Long-Run Success In The Accounting Profession: A Study Of Student Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

Accounting students are generally well aware of the skills, education, and accomplishments needed to get that first job and initially enter the accounting profession. However, it is equally important that accounting students approaching graduation have a good understanding of the skills, education and accomplishments required for an experienced accountant (an accountant who is three, five, or even ten years into their career). Armed with this information, students will be better equipped to make the best decisions as they complete their undergraduate degree and begin their careers. This would include decisions about graduate studies, pursuing certifications, accepting a job in a particular industry or one which provides specific experiences or training. Unfortunately, many students do not have accurate or complete information regarding the requirements for continued, long-run success in the profession. This paper reports the results of a project which (1) measured accounting students perceptions of the education, training, knowledge and experience required for experienced accountants, (2) implemented a class project exposing students to employers' requirements for experienced accountants, and (3) measured student perceptions after the project was completed.

Keywords: Accounting education, accounting student project, accounting profession, accounting student perceptions.

INTRODUCTION

Students who pursue a career in accounting typically have a long-range goal to progress upward through an organization and to eventually become a successful accounting or business executive. In doing so, there are many possible background qualifications or "career building blocks" for them to consider. Current job postings for higher level accounting positions indicate that employers demand candidates in the profession meet certain degree and certification requirements, have experience in specific areas of accounting and specific industries, are knowledgeable in the area of information systems/computer technology, and possess necessary work environment skills and abilities. As accounting educators, it is important that we provide students with this information so that the students can better make informed life decisions related to their careers in the accounting profession.

The purpose of this paper is to report on the results of an interactive class project designed to increase student awareness of the career building blocks they must develop in order to achieve long-run success in the accounting profession. Initial student perceptions of the qualifications necessary for long-run success in the accounting profession were measured first using a questionnaire. Then the project was administered. This was followed by a second measurement of student perceptions to determine if the project was successful in having an impact on student awareness of the items required for long-run success in the profession. The following sections of this paper give a detailed description of the project development and implementation, including the various instruments used and a discussion of the results and findings.

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

The first step in the development of the class project was to construct a list of skills, education, experience, and traits that are required for long-run success in the accounting profession. Long-run success in the accounting profession is defined in this project as the ability to be successfully employed in the accounting profession in mid-to-upper level positions (beyond the entry-level position). One of the best sources of information regarding the requirements for such employment are the employers who are hiring for these positions. Actual job descriptions or advertisements, prepared and posted by employers, were examined to determine what characteristics employers typically seek in an experienced accountant. Monster.com, a popular job search website, was the source for these job postings. By examining these postings the authors were able to identify skills, education, experience and traits which are commonly demanded by employers when hiring for non-entry level positions. This examination resulted in the following 19 items which were deemed to be important to long-run success in accounting profession:

- Master's degree (MBS/MS)
- Certified Public Accountant certification (CPA)
- Other professional certification (CMA,CIA, etc.)
- Related work experience
- Public accounting experience
- Specific niche area of accounting experience
- Specific industry experience
- Spreadsheet knowledge/experience
- Database knowledge/experience
- Word processing knowledge/experience
- Computerized accounting package knowledge/experience
- ERP knowledge/experience
- Communication skills
- Analytical skills
- Supervisory/Managerial skills
- Organizational Skills
- Ability to work in a team environment
- Ability to work with minimal supervision
- Time management skills

Using these 9 items, a "pre-project" questionnaire and a "post-project" questionnaire were developed. For each of the nineteen items, students were asked to use a 5-point scale to indicate how important they believed each item was for achieving long-run success in the accounting profession (employment in upper level accounting positions). Students were asked to assign each item a score from one to five with one being "lowest level of importance" and five being "highest level of importance". A copy of the student survey can be found in Appendix A. In addition, the "pre-project" questionnaire included a section which was designed to elicit demographic information from the survey participants.

The questionnaire was pre-tested on two intermediate accounting classes. Student feedback from the pretest was used to revise and improve the instrument as needed

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation of this project included three basic steps:

1) administration of the pre-project questionnaire
2) administration of the class project, and finally
3) administration of the post-project questionnaire.

Pre-Project Questionnaire

The pre-project questionnaire was administered to 138 students enrolled in four sections of Intermediate Accounting I at a regional, public university in Texas. The majority of the respondents were juniors (64%), as one would expect for Intermediate Accounting. There were also 25% seniors, 10 % sophomores and 1% graduate students. Sixty-five percent were accounting majors, 25% were finance majors and 10% had some other major. Fifty-four percent were female and 46% were male. Seventy-five percent were white, 10% black, 12% Hispanic and 3% Asian/Pacific. Self-reported GPAs range from 4.0 to 2.0 with no one reporting a GPA of less than 2.0. Fifty-seven percent of respondents indicated that their parents' education level was less than a 4-year college degree.

Table 1 contains the results from this "pre-project survey" which gives us a glimpse into student perceptions before completing the class project. Students appeared to perceive all items to be of at least fairly high importance as no item had a mean response less than 3.0. Time Management Skills ranked most important (4.61) while Other Professional Certification was ranked least important (3.03). Also noteworthy is the fact that several IT related items ranked among the lowest levels of perceived importance (ERP, Database, Word Processing).

Table 1: Student Perceptions Before Class Project
Results of "Pre-Project" Survey

Item	Mean Response
Time Management Skills	4.61
CPA	4.40
Organization Skills	4.34
Communication Skills	4.30
Analytical Skills	4.25
Ability to work under minimal supervision	4.14
Ability to work in a team	4.12
Masters Degree	4.01
Spreadsheet Knowledge	3.94
# Years Related Work Experience	3.79
Computer Accounting Package	3.79
Supervisory Skills	3.64
# Years Public Accounting Experience	3.50
Experience in Specific Area of Accounting	3.50
Word Processing Knowledge/Experience	3.50
ERP Knowledge/Experience	3.41
Database Knowledge/Experience	3.37
Experience in a Specific Industry	3.13
Other Professional Certification	3.03

Administration of Class Project

After completion of the pre-project questionnaire, students were assigned the class project (known as the "Monster Project"). The purpose of assigning this project was to increase student awareness of the importance of each of these 19 items to long-run success in the accounting profession. Students were asked to find 15 valid job postings on Monster.com. A valid posting was defined as one which was accounting/audit-related, required a minimum of a bachelor's degree in accounting, was non-entry level, and was not a work-at-home job. Postings were limited to jobs in the Houston, Texas, area only (the closest major metropolitan area) and were required to be from five different posting dates, all within the month the assignment was made. For each valid job posting, students were asked to complete a response form, which was designed to lead students through the job posting. To complete the response form correctly, students had to read the entire job posting carefully. In fact, the entire purpose of the response form was to ensure that students thoroughly read all 15 job postings. A copy of the response form is located in Appendix B.

Students turned in both the response form and a copy of the actual job posting for all 15 job postings. Extra credit points for the course were given to the student only if the project was fully completed according to the directions given. There was a 100% participation rate, perhaps due to the value of extra credit points in a course like Intermediate Accounting.

Post-Project Questionnaire

The post-project questionnaire (identical to the pre-project questionnaire, but without the demographic section) was administered after students completed the Monster project. Post-project results were compared to pre-project results to determine if student perceptions were altered by the experience of the Monster project. Table 2 contains the results of the post–project questionnaire and compares these results to the pre-project questionnaire.

Table 2: Change in Student Perceptions

Item	Pre-Project Mean	Post-Project Mean	Change in Mean *p < .01 **p < .05 ***p < .10
# Years Related Work Experience	3.7898	4.4887	.6988 *
Masters Degree	4.0072	3.5413	-.4659*
Spreadsheet Knowledge	3.9420	4.3383	.6963*
Communication Skills	4.3333	4.6691	.3358 *
Time Management Skills	4.6087	4.3636	-.2451*
ERP Knowledge/Experience	3.4130	3.7142	.3012 *
Computerized Accounting Package Knowledge	3.7898	3.5037	-.2861**
Experience in a Specific Niche Area of Accounting	3.500	3.7368	.2368**
Word Processing Knowledge/Experience	3.500	3.7744	.2744***
Data Base Knowledge/Experience	3.3695	3.5864	.2169***
Other Professional Certification	3.0289	2.8120	-.2169
CPA	4.3985	4.2406	-.1579
Ability to Work Under Minimal Supervision	4.1449	4.000	-.1579
Supervisory Skills	3.6449	3.5227	-.1222
# Years Public Accounting Experience	3.50	3.3834	-.1165
Experience in a Specific Industry	3.130	3.2481	.1176
Ability to Work in a Team	4.1159	4.2121	.0961
Analytical Skills	4.2536	4.1742	-.0793
Organizational Skills	4.3406	4.3181	-.0223

RESULTS

The purpose of assigning the "Monster Project" was to increase the students' awareness of the importance of various items to long-run success in the accounting profession. Therefore, the mean responses from the pre-project survey and the mean responses from the post-project survey were compared (see Table 2). This allowed us to examine whether the completion of the monster project had an impact on student perceptions of the importance of each item. In other words, we are able to determine if the assignment of the monster project had the desired effect. To test significance of the change in the mean responses, a T-test was used. Although it was hypothesized that the assignment would increase the students' perception of the importance of each of the items, it was possible for student perceptions to either increase or decrease. Thus, a two-tailed T-test was conducted. Table 2 reports these results. Items are listed in descending order based on the significance of the change in student perception (the item for which student perception changed the most is listed first).

Of the 19 items of importance to long-run success in accounting, 10 items had a mean response after the Monster project which was statistically different than the mean response before the Monster project. Of these, seven items had an increased mean (as expected) while three decreased.

Increased Importance

Seven items experienced an increase in the mean response after the project. These items are: Number of Years Related Work Experience, Spreadsheet Knowledge/Experience, Communication Skills, ERP Knowledge/Experience, Experience in a Specific Area of Accounting, Word Processing Knowledge/Experience, and Database Knowledge/Experience. The increased mean response indicates that students' perception of the importance of these skills to their success in the accounting profession increased as a result of the assignment. This result was consistent with the goal of the Monster project assignment.

It is also of particular interest to note that four of these seven items are IT related. In the pre-project survey, IT related items tended to be among the lowest level of importance. After examining job postings, the students seem to believe that these skills are much more important than they did before. This result is of particular interest to those teaching an Accounting Information Systems class as it suggests that a project such as the Monster project may be used in such a class to increase student motivation to learn these skills.

Decreased Importance

Of particular interest were the three items for which student perceptions of importance actually decreased after the Monster project. The results suggest that students perceive Masters' Degree, Time Management Skills, and Computerized Accounting Package Knowledge as less important to a career in accounting than they did before examining the job postings (the Monster project). This was contrary to the expected outcome. These unexpected results can be explained by the fact that there is a greater amount of emphasis placed on these items by the university (the student's current environment) than is placed on these items in the job postings.

Time Management Skills were rated by students as the most important item before completing the Monster project. This high rating is not surprising given the constant attention college students must place on "time management skills" to succeed while at the university. While time management skills are certainly important to employers, such skills may not be explicitly stated or emphasized in employment postings. In fact, time management skills may be so inherently important, that employers may simply assume that anyone who has successfully advanced to the level of applying for upper level accounting positions must already possess appropriate time management skills. Therefore, students may not have seen time management skills written into the job postings. Consequently, students may have perceived that time management skills were of lesser importance than they originally believed.

The perceived importance of a Master's degree also declined after students completed the Monster project. Again, this may be due to the fact that the master's degree is given greater emphasis by faculty and others at the university than it is given in a job posting. The connection between the master's degree and the accounting profession exists primarily through the CPA certification. The master's degree is a vehicle which is commonly used to fulfill the educational requirements to take the CPA exam (150 hours). However, there are other ways to satisfy this requirement. Faculty and others at the university tend to emphasize the master's degree approach while employers many not care how a student meets the educational requirement, only that they eventually do and are certified. Thus, emphasis on the master's degree itself may be much higher at the university than it is in the job postings. This relative difference in emphasis on the master's degree would explain a decrease in the students' perceptions of importance after examining several job postings.

Finally, the decrease in the perceived importance of knowledge of computerized accounting packages may also be a result of the emphasis on such knowledge in the university curriculum. Many of the students participating in this project were also enrolled in the Accounting Information Systems course the same semester. This course places great emphasis on computerized accounting packages, which likely resulted in a higher pre-project survey rating than they would have otherwise. Likewise, employers may view knowledge of computerized accounting packages to be such a basic job requirement that they assume an understanding of this from anyone applying for upper level positions. Therefore, once again, the emphasis at the university exceeds the emphasis in the written job posting, resulting in a decreased rating. It is notable that Knowledge of Computerized Accounting Packages is the only IT related item in the questionnaire which had a decreased response. This may suggest that the Accounting

Information Systems course should focus more resources on such things as databases, ERP systems and spreadsheets and less on computerized accounting packages.

CONCLUSION

Results of the class project indicate some significant changes in student perceptions of the skills, education, certification, and experience they will need for long-run success in the accounting profession. Changes in perceived importance occurred in both directions but with most increasing, as expected. Perhaps one of the most interesting results is that many of the items with significant changes in perception were related to information systems/computer technology. These results should be of particular interest to those teaching/developing the Accounting Information Systems course, and suggest that this project may be an excellent way to motivate those students.

Student feedback on this project was highly positive and the results indicate that exposure to "real-world" job postings altered student perceptions and was a valuable learning experience. As a result of this project, students should be better equipped to make informed career decisions, such as pursuing graduate studies and certifications and accepting a job in a particular industry or one which provides specific experiences or training.

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APPENDIX A
Monster Project Questionnaire

Survey of Student Perceptions

Assume you have decided to pursue a career in accounting. Your long-range goal is to become a successful executive in the field of accounting that you will choose somewhere along your career path. Listed below are various qualifications, skills or "career building blocks" . For each of these items, indicate your current perception of the level of importance of each item in achieving long-run success in the accounting profession. Specify your perception by ranking each item from 1 (Lowest level of importance) to 5 (Highest level of importance). Please circle the number corresponding to your current perception or belief.

For each item below, indicate how important you believe that item is for achieving long-run success in the accounting profession.

Masters' Degree (MBA/MS)

Lowest level of Importance				Highest Level of Importance
1	2	3	4	5

Certified Public Accountant (CPA) certification

Lowest level of Importance				Highest Level of Importance
1	2	3	4	5

Other Professional Certification (CMA, CFE, CIA, CFM, CISA, etc.)

Lowest level of Importance				Highest Level of Importance
1	2	3	4	5

Number of Years of Related Work Experience

Lowest level of Importance				Highest Level of Importance
1	2	3	4	5

Number of Years of Public Accounting Experience

Lowest level of Importance				Highest Level of Importance
1	2	3	4	5

Experience in a Specific Area of Accounting (financial reporting/analysis, tax, cost/managerial, internal audit, treasury, SEC reporting, Sarbanes Oxley(SOX), etc.)

Lowest level of Importance				Highest Level of Importance
1	2	3	4	5

Experience in a Specific Industry (oil & gas, banking/financial services, health care, manufacturing, construction, etc.)

Lowest level of Importance				Highest Level of Importance
1	2	3	4	5

Spreadsheet Knowledge / Experience (Excel, etc.)

Lowest level of Importance				Highest Level of Importance
1	2	3	4	5

Database Knowledge / Experience (Access, Oracle, etc.)

Lowest level of Importance				Highest Level of Importance
1	2	3	4	5

Word Processing Knowledge / Experience (Word, WordPerfect, etc.)

Lowest level of Importance				Highest Level of Importance
1	2	3	4	5

Computer Accounting Package Knowledge / Experience (QuickBooks, Peachtree, etc.)

Lowest level of Importance				Highest Level of Importance
1	2	3	4	5

ERP Knowledge / Experience (SAP, PeopleSoft, Microsoft Dynamics, etc.)

Lowest level of Importance				Highest Level of Importance
1	2	3	4	5

Communication skills (written, verbal)

Lowest level of Importance				Highest Level of Importance
1	2	3	4	5

Analytical skills

Lowest level of Importance				Highest Level of Importance
1	2	3	4	5

Supervisory/managerial skills

Lowest level of Importance				Highest Level of Importance
1	2	3	4	5

Organization skills (multi-tasking)

Lowest level of Importance				Highest Level of Importance
1	2	3	4	5

Ability to work in a team environment

Lowest level of Importance				Highest Level of Importance
1	2	3	4	5

Ability to work with minimal supervision (self-starter)

Lowest level of Importance				Highest Level of Importance
1	2	3	4	5

Time management skills (deadline oriented)

Lowest level of Importance			Highest Level of Importance
1	2	3	

APPENDIX B

RESPONSE FORM

Posting date_____

Company name (if stated)_____

Industry (if stated)_____

Job title/position (if stated)_____

Salary range (if stated)_____

Education (indicate all stated requirements/preferences):

□ Bachelors' degree in Accounting □ Masters' degree (MBA/MS) □ Accredited university

Professional Certification (indicate all stated requirements/preferences):

↑ CPA □ CMA □ CIA

□ CFE □ CFM □ CISA

↑ Other (specify)_____ ↑ None stated

Related Work Experience:

□ Less than 2 years □ 2-5 years □ 5+ years

□ Number of years not stated

Public Accounting Experience:

□ Less than 2 years □ 2-5 years □ 5+ years

□ Number of years not stated □ Not a requirement/preference

If public accounting experience is a requirement/preference, is "Big 4" public accounting experience required/preferred?

□ Yes □ No ↑ Not applicable

Other Areas of Accounting Experience (indicate all stated requirements/preferences):

□ Financial reporting/analysis (including GAAP, SFAS) □ Tax

□ Cost/managerial accounting □ Sarbanes Oxley (SOX) □ SEC reporting

□ Treasury □ Internal audit

□ Other (specify)_____ □ None stated

Industry Experience (indicate all stated requirements/preferences):

□ Manufacturing □ Oil & gas □ Construction

□ Health care □ Banking/financial services

□ Other (specify)_____ □ None stated

Information Systems/Computer Applications Experience (indicate all stated requirements/preferences):

□ SAP □ PeopleSoft □ Oracle

□ QuickBooks □ Microsoft Dynamics □ Peachtree

□ Word □ Excel □ Access

□ Other (specify)_____ □ None stated

Technical Skills & Abilities (indicate all stated requirements):

□ Communication (written, verbal) □ Computer proficiency □ Analytical

□ Supervisory/managerial □ Ability to work in a team environment

□ Ability to work with minimal supervision (self-starter)

↑ Organization (multi-tasking) □ Deadline oriented/time management

↑ Other (specify)_____ □ None stated