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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### The relationship between job search strategies and employability: Analysis of the graduate survey

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#### Abstract

Career planning and employability has been a global concern for all higher education sectors. The fear of being unemployed following the graduation and the intense competition in the labor market calls for attention what students should be doing in sourcing a job offer. In this study we focused on the five different strategies through which undergrad students can get closer to the potential job market. We surveyed 97 graduates working in different organizations with a questionnaire. The purpose of the study was to establish relationship between the five job search strategies and their relative consequences in employment outcome. Among the five strategies, personal skill development training, attending job fairs, and engaging with extracurricular activities proved to have strong influence in employability.

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## INTRODUCTION

To date, the literature in the field of career planning found to be limited in the area of early career management. In general, the notion of career planning charts the path individuals are likely to encounter as they are promoted to the higher positions. Moreover, such researches are mostly carried out at the managerial level and the job holders are urged to identify appropriate strategies for career advancement and job security. Alternatively, the early career management literature emphasizes on the selection process of the human resource management functions which guide the potential graduate to take necessary preparation before applying for the job.

For several reasons, research into the early career management is important to undertake. Review of the existing literature in the field of early career management addresses the issues related to employability skills needed to serve at the start up years of employment (Lau & Pang, 2000; Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010; Pool & Sewell, 2007), the gap between expectation and actual experience of fresh graduate at the first job (Jusoh et al, 2011), and how the employers conceptualize person-organization fit (Bretz et al., 1993). What is important at this stage is to have a model that can work as a guideline for the undergraduate students to promote their skill and ability to the potential employer. The model is going to outline the ways through which graduate can circulate their resumes to different organization and as unsolicited applicant. The primary objective of resume circulation is to introduce them to the job market and to realize the importance of being proactive in job search activities to secure a job offer.

The higher education sector in Bangladesh is still at the embryonic stage. The university dropout rate is very high along with the university enrollment rate. Prior to the 2005, the number of graduate rate is thought to be low due to the scarcity of education institution at the tertiary level. There used to be very firm competition among the public universities since they were the providers of university degree at almost free of cost. During the last ten years, the government approved many private universities to facilitate students to receive university education by paying tuition fees. While this step enables the country to achieve a growing number of graduates at the end of each academic year, Bangladesh is struggling to offer job opportunities for them. On the other hand, employers often complain that they lack the right skill of people for the vacant position. The primary reason for this skill shortage is not the inability of the graduates but the lack of knowledge of the graduates to present their capability to the proper channels to the employers. In the recent time it has been observed the graduates are not limiting themselves into the

curriculum rather they are engaging into many non-academic and non-text oriented activities to better meet the employer's expectation. Moreover, to manage the stiff competition of the rising number of universities and graduates, the academic institutions are also making active efforts through networking to introduce their students to the potential employers.

This study investigates the significance of different job search strategies practiced by potential graduates in their early career planning stage. The objective of the research is to identify and analyze the strategies adopted by graduates in circulating their resumes to the potential employers and to examine the successful strategies in comparison to the less successful one.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

Career planning remains to be an ongoing concern for those interested to establish a successful career through responding to the challenges of the job market. Job search strategy is one the vital component of career planning that refers to the activities in which students were actively involved by excelling their ability during their undergraduate study with the aim of securing a job offer following the graduation. The existing literature suggests that student's involvement in the job search activities in the form of preparing resume, researching potential employers, and networking with friends and family are likely to reveal their internal readiness in transforming the career plan into reality (Kopelman et al., 1992). Moreover, as the graduates become experienced in the job search process they explore more job opportunities in their desired field and achieve success in getting a job offer (Schwab et al, 1987). The survey conducted by Kimmel et al (2003) on the undergrad students looking for a full-time job following the graduation reveal the list of the available resources through which job is applied include career planning and placement center, business contacts, job fairs, temporary agencies, job-search websites, and employer websites. The survey concluded the use of above mentioned resources produced a significant number of job offers (56%).

### ***Career Counseling Services***

The primary responsibility of the career placement/management service office is to source jobs and internships for the students. McKeown & Lindorff (2011) said it is the responsibility of the university career placement office to identify career opportunities and match them with internal strengths and interests. Since most of the career counseling offices have qualified career counselors who may access to the information of the potential employer's looking for applicants, promoting on campus career opportunities, and providing career related guidance (Graduate Careers Council, 2010). However, in reality student's perception about the service of the career placement office is different. According to Yet Ng & Bourke (2006) graduate's expectation about the service of career placement office is low and they are not satisfied with the available service, and they have little interest in pursuing such services. Gold (2002) stressed most of the career service office lacks required amount of staff which affects their functionality. The existing literatures indicate the role of career placement office in managing career opportunities is weak.

### ***Personal Skill Development***

There has been an ongoing debate on the issue of what employers look into the resumes of the fresh graduate. Naidoo & Jamieson (2005) stressed the underlying reason for pursuing higher education e.g. bachelor degree for the student and parent is the future financial potential which arises through employment offer. In addition to that the notion of graduate's employability is found to be linked with individual's ability, attitude, and attribute when they initiate to apply for jobs following the graduation (Jackson, 2014). Lowden et al. (2011) mentioned mastery of certain generic skills e.g. team-orientation, interaction, problem solving, and self-management are desirable to the employers. Raybould & Sheedy (2005) prepared the list of soft skills in the form of risks management, work stress management, action-planning skills, communication skills, IT skills, interpersonal skill, leadership and team building skills, desire to learn and develop etc which can be carried forward in performing one job to another. While the soft skills are attractive to employers, they now verify individual claiming to have such skills to show the evidence in the form of certificate. Now days many institutions and associations are providing soft skill training with certificate which are weighted positively to the employers. What is apparent at this stage is that the undergrad students must get into some training programs to develop their generic/soft skills as they are desirable to the employer's viewpoint.

### ***Alumni***

Alumni are the former students of an academic institution who have graduated. The alumni association of an academic institution is expected to arrange mentor for guiding students in career development activities. The alumnus can assist undergraduates at the early career stage to explore job opportunities and to build network with potential employers. Students can also seek advices and guidance in selecting their major areas of discipline that match with the areas of the alumnus. Alumni associations are increasing their voluntary activities in managing part-

time jobs and internship offers so that the potential graduates get a chance to meet the potential employers (Singer & Hughey, 2002). However, literature in the field of the role of alumni association in graduate's employability is almost dormant.

#### ***Job Fair***

Job/career fairs have become increasingly popular to the potential job seekers since it gathers a large number of potential employers in one location. By participating in the job fairs, students are able to acquire knowledge about what employer's desire in their potential applicant, what courses are important in their area of specialization, and how they will be preparing themselves to the job market. Moreover, job fairs enable students to explore maximum number job opportunities within their field of study. Students also gain ideas about the hiring process of different organizations and the role played by hiring agencies during the recruitment process. The presence of many employers under a roof also provides the opportunity to establish contacts for their career searches. Such type of networking cannot take place inside of the classroom (Brian & Melvina, 2005).

#### ***Extracurricular Activities***

Extracurricular activity refers to the student's engagement into the activities of part-time work, volunteering, individual's interest related tasks, club and association, all of which could held both on and off the campus. The seriousness of universities in involving students into varied activities off the curriculum is expected to excel the practical experience of them which further is likely to contribute towards a student's employability (Watson, 2011). According to Astin & Sax (1998) voluntary engagement in the community based activities developed the academic and life skills, and a sense of public responsibility of the individuals. Furthermore, students can also increase their level of confidence and communication skills in establishing social contacts by involving into extracurricular activities (Stuart et al., 2008). The study of Muldoon (2009) addressed why students willingly choose to engage into extracurricular activities. While the institutional award is a valued incentive, students mostly consider such engagements are likely to benefit future employment opportunities. The findings of another study reveal that 51% of the recent graduates under the age of 30 currently employed agreed that their voluntary activities enabled them to find jobs (Brewis et al., 2010).

### **3.0 Research Methodology**

We carried out a quantitative research. The objective was to know what different job search strategies was applied to get the initial job offer. The research questions of this study were:

- In what ways graduates were networking with their potential employers?
- What roles played by the academic institution in introducing their candidates to the job market?
- Are the senior graduates of the same academic institution providing support to their juniors in exploring career opportunities?
- How the graduates were benefiting out of the skill development training initiatives?
- To what extent graduates are engaging into voluntary initiatives to make them as problem solver?

#### ***Sample***

A survey was conducted with a questionnaire which was filled by the newly recruited employees in different organizations. We distributed 150 questionnaires across 32 organizations and received 97 completed questionnaires. The respondents are found to be holding one to three years of working experiences in different types of business organizations.

#### **Defining Variables Set**

##### **Dependent variables**

The dependent variable for this model (job offer) was created by a five item measure, that assessed whether or not respondents agreed or disagreed/or not sure that career planning areas: (1) are important for getting job; (2) people receive job offer due to engagement with most career planning areas; (3) are successful if he/she put effort; (4) need to give more attention;(5) are helpful to reach the potential employers. An index was formed by reversing the order of all these items so that a high score indicates more favourable or high confidence of the potential graduate. The Cronbach alpha for the index was 0.878.

There were no missing data values but dealing with five different types of career planning issues we have computed the final index by the mean value of five questions where anyone gets a missing value on the index if they have fewer than 4 valid responses. Based on the histogram, the index does appear to be normally distributed as the data generally follows the shape of a bell, therefore, we could say that there are no outliers.

##### **Independent variables**

This research has five independent variables i.e. career counseling service, personal skill development, job fair, alumni association, and extracurricular activities. All the independent variables were measured by a four item measure that assessed whether or not respondents considered such variables played active role as job opportunities. Each item was measured by an ordinal level variable ranging from 1 (agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) but we have recoded this variable and merged into two categories, for example 0= disagree/not sure (it included respondents who were not sure and disagreed that career counseling office/personal skill development/job fair/ alumni association/extracurricular activities is important for job opportunities), 1= agree. After that an index was formed by all these items so that a high score indicates more favorable or high confidence towards the five independent variables mentioned above. The Cronbach alpha for the index was 0.878.

To examine the relationship between job offer (nominal level DV) with career counselling, personal skill development, job fair, alumni, extracurricular activities (IVs), we used bivariate tests, for example chi-square.

### Hypotheses

After reviewing the literature on job search strategies and their relative outcome in employment, several hypotheses have emerged:

#### *Hypothesis 1:*

Job seekers (students) believe career counselling office plays an active and vital role in managing a job offer following the graduation.

#### *Hypothesis 2:*

Job seekers (students) consider personal skill development trainings increase the chance of receiving a job offer

#### *Hypothesis 3:*

Job seekers (students) believe involvement with alumni association is more likely to receive a job offer

#### *Hypothesis 4:*

Attending job fairs increase the possibility of receiving a job offer.

#### *Hypothesis 5:*

Job seekers (students) are more likely to receive a job offer if they have engaged with different type of extracurricular activities.

Therefore the final hypothesis of this study assumes that job offer is influenced by initiatives of career counseling, personal skill development training, participation at the job fairs, engagement with alumni association, and involvement with extracurricular activities.

### 4.0 Analysis and Discussion

To establish the relationship between dependent variable and independent variable we computed a chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test since both the variables are nominal variables. The majority (98%) of the answers to the questions in the field of dependent and independent variables dominated 'strongly agree', 'disagree', and 'not sure' options (around 2% answers were in the options of 'strong disagree' and 'agree'). Moreover, most of the graduates found to be positively agreed with the importance of job search strategies in receiving job offer. Thus, the chi-square test of independence was conducted to compare the differences of agreement (strongly agree) and disagreement/ not sure (strongly disagree/not sure) on all five independent variables to job opportunities.

Among the five independent variables, career counseling office and role of alumni association are not related to the dependent variable. This means that both of the hypotheses were rejected or we could say that they are not playing a significant role to the job opportunities. The outcomes of the two rejected hypothesis have also been supported by the existing literature (Yet Ng & Bourke, 2006).

At the same time, the remaining three independent variables i.e. personal skill development training (PSDT), participation in the job fairs (JF), and engaging with extracurricular activities (ECA) have produced significant result of acceptance. The summary of the statistical figure measuring relationship between the three independent variables and the dependent variables shown in the Table 1-

Table 1: statistical measure of the significant variables

	Personal Skill Development Training	Job Fair	Extracurricular Activity
Pearson Chi-square	15.268	11.499	13.167
p	<.000	<.001	<.001

### ***Hypothesis Testing - Personal Skill Development Training***

89.8% of respondents agreed that personal skill development is an important issue for receiving a job offer, compared to only 10.2% of respondents who did not agree with this job search strategy. Graduates who did not receive a job offer and considered personal skill development has no relationship with job offer represented the majority of the unsuccessful case (the standardized residual of 2.7 is greater than the critical value of +/- 1.96). Alternatively, there were more subjects who reported positive attitudes to personal skill development than would be expected. The standardized residual (-1.5) was also greater than the critical value (+/-1.96), supporting a specific finding that among who did not consider that personal development skills are important, there were fewer subjects who were successful in getting a job offer.

### ***Hypothesis Testing –Job Fair***

The majority (90.2%) of the responding graduates who attended job fair found to be benefited with a job offer. The graduate's perception of attending job fair is not important to receive a job offer represents a small and negligible cluster of people (the standardized residual is 2.1>1.96). The probability of receiving a positive feedback by circulating resume to a group of potential employer supported the positive linear relation between participating in job fair and employment outcome. The standard residual value (-1.2>-1.96) with the job fair independent variable gives indication that using the opportunities of the job fairs graduates can excel the potentiality of being successful right after the graduation.

### ***Hypothesis Testing – Extracurricular Activity***

Like personal skill development and job fair, the extracurricular activity is equally weighted as a successful job search strategy. 90.6% of the responding graduates who were engaged into some form of extracurricular activities in their university life were successful in securing a job position after their study. Only 9.4% of the sample found to depict an opposing experience. The standard residual value (-2.1<-1.96) of the pair of independent variable (extracurricular activities is important) and dependent variable (did not receive job offer) consists of fewer avoidable cases. Such result once again will encourage students to actively participate in non-academic related responsibilities as they positively influence the employer's viewpoint of judging an applicant. The importance of extracurricular activity and its relative positive consequence on the employment effect produces more cases as expected (the standard residual value is greater than the critical value -1.3>-1.96).

In a nutshell, the statistical measure of the three independent variables personal skill development, job fair and extracurricular activity proved to be positively affects the dependent variable job offer. That means hypothesis one, four, and five outlined above are accepted and proved true for this study.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

Employability of fresh graduates is being studied to a great deal in many countries. The job market in general is so competitive that we need to do more than just focus on our background and qualifications. The 'one size fits all' approach is long gone and to remain competitive one must use all the possible strategies to introduce them in the job market. In this research we examined the five different job search strategies practiced by undergraduate students in seeking employment following the graduation. It is interesting to note both personal skill development training and engagement in the extra-curricular activities prioritize the need of skill development issue of the potential job applicant. That means students must give considerable attention in the activities that improves the skill set desired by the employers. Similarly, participation in the job fairs opens the window of opportunities to build and establish social contact and networking. Although the role of career counseling service and alumni supports proved to have weak relationship in ensuring employability, it is indeed vital for academic institutions to overcome the weakness of the existing career placement office and alumni association. Since the theory suggests that both the ignorant variables have the potentiality to generate successful employment outcome. To make it more explicit, the university career placement office should be proactive in managing career development issues of the students by responding to the requirements of the job market and increase the confidence level of the students through guidance and advisory

services. As the alumni association is responsible for presenting their academic institution in a prestigious manner to all the interested stakeholders, more efforts are expected in managing fractional piece (internship/part-time) of employment.

**Appendix**

**Table 2: Receive job offer \* PSDT IS IMPORTANT Cross-tabulation**

			PSDT IS IMPORTANT		Total
			IS NOT IMPORTANT	IMPORTANT	
Receive job offer	Did not receive job offer	Count	17	6	23
		% within PSDT IS IMPORTANT	44.7%	10.2%	23.7%
		Std. Residual	2.7	-2.1	
	Receive job offer	Count	21	53	74
		% within PSDT IS IMPORTANT	55.3%	89.8%	76.3%
		Std. Residual	-1.5	1.2	
Total		Count	38	59	97
		% within PSDT IS IMPORTANT	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

**Table 3: Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	15.268 <sup>a</sup>	1	.000		
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>	13.417	1	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	15.205	1	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				.000	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	15.111	1	.000		
N of Valid Cases	97				

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 9.01.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

**Table 4: Receive job offer \* Fair IS IMPORTANT Cross-tabulation**

			Fair IS IMPORTANT		Total
			IS NOT IMPORTANT	IMPORTANT	
Receive job offer	Did not receive job offer	Count	18	5	23
		% within Fair IS IMPORTANT	39.1%	9.8%	23.7%
		Std. Residual	2.1	-2.0	
	Receive job offer	Count	28	46	74
		% within Fair IS IMPORTANT	60.9%	90.2%	76.3%
		Std. Residual	-1.2	1.1	
Total		Count	46	51	97
		% within Fair IS IMPORTANT	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

**Table 5: Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	11.499 <sup>a</sup>	1	.001		
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>	9.935	1	.002		
Likelihood Ratio	11.965	1	.001		
Fisher's Exact Test				.001	.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	11.380	1	.001		
N of Valid Cases	97				

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 10.91.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

**Table 6: Receive job offer \* ECA IS IMPORTANT Cross-tabulation**

			ECA IS IMPORTANT		Total
			IS NOT IMPORTANT	IMPORTANT	
Receive job offer	Did not receive job offer	Count	18	5	23
		% within ECA IS IMPORTANT	40.9%	9.4%	23.7%
		Std. Residual	2.3	-2.1	
Receive job offer	Receive job offer	Count	26	48	74
		% within ECA IS IMPORTANT	59.1%	90.6%	76.3%
		Std. Residual	-1.3	1.2	
Total		Count	44	53	97
		% within ECA IS IMPORTANT	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

**Table 7: Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	13.167 <sup>a</sup>	1	.000		
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>	11.484	1	.001		
Likelihood Ratio	13.604	1	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				.001	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	13.031	1	.000		
N of Valid Cases	97				

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 10.43.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

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