STUDENTS' VALUATIONS OF JOB CHARACTERISTICS: AN EXAMINATION OF THE EFFECT OF DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

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Abstract - One of the important duties of faculty is advising students on courses and careers. Undergraduate students often have little information on what factors they might consider in selecting a career or how they might weight these factors. This paper reports the results of a survey of undergraduate students on their preferences with respect to job characteristics and analyses the relationships between student preferences and their demographics. This information can be useful to faculty and students during advising on career planning.

Index Terms - Career Planning, Job Preferences & Student Demographics.

I. INTRODUCTION

The AICPA predicts record demand for accounting graduates (Schiavone 2013). The Bureau of Labor Statistics (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016a) predicts an 11% annual growth rate in accounting jobs over the period 2014 to 2024, faster than the average for all types of positions. The unemployment rate for those with a BA in general was only 2.5 % in December 2015 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016b). Jobs are and should continue to be available to accounting graduates. Thus graduates need not take the first job they can find, but can try to match job characteristics to personal needs and desires. Thus, faculty responsibility for advising includes not just advising for class schedules, but also advising for career planning. With limited experience and knowledge it may be difficult for students to determine how to choose a career path. Faculty can play a role in helping students recognize what factors they might consider and what best fits their personal goals and preferences.

Faculty are likely to have useful knowledge in this area due to their work in teaching and their maintenance of professional credentials. Faculty, in maintaining professional qualifications such as a CPA, a CMA or a CIA, are required to invest in continuing professional education (AICPA 2001; IMA 2013; IIA 2015). This study examines the effect of demographic and personality traits on students' valuation of job characteristics. The objective of this research is to help faculty advice students on career planning by demonstrating links between student characteristics, which faculty advisors may know firsthand from the classroom or can try to determine in discussion with advisees, and the range of job characteristics these advisees might consider in their job search.

II. BACKGROUND

Is a high salary or a flexible schedule more preferable? What is more important, a 401(k) plan or a pleasant work environment? These are some questions accounting students could consider. Faculty experience and education can play a role in helping students prioritize job characteristics. There is some information on accounting student job preferences. Phillips & Phillips (2006) conducted a survey of accounting students to determine what they found important in a job search. Job security and advancement opportunities were ranked as the top two choices, while day care and gym facilities were the least desired. A more recent study (Bagley et al 2013) found that there were differences in the importance of job characteristics when students were grouped by those seeking jobs with Big Four firms and those seeking jobs with non-Big Four firms. One difference the authors found was that those seeking a job with a Big Four firm ranked salary as the most desired factor and tone of the firm as the least desired factor. Students preferring a job at a non-Big Four firm ranked work-life balance as the most desired factor and recognition of working for a prestigious firm as the least desired factor. Bagley et al. (2013) provides information that can help faculty in this process. They found that current accounting professionals felt the advantages of working in a Big Four accounting firm were prestige, larger clients, networking/future job opportunities, compensation, and better resources/training. These professionals identified the advantages of working at a non-Big Four accounting firm as a more comfortable work environment, more diverse experience, fewer hours, less travel, and closer client relationships. The authors note that faculty can provide valuable information to students in deciding what factors are most important in their career planning.

Faculty Advising

Faculty can have an impact on a student's decision to major in accounting and the particular type of career that student chooses. Past research has shown that a student's experience in the first accounting course has a significant effect on the perceived benefits of an accounting career (Chen 2008), and that business

students in general have a high demand for career counseling (Lin and Chang 2007). Faculty can offer guidance to students in determining what factors are important when identifying a career. This study is from a student perspective rather than from an accounting professional's perspective, and can aid faculty in discussing a range of factors that may be important to students seeking employment so they can properly identify their preferences when making career decisions.

For respondents in this study, it appears that faculty influence on the selection of accounting as a major is fairly small. The current study allowed students to mark all factors that influenced their choice of major, but only a small percentage indicated faculty as an influence. Given faculty experience and skills, this may indicate an opportunity for faculty to help students recognize a career in accounting as a possible choice.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

Demographics

This study involved two groups of students, accounting majors at a regional AACSB accredited university and attendees at the IMA Student Leadership Conference. Past research suggests that different demographic groups have different preferences when it comes to job characteristics. A study of Canadian graduates found that men tend to put more emphasis on initial earnings while women care more about long-term earning potential (Boudarbat & Montmarquette 2009). Another study found that older accounting professionals tend to find their jobs more fulfilling than their younger counterparts (Moyes et al. 2006).

For these reasons we decided to not only report students' desired job characteristics as a whole, but also examine different demographic subsets to see if certain types of students desire some characteristics more or less than other types. We divided the students into basic demographic groups (gender, age, financial dependents, etc.) to see if the groups differed in their ratings of job characteristics.

IV. DATA

Survey

We developed a survey to help us determine the factors that accounting student's value in a new job. The survey was piloted, with about a half dozen graduate students, to ensure clarity and to test the time required for the survey. It was given in class at the regional university, was voluntary for both groups of respondents, and also short to encourage students to complete it. The results of the pilot resulted in minor changes to the wording of the questions.

The first section of the survey elicited basic demographic information. Respondents were asked for their gender, age, and GPA. Respondents were also asked why they chose accounting as their major, their number of financial dependents, and if they were the first person in their family to attend college.

The next section of the survey had students indicate, on a ten-point Likert scale, how important certain job characteristics would be in their job choices. Zero was not at all important and ten was extremely important. The job characteristics listed were, in alphabetical order: benefits (e.g. health, life insurance, retirement plans), geographical location, job security/stability, long-term growth opportunities, nature of work (e.g. interesting, stimulating, challenging), salary, and work environment (e.g. culture, flexibility). The survey was given to students in upper-level accounting classes at a regional university and to students at an Institute of Management Accountants (IMA)'s Student Leadership Conference. This conference has many of the best accounting students from all across the U.S.

In order to ensure that the responses collected at the regional university and at IMA's Student Leadership Conference could be combined for analysis, we compared results for the two groups for each demographic question asked. The two groups were significantly different only in salary. However, there was a marginally greater percentage ($p<0.054$) of the students at the IMA conference with a high GPA than at the regional university.

V. RESULTS & ANALYSIS

Job Characteristics

While one might think that salary would be the deciding factor for most students seeking employment, our survey shows that upper-level and graduate accounting students' top two most desired characteristics are job security (mean 8.63) and long-term growth opportunities (mean 8.61). The three least desired characteristics are benefits (mean 8.09), salary (mean 8.07), and geography (mean 6.39).

When comparing salary to the other job characteristics, salary was valued significantly lower than work environment ($p<0.0001$), long-term growth ($p<0.0001$), and job security ($p<0.0001$). Salary was no differently valued than the nature of the work or benefits, but was valued significantly higher than geography. It appears that students are thinking long-term, and are concerned with job stability and advancement potential. Quantitative factors, such as salary and benefits, are not among the top priorities for these students.

Gender & GPA

Our study showed that women rated the importance of all job characteristics higher than men. However, the only significant difference was for benefits ($p<0.014$). Women ranked job security ($p<0.052$) and geography ($p<0.0997$) marginally higher than their male counterparts.

However, when isolating by high GPAs (greater than 3.5), female students' ratings were significantly higher for benefits ($p<0.004$), nature of work ($p<0.015$), job security ($p<0.035$), geography ($p<0.037$), and work environment ($p<0.041$) as compared to male students with a high GPA.

Traditional/Non-traditional

We grouped respondents as traditional and non-traditional students. Students aged 25 and under were categorized as traditional and those older than 25 as non-traditional. Traditional students rated job security significantly higher ($p<0.02$) than non-traditional students. Non-traditional students rated geography ($p<0.06$) and nature of work ($p<0.09$) marginally higher than traditional students. Thus it appears that traditional students are more concerned with the stability of their job.

This may be the result of current economic conditions: non-traditional students have seen favorable and unfavorable economic conditions during their lifetimes, while traditional students have only seen difficult times. Therefore, stability may be less of a priority for the non-traditional students. Non-traditional students care more about geography, perhaps because they are likely to have family-ties to their current location. A possible explanation for why non-traditional students rate nature of work higher is that they probably have more experience working and may have put more thought into the decision to come back to school and select a major they enjoy and are passionate about.

Financial Dependents

Respondents were asked to indicate their total number of financial dependents. The data showed that if a respondent had any financial dependents, all job characteristics were rated higher. Nature of work was rated significantly higher ($p<0.002$). Long-term growth opportunities ($p<0.054$), benefits ($p<0.065$), work environment ($p<0.08$), and job security ($p<0.09$), were rated marginally higher.

First Generation College Students

Our results showed that there were no significant differences in the rating of job characteristics by those who were first generation college students and those who were not.

Reasons for Selecting Accounting

The survey asked respondents what made them choose accounting as their major. The order of most to least selected answers were: interest in the nature of the work; likelihood of finding a job; potential for salary; potential for advancement; aptitude in the subject; parent/peer influence and faculty encouragement. This indicates that faculty encouragement is currently not a significant factor in student career choice.

VI. IMPLICATIONS

For Faculty

Faculty can have a lasting impact on accounting students both inside and outside the classroom. Faculty are in a unique position to help students make career decisions that can significantly and positively affect their future. When advising, it is important that faculty initiate a discussion on what job characteristics are important to a student. Our research can help initiate that discussion. Faculty can also use our research to predict what characteristics might be most important given their knowledge of a student's personality and demographics. Knowing which job characteristics are important to a student can help faculty recommend a type of job that might best suit that student. Students who value long-term growth opportunities and salary could be encouraged to look into employment with a large firm, while advisees valuing the work environment or geography might prefer a smaller firm. Students with an entrepreneurial personality find long-term growth opportunities, nature of work, and salary to be more important than other factors. Those with an analytical personality find long-term growth opportunities, work environment, job security and salary to be more important.

Traditional students value job security more than non-traditional, while non-traditional students value geography and nature of work more. These preferences can be used while advising students on career paths. In our study we found that faculty encouragement was the least chosen reason for students selecting accounting as their major. This is disconcerting and is something faculty can perhaps change, by discussing, both during advising and in the classroom, the many benefits an accounting career could offer a student and how different accounting careers have different characteristics.

For Employers

Finding and recruiting staff is important to accounting practices, and has been since 1997, according to the AICPA. The enactment of Sarbanes Oxley in 2002 has only further increased the need for qualified accounting staff (Finning 2006). Past research has found that campus recruiters are becoming an important factor in finding and attracting new accounting staff. The top three qualities recruiters look for are leadership potential, strong communication skills, and enthusiasm/motivation for the company (Violette & Chene 2008). A study by Van Hoye and Saks (2011) found that an employee's opinion of the attractiveness of a firm is affected by both instrumental factors (pay, job security, etc.) and symbolic factors (prestige, sincerity, etc.). It is important that firms consider how to attract the best candidate as they compete for talent. Knowing what

characteristics students with an entrepreneurial or an analytical personality value could allow firms to emphasize the most appealing characteristics of their open positions. For those with an entrepreneurial bias, a firm could emphasize the increasing decision making freedom allowed as one progresses in one's career or the exposure to higher levels of management which can help an employee develops a broad view of the firm and its goals. For those with a more analytical preference, the recruiter could emphasize the scope of the data available for analysis, the provision of tools and reports for control purposes, t and he expectation of a rational and well-supported approach to problem solving. .

We found, through our literature review and discussions with accounting professionals, that hiring quality employees is a challenge. Since companies certainly want to hire the best candidates, they must keep in mind how to make the job appealing to those candidates. Our research provides information to help companies understand which job characteristics to emphasize to attract their top candidates. Knowing what job characteristics to emphasize during the hiring process will improve a company's chances of attracting and hiring the best candidate. Contrary to popular belief, salary is not necessarily the most important job characteristic to emphasize. Job security and long-term growth opportunities were found to be the most important job characteristics for many of our respondents. Discussing employee retention rates or the typical career path for employees can emphasize the job security and long-term growth opportunities of a career at a company.
Our results indicate that students looking for a job are more likely to be attracted to a company they believe to be a secure and stable place to work, that provides long-term growth opportunities and that has a positive work environment. While a company may have a standard offer for a specific position, knowing what organizational characteristics to emphasize can make a significant difference in its attractiveness to a particular candidate. With respect to demographic characteristics, we found that females find the benefits a company offers more important than males. Females with high GPAs are more concerned with job security, nature of work, and benefits when looking for a job. With respect to age, if the ideal candidate is a traditional student, putting extra emphasis on the job security and stability of the company could be beneficial. Non-traditional students could be attracted by focusing on the specific work they would be doing and the amount of travel required.

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