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Why Send Students Abroad?

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Abstract

The author reports on a study done among food service and lodging industry recruiters to determine their perceptions about the value of various international student experiences such as internships and exchanges. The study found that lodging recruiters appreciate the value of these experiences significantly more than their peers in food service and contends that there is a role for both corporate executives and educators in raising recruiters' awareness of the value of international student experience.

Why send students abroad?

by Hubert B. Van Hoof

The author reports on a study done among food service and lodging industry recruiters to determine their perceptions about the value of various international student experiences such as internships and exchanges. The study found that lodging recruiters appreciate the value of these experiences significantly more than their peers in food service and contends that there is a role for both corporate executives and educators in raising recruiters' awareness of the value of the international student experience.

In the minds of many of the CEOs of large hospitality companies, being able to think "globally" is an important characteristic of the industry's future leaders. In many instances, it has been emphasized that the industry needs employees with good cultural awareness, which enables them to deal with people from other societies and do business the world over. These same sentiments are prevalent among educators. Much of what is done in higher education is aimed at creating a more "rounded" and culturally aware individual with a

global perspective. Education is preparing students not only for life in the workforce, but also for life in general.

Sending students abroad during their college careers, either as exchange students or as interns, helps in making them more aware of other cultures, and exposes them to diversity issues they might never face at home. When they leave their comfortable surroundings, it forces them to face some of the challenges they will also face after graduation. Students who move to other countries and adapt to different living environments during their college careers will almost certainly also be able to do so once they become part of an industry which moves its people around frequently. Both the international internship and the international student exchange can be instrumental in creating "world citizens," and in shaping some of the most well-rounded, mature, and knowledgeable adults

educators are aiming to educate and company executives are hoping to attract.

Recruiters' perceptions matter

Yet, neither CEO's nor educators hire hospitality management students for industry positions. Recruiters do. With both corporate executives and educators emphasizing the importance of international experience and global awareness, do hospitality industry recruiters also feel that international exposure is important in a student's education?

This article reports on a study done among hospitality industry recruiters to determine what their perceptions are about the various international experiences that are now available to hospitality management students, in particular the international internship, and how they perceive the value of those experiences to the companies they represent. Specifically, the study was designed as follows:

- To determine how hospitality industry recruiters rated the importance of students' international work and study experience as compared to national work and study experience
- To determine if recruiters favored international work/study experience over national work and study experience in their hiring decisions
- To determine what they considered to be the benefits and drawbacks to students

going abroad to work or study

- To determine whether company characteristics such as size and multi-nationality and recruiters' personal international exposure had a significant effect on their opinions
- To determine whether the opinions of food service recruiters were significantly different from the opinions of lodging industry recruiters

The survey was conducted during February and March of 1999 among hospitality industry recruiters in the database of the Career Services Department at Northern Arizona University. The recruiters represented hospitality companies operating all over the United States.

The questionnaire was designed to enable the generation of data that could potentially enhance the understanding of how hospitality recruiters perceive the value of international study and work programs. Particular attention was paid to the brevity of the instrument and the clarity of the questions to ensure the highest possible response rate. The questionnaire was a two-page, self-administered instrument that would take the respondent less than two minutes to complete. With the exception of two questions, which asked the respondents to list benefits and drawbacks of international internships,

the questions were closed-ended, requiring a choice from a number of alternatives.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. In the first section the respondents were asked to rate on a five-point Likert scale

the importance (to their company) of students having national internship experience, students having international internship experience, students having international exchange (or study abroad) experience, students speaking a second language, and students having a second (or double) degree in a related field from a foreign institution.

Experience is rated

In the second section respondents were asked to compare the value of students with various educational backgrounds with each other, for instance, if they favored a student who had studied abroad over one who had not studied abroad in their hiring decisions, assuming all else was equal.

The third section inquired into some relevant company and personal demographics, including size and international involvement.

In the last section, respondents were asked to list what they considered to be the three most important benefits and drawbacks of a student doing an international internship.

Recruiters in the sample were selected for the following reasons:

- They were considered knowledgeable about the value of a student's international

experience to the companies they represented, about college education in general, and about the various national and international internship and exchange opportunities that presently exist in hospitality management education.

- The database of recruiters was readily available at the university's Career Services Department.
- The recruiters' interest in the topic and, accordingly, their willingness to cooperate were expected to be high.

On February 17, 1999, the questionnaires were either sent or handed to the 40 hospitality management recruiters who intended to interview hospitality management students at Northern Arizona University during spring 1999. The questionnaire was accompanied by a letter, which explained the intent of the study, and a self-addressed return envelope. A total of 24 responses was received, a 60 percent response rate.

Limitations do exist

Although the recruiters in this sample represented hospitality management companies operating all over the United States and recruiting at numerous universities nationwide, the fact that the study was based on a database of recruiters at only one university was a limitation. Second, there were relatively more

recruiters from states in the western half of the U.S. than recruiters representing companies along the East Coast. Third, because the study only used recruiters at one university, the sample size was relatively small. Yet it was felt that the recruiters in the sample, due to the "national" nature of their positions and their companies, would provide a good representation of recruiter sentiments nationwide.

Options are compared

This article will discuss the descriptive results of the study, the effect of several company and personal characteristics on the recruiters' perceptions, and whether the opinions of the food service recruiters were significantly different from those of lodging industry recruiters. Finally, the benefits and drawbacks of a student doing an internship abroad, as identified by the respondents, will be highlighted.

Thirteen of the 24 respondents (54.2 percent) represented food service companies, and 11 (45.8 percent) the lodging industry. Ten recruiters (41.7 percent) worked for multinational companies, and 18 (75 percent) were employed by companies which had more than 10,000 employees.

Thirteen recruiters (54.2 percent) stated they had hired students with international work and/or study experience in the past, and four (16.7 percent) had international work and/or study experience themselves.

Among the 13 food service recruiters, six (46.2 percent) worked for multinational companies, and 11 (84.6 percent) worked for companies with more than 10,000 employees. Five of the food service recruiters (38.5 percent) had hired students with international work and/or study experience before, and none had any personal international experience.

As far as the 11 lodging recruiters were concerned, four (36.4 percent) worked for multinationals, and seven (63.6 percent) were employed by companies with more than 10,000 employees. A large majority of the lodging recruiters (72.7 percent) had hired students with international experience in the past, and, as opposed to the food service recruiters, four respondents (36.4 percent) indicated they had international work and/or study experience themselves (See Table 1).

International experience rated

The first question asked respondents to rate on a five-point scale with 1=not important and 5=very important the importance of a U.S. student (and potential hire) having done an internship in the hospitality industry in the United States. Overall, recruiters considered this fairly important. The overall mean score for this question was 3.88, with food service recruiters rating it 3.62 and the lodging recruiters a 4.18.

In the second question, recruiters were asked to rate the importance of a student having done an internship in the

Table 1
Recruiter and company demographics

Company origin	n=24	percent
Food service	13	54.2
Lodging	11	45.8
Multinationals		
Yes	10	41.7
No	14	58.3
Company size		
<10,000 employees	6	25.0
>10,000 employees	18	75.0
Recruiters who hired students with international experience		
Yes	13	54.2
No	11	45.8
Recruiters international experience		
Yes	4	16.7
No	20	83.3

hospitality industry abroad. In this case, the ratings were considerably lower: 2.67 overall, with 2.23 for food service and 3.18 for lodging recruiters.

When asked how they felt concerning another international student experience, the study abroad, respondents were even less positive. Overall, they rated this at 2.38, with food service representatives considerably less positive (1.92) than their colleagues from the lodging industry (2.91).

Given the fact that many people in today's workforce do not speak English as a first language, it was of interest to see whether recruiters considered a student's ability to speak a second language important. Overall, they rated this at 3.46, or fairly important. Food service representatives were, once again, less optimistic

than their lodging counterparts. They rated this at 3.23, whereas the lodging recruiters felt it was more important (3.73).

The final question received the lowest ratings. When asked how important it was to their company that a student obtain a second or double degree in a related field from an institution abroad, the overall rating was only 2.08, with 2.00 for food service and 2.18 for lodging.

Many are indifferent

In an effort to crystallize opinions even further, respondents were asked to choose between various options in the second section. In the first question they were asked whether they would favor a U.S. student who had studied abroad over a student who had no international study experience,

assuming all else was equal. Only five recruiters (20.8 percent) indicated they would favor a student with international study experience. Eight (33.3 percent) stated they would not favor a student with international study experience, and 11 (45.8 percent) were indifferent.

When presented with the option of whether they favored a student who had worked abroad in a hospitality internship over a student who had not worked at all, with all else being equal, nine recruiters (37.5 percent) indicated they preferred international work experience over no work experience at all. Five (20.8 percent) stated they would not prefer a student with international work experience and the remainder (41.7 percent) were indifferent.

U.S. experience preferred

Finally, since recruiters prefer work experience, any work experience, over no work experience at all, the last question compared students with national and international work experience. Only two recruiters (8.3 percent) preferred international internship experience to national internship experience, with nine (37.5 percent) expressing a preference for national internship experience. A large number of the respondents (54.2 percent) were indifferent. Overall, recruiters showed some preference for national over international internship experience.

A cursory look at the descriptive statistics reveals that several personal and company characteristics

might have an effect on recruiter perceptions and preferences. Depending on the level of data available, the study used either chi-square analyses or t-tests to determine whether any of the differences observed in the descriptive statistics were significant.

From the descriptive statistics it became clear that the food service recruiters' ratings about the various international student experiences were lower than the ratings of the lodging industry representatives. By means of a t-test, the study first looked at whether these differences of opinion were significant. In all instances, the null hypotheses assumed that the population means were equal. All analyses used an alpha level of .05.

The study found two significant differences of opinion. In both cases, the significance scores were below the .05 alpha level and the null hypotheses of equality of means could be rejected. First, it was found that lodging recruiters rated the importance of a student having studied abroad significantly higher than their peers in the food service industry. Second, lodging industry recruiters also rated the importance of a student having worked abroad significantly higher than their food service peers.

There was no significant difference of opinion regarding the national internship, the student speaking a second language, and the student having a second degree from a program abroad. Moreover, by means of chi-square

Table 2
Differences in perceptions of food service and lodging recruiters

	Mean food service	Mean lodging	Sig.
Importance U.S. internship	3.62	4.18	.224
Importance int'l internship	2.23	3.18	.044*
Importance int'l exchange	1.92	2.91	.031*
Importance 2nd language	3.23	3.72	.236
Importance 2nd degree	2.00	2.18	.727

*Significant at .05 level

testing it was found that there were no significant differences in the preferences expressed in the second section of the survey (See Table 2).

T-tests and chi-square analyses found no evidence of a significant effect of either company size or multi-nationality on the recruiters' preferences and perceptions about the various international student experiences. Likewise, the fact that recruiters had hired a student with international work and study experience in the past or had worked and studied abroad themselves did not significantly affect their opinions. This might lead one to assume that the recruiters represented the company point of view rather than their own opinions in the recruiting process, or that their international experience does not necessarily benefit them in their current positions.

Cultural benefits cited

When asked what they considered to be the most important ben-

efits of a student doing an international internship, a large majority of the recruiters (75 percent) indicated that an international internship exposed students to different and diverse cultures. Thirteen respondents (54.2 percent) felt that it made the student more mature and well-rounded, stating that students who go on an international internship show initiative and a willingness to face challenges and to relocate. Nine recruiters (37.5 percent) were of opinion that it helped students in mastering a second language, and seven (29.2 percent) felt it broadened the student's work experience.

As far as the drawbacks were concerned, the most important one identified (29.2 percent) was the fact that an international internship did not prepare a student for the American way of doing business. Three recruiters (12.5 percent) felt that it created a "wanderlust" in the students, and two (8.3 percent) stated that it might create unrealistic expectations of international careers in

the minds of the participating students. Six recruiters (25 percent) specifically stated that they could not identify any drawbacks.

Changes occur in students

Many educators are convinced of the value of international education, as exemplified by the many articles, books, and other publications dedicated to the topic. Various authors have discussed the rounding process which occurs when students are sent abroad and are forced to live in another culture.¹ Additionally, they have investigated the changes that occur in students when they live and work abroad and what the students' expectations and perceptions are about the foreign experience.²

Similarly, executives at higher corporate levels feel that the industry leaders of tomorrow need, among other things, a global outlook on life and business, and an exposure to different cultures and societies. Students who are willing to leave their safe surroundings and to face some tough challenges might have a better chance to make it all the way up the corporate ladder. For educators, international exposure adds to students' education in several ways. It makes them more mature; it adds to classroom education, and provides them with a global outlook on life.

Similarly, hospitality management internships are generally seen as valuable experiences for students. They provide them with a reinforcement of classroom the-

ory, help them hone their interpersonal skills, give them an edge in the recruiting process, and, overall, provide them with a first-hand look at what the hospitality industry is all about. As recent articles have indicated,³ they bridge the gap between hospitality management education and the hospitality industry.

Recruiters' opinions differ

As this study has shown, however, hospitality industry recruiters do not share in the euphoria about the international student experience in the form of an international internship or a student exchange. They clearly favor national work experience over international work experience, and do not particularly care for a student studying abroad, speaking a second language, or having a second (or double) degree in a related field from an institution abroad. Presumably, these were seen as educational rather than practical experiences, and of little relevance to the industry or the company they represented.

Comparative analysis found that lodging industry recruiters consistently, and in some cases significantly, rated the value of the various international student experiences higher than their food service peers. Perhaps it is true that the lodging industry has more use for employees with a "global" background, and that the food service industry is more nationally oriented.

Company characteristics had no significant effect on opinions,

perhaps a surprising finding. One would expect multinational companies to be more interested in hiring students with international experience. The recruiters' own international background also did not significantly affect opinions, which could lead one to conclude that they truly represent the company line in their hiring decisions.

The benefits of international internships which the recruiters identified were virtually the same as the benefits identified in the literature over the years, and recruiters and educators were fairly similar in that regard. The drawbacks mentioned centered around the issue of the international internship taking away valuable national work experience. An often-heard comment was that an international internship does not show a student the U.S. way of doing business. Moreover, some recruiters felt that an international internship would install a "wanderlust" in students and would raise unrealistic hopes about international careers.

Is this a case then of educational idealism versus economic realism prevalent among hospitality industry recruiters? Why are opinions about the value of the international experience so different? Is it that the recruiters' views, perhaps by necessity, are more short term than long term? Do recruiters look at recruits in terms of what they can do for the company in the next three years, rather than what they may mean when they reach the corporate levels? Are all the arguments in favor

of a student going abroad overtaken by economic reality?

Education has role

Perhaps there is a role for education in this regard. Educators could publish more articles about the benefits of international education in the trade press and talk to recruiters when they come to campus. Similarly, high-level corporate executives need to do a better job of conveying the message of the importance of a global outlook in employees to the people who hire the leaders of the 21st century, in this case their recruiters. Moreover, additional research is warranted. This study could be done at a national level and the number of recruiters and companies could be expanded upon.

If it makes sense to educators and corporate executives that a student who is willing to relocate and face the world is a more rounded, mature and experienced person than his/her peers who did not, and consequently might turn out to be a better resource to the company in the long run, it might also make sense to the industry's recruiters. Even though they may be limited by staffing demands, short-term goals, and a conviction that the way things are done in the U.S. hospitality industry might be better than the way they are done in other parts of the world, corporate executives and educators need to do a better job informing recruiters, and food service recruiters in particular, of the benefits of a student going abroad.

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