfortable speaking with a young alumnus compared to the recruiter (Taylor, 2009). Some companies have found that paying a stipend to a former intern to become a campus representative upon his return to school is also an effective way to increase awareness of the company (Hansen, 2006). Another method companies use is to inform former interns of when they will be on campus, invite them to a casual gathering, and ask them to bring a friend as a way of reaching more students (Taylor, 2009).

Not only do career fairs provide recruiting opportunities, but they also allow companies the opportunity to increase brand awareness (Hansen, 2006). This is an important opportunity for companies, as some students only know about the company through interactions with the recruiter (Silkes, Adler, & Phillips, 2010). It has been found that applicants are influenced by “how amiable, empathetic, caring, concerned, and how knowledgeable a recruiter is about the company, its positions, and its applicants” (Silkes, Adler, & Phillips, 2010). Another advantage of career fairs is the ability of employers to check out the competition, especially when attending industry-specific fairs (Hansen, 2006).

One recruiter stated that spending money on career fairs overall is well worth it given the amount of exposure a company can obtain and the number of people it can reach (Hansen, 2006). Some companies are committed to spending money now to ensure that they retain talent in later years. Despite the economic situation, M&T bank has continued to hire into its yearlong mentorship program because it is “an investment in our mind” according to one recruiter (Monks, 2009). In addition, because many companies recruit online, companies have found that the combination of fairs and technology strengthens their recruiting strategies as fairs allow them face time with quality candidates (Hansen, 2006). In order to better connect with Generation Y candidates, recruiters for Sodexo utilize Twitter, Facebook, and the company’s career blog in addition to attending career fairs (Frauenheim, 2009).

METHODOLOGY

Population and Sample Size

For the purpose of this study, recruiters who attended an annual hospitality and tourism management (HTM) career fair at a major university were surveyed. Recruiters were surveyed regarding their perception of career fairs in general and the effectiveness of career fairs as a tool to meet their companies' recruiting needs. Recruiters were human resource and operations professionals from 41 hospitality companies. Among the companies represented at the fair, 20 were classified as hotel operations, 16 were classified as restaurant or food service operations, 2 were classified as tourism related, 1 was classified as equipment related, 1 was classified as apartment management, and 1 was classified as hospital management. The population of recruiters was 82 during the fall of 2010 when the survey was done. The career fair was held from 12:30pm to 3:30pm, and all students within the department were invited to attend. A reception for the recruiters was held the evening prior to the career fair with the hospitality department faculty and graduating seniors, who were invited to meet recruiters. This particular career fair is held only once per year in the fall as opposed to some hospitality departments which hold their fairs in the spring or twice per year.

The survey was distributed to recruiters during the evening reception. The survey included a letter, which advised the participants of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses and the importance of the research. The letter also provided the participants with the researchers' names and contact information. Those recruiters who did not attend the reception were given the letter and survey during the career fair. Completed surveys were collected at the career fair and those recruiters who were unable to complete the survey during the fair sent their responses back via postal mail. A follow-up mailing with the letter, survey, and return envelope was sent to the recruiters three weeks after the fair. In addition, an email with an electronic copy of the survey was also sent and participants were given the option of emailing or faxing back the completed survey. Participants were ensured confidentiality and anonymity (no names were required) and the research was conducted independently of any participating companies, although results in general will be shared with participating companies. The total amount of returned surveys was 41 for a response rate of 50%. Surveys were numbered and data entered into a database for input into SPSS for Windows statistical database to analyze.

Survey Design

The survey was divided into five sections and used a variety of different scales to measure responses. The survey asked recruiters a variety of questions about themselves and their experiences at career fairs. The questions posed were developed from a review of the related literature. The first section of the survey asked recruiters demographic questions including if they are a graduate of a hospitality program, title, number of times attended that particular career fair, average number of career fairs attended, whether or not interviews are also conducted while at the career fair, and if so, were the interviews for internships, graduating students, or both. In the second section of the survey, recruiters were asked about their companies' current hiring of college graduates in terms of how it has changed since the prior year based on change in amount of universities being visited and number of students being recruited.

The third section of the survey asked recruiters to rate their level of agreement with various statements including: I think that career fairs are a very important and valuable component to our recruiting plans, I think that career fairs are mainly a public relations activity to keep my company's name out there, and I think that career fairs help us get our message out there and are a good use of company time. These questions were rated using a Likert scale comprised of five levels: strongly agree, agree, neither, disagree, and strongly disagree.

In the fourth section of the survey, recruiters were asked what they like best about career fairs and were given the option to make two selections from the following: keynote speakers, evening receptions, lunch with students, being able to interview while you are here, interacting with other recruiters, and interacting with students. Finally, in the fifth section, recruiters were asked to select what they would change about career fairs including length of time, attendance regulated by student class (freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior), size of booth, and crowd size. In addition, recruiters could write in their own suggestion of change. The survey was approved by the University Committee on Human Research Subjects to ensure that all respondents were protected.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Findings of this survey relate to recruiter perceptions. The findings are framed to answer the research objectives of the survey. If recruiters feel that career fairs are valuable, what are the most important activities they value as part of the career fair such as networking, interviewing, etc., and does the HTM program facilitate these activities. If they do not find the career fair valuable, what can the HTM program do to change that perception. This information will allow HTM programs to alter the format or activities of career fairs to better suit the company representatives thus helping the students. Survey results are anticipated to show that recruiters feel overall career fairs are an important component to their companies' recruiting strategies and therefore, a valuable use of their time. Results are also expected to show that recruiters agree that the facilities provided meet their needs and the students they meet were prepared. Finally, survey results are predicted to show that interacting with students and evening receptions to rank highly among the items that recruiters like best about career fairs. Specific correlations are expected to show differences in perceptions based on whether people attending the career fair were human resources based or operations based. In addition relationships will be examined based on how many times they have attended career fairs and how much time they spend at a career fair.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study represents only one career fair at one university. While the participants were representative of the recruiters who attended the career fair at the university where the study was conducted, the possibility exists for differences based on the department of study, the university's size, the location of the university, etc. Therefore results cannot be generalized beyond this career fair. The career fair was held in the fall as compared with other universities who may hold career fairs in the spring, which could change the perceptions of some recruiters.

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