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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jretconser

Retail career attractiveness to college students: Connecting individual characteristics to the trade-off of job attributes

Hyunjoo Oh ^{a,*}, Barton Weitz ^b, Jeremy Lim ^{a,b}^a Research Director, David F. Miller Center for Retailing Education and Research, 100 Stuzin Hall, Warrington College of Business Administration, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA^b Emeritus JCPenney Eminent Scholar Chair and Professor of Marketing, Warrington College of Business Administration University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 April 2016

Accepted 19 April 2016

Available online 7 May 2016

Keywords:

Career expectation

Conjoint approach

Core competency

Job choice determinants

Recruitment

Retailing career

ABSTRACT

This study examines how U.S. business college students evaluate the attractiveness of potential job opportunities by making trade-offs among important job attributes. Using a conjoint approach, we examine the relative importance of industry type, starting salary, five-year salary, training, benefits, and work-life balance in job choice decisions. We also examine the effects of job applicants' career expectations and core competencies on their job choice determinants. An analysis of 162 business students' evaluations of 27 job profiles indicates that five-year-salary outweighs all other attributes. Their career expectations and core competencies have a substantial influence on their ensuing job choice. We suggest recruitment strategies to target recent college graduates with consideration of individuals' different career expectations and core competencies.

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1. Introduction

The retail sector plays a vital role in the U.S. economy, supporting 1 in 4 American jobs. Each year the retail industry contributes over \$2.6 trillion in total GDP impact to the American economy, and this number is only expected to grow (PWC, 2014). Because of this, it is critical that retailers revamp their recruiting tactics in order to beat competing industries in the fight to capture top talent. Recruitment has become one of the most important elements of strategy, as it influences all subsequent human resource practices, which further determines organizational performance (Breaugh and Starke, 2000; Rynes, 1991; Roberson et al., 2005). Also, since talented employees are often viewed as one of the most important factors of production needed by retailers to stay competitive in today's rapidly changing retail environments, many retail organizations have focused their recruiting efforts on college graduates (Reda, 2008). Indeed, the importance of recruiting "top talent" is underscored by numerous factors, such as the eminent retirement of the baby boomer generation, the increasing use of sophisticated technology in retailing, the competitive and quickly changing retail environment, and the placement of profit and loss responsibilities on frontline managers. It is for

these reasons that the search for "top talent" is, and will remain, a high priority for retail organizations. Recruiting the best and the brightest college graduates has been a challenge for retailers due to negative stereotypes associated with the retailing profession (i.e. long work-hours, low compensation, monotonous work, and poor work-life balance), as documented in previous studies (Broadbridge, 2003b; Houlton and Thomas, 1990; Rhoads et al., 2002; Swinyard et al., 1991). Moreover, Broadbridge, (2003b) compared his results with similar research, conducted at early 80s (Swinyard, 1981) and 90s (Swinyard et al., 1991) and found that negative perception of a retail career prevailed and retail remained an unattractive career choice to college students during those 20 years.

However, college graduates have recently begun to see renewed opportunities in retailing careers. A pool of talented graduates now want to pursue careers in retailing, in part inspired by the rapidly changing landscape of retailing, with emphasis shifting toward employee responsibility in areas such as financial management, leadership, and technological skills. It is expected that college students are even willing to start out by working in training track positions at retail stores (Broadbridge, 2003b). While such a change is a definite positive for retail recruitment, challenges brought about by competing industries still exist. Specifically, companies in other industries are simultaneously increasing their recruitment efforts, targeted toward those same talented graduates. Retailers should be wary of such competition because students are primarily concerned about their own career

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: hyunjoo.oh@warrington.ufl.edu (H. Oh), bart.weitz@warrington.ufl.edu (B. Weitz), jaymlim@gmail.com (J. Lim).

development with no boundaries on specific industries and job categories (Rousseau and Arthur, 1999). Hence, it is important to understand how these potential job candidates evaluate the attractiveness of jobs and make their decision across different industries.

Due to its importance, retail career attractiveness and choice has attracted significant research attention in the past three decades (e.g., Hurst and Good, 2009; Broadbridge, 2003a, 2003b; Commins and Preston, 1997; Shim et al., 1999; Swinyard, 1981). However, most previous studies employed regression or structured equation modeling to model the static relationships between different determinants and college students' retail career choice, while the dynamic trade-off of different determinants by college students in their career choice was completely neglected. Extending the existing literature methodologically, we employed a policy capturing methodology called conjoint analysis in marketing research. This method allows us to estimate psychological tradeoffs that job candidates make when evaluating several job attributes together and uncovers real or hidden drivers which may not be apparent to the respondent themselves. Furthermore, this study considered not only the trade-off of job attributes but also the influence of individual factors including career expectations and core competencies on college students' retail career choice. This study shed new light on college students' retail career choice by connecting job candidates' career expectations and competencies to the relative importance assessment of the various job attributes. Overall, we set out to investigate the following two research questions in this study: (1) what critical job attributes do business students use to determine job attractiveness when evaluating alternative job opportunities, and (2) how do college students' career expectations and core competencies affect the relative importance of job attributes as they evaluate the attractiveness of a job?

The answer to the above to research question will provide significant implications for retail managers. Several authors (e.g., Casey, 2006; Broadbridge et al., 2009.) have argued that retailers have not been successful in selling retail careers to the public. The negative perception of retail careers may be caused by poor communication between the retail industry and prospective job candidates (Broadbridge, 2003b). Thus, it is critical for retail recruiters to provide job information that is attractive to their targeted pool of candidates and communicate effectively with them. To build effective communication strategies, retailers must understand the important factors that influence the candidates' evaluation of job attractiveness and, ultimately, their job choice. This means recruiters have to understand not only which job attributes are particularly important for influencing job choice but also whether the effect of individual factors exist in job choice evaluation. In summary, this study helps retailers develop effective communication strategies that can heighten job candidates' interest in learning more about the retailers' career offerings and may thus increase the economic return to retailers' recruiting efforts.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

Previous studies on retail career choice suggested that career choice or career attractiveness are determined by both job attributes and individual factors. For example, some previous studies focused on job attributes (e.g., Kim et al., 2009), some emphasized individual factors such as work expectation and personal values (e.g., Broadbridge et al., 2003b), and the others evaluated the factors from both sides (e.g., Shim et al., 1999). In this study, we consider factors on both sides and propose that career expectation drives college students' trade-off among different job attributes

based on their evaluation of their own core competencies. We will discuss each category of factors below.

2.1. The effects of individual factors

Previous studies have widely examined individual factors that determine job candidates' career choice because different individuals have different needs and seek jobs that best fit these needs. Researchers have also pointed out that individual-organization fit influences not only job choice but also job performance and satisfaction (Cable and Judge, 1994; Cable and Edwards, 2004; O'Reilly et al., 1996). The importance of fit between the individual and his or her job implies that individual characteristics, such as values, capabilities, and goals, influence job choice. This further implies that career expectation and competency appear to influence the evaluation of job attractiveness.

2.1.1. Career expectation

Career expectation, or work value, is the anticipation that job seekers have for their careers. Researchers have established that work value predicts job choices as individuals seek jobs that provide a fit between their work values and the characteristics of their job or organization (Cable and Judge, 1994; Elizur, 1984; Judge and Bretz, 1992; Knoop, 1994). The dimensions of work values suggested by researchers vary. For instance, Ros et al. (1999) proposed four basic dimensions as intrinsic, extrinsic, social, and prestige, whereas Cable and Edwards (2004) proposed eight dimensions as altruism, relationships with others, pay, prestige, security, authority, variety, and autonomy. In addition, Knight et al. (2006) proposed three other dimensions, such as: environment, opportunity, and success. Gush (1996) found that college graduates employed in retail stores expected the following characteristics: structured training and development programs, advancement opportunities, responsibility and variety in their job, clear career paths, and opportunities to fulfill their long-term career aspirations for success. Given this backdrop, we intend to identify the dimensions of career expectations that are relevant to college students' job choices and to test the degree to which the different dimensions correspond to varying emphasis on the job attributes.

2.1.2. Core competencies

Vroom noted that: "... people not only select their occupations.... they are selected for occupations..." (Vroom, 1964, p.56). His notion suggests that capabilities, skills, or competencies can influence job seekers' evaluation of job attractiveness. Previous studies have shown that skills and abilities influence job performance and satisfaction (Fricko and Beehr, 1992). It is then reasonable to believe that one's self-assessment of core competencies plays an important role in regard to evaluating job attractiveness. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) defines personal core competencies as competencies that employees must possess in order to successfully perform job functions that are essential to business operations. Whether the above reference is to task-based competence or general competence is debatable (Brown, 1994; Hart et al. 1999; Lievens et al., 2004; Woodruffe, 1991). Nonetheless, we adopt the general definition that describes managerial competence as personal traits, characteristics, or skills that are shown to influence job performance. Such a definition is also consistent with that of previous studies on retail and management careers (Hart et al., 1999; Preston and Smith, 1997). It is particularly important to understand how an individual's perceived general competence influences their evaluation of job choice alternatives since retailing requires general competencies, such as personal skills, energy, and drive that cannot be trained.

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