Work Readiness: A Study of Student Intern’s Self-Perception and Supervisor Evaluation

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

In the knowledge economy, graduates are expected to be responsive to the demands of a highly technological society that is constantly changing. Today, employers expect graduates to be equipped with generic skills and competencies such as problem-solving skills, communication skills, interpersonal skills, lifelong learning attitude and be knowledgeable team players who are able to tackle challenging problems and handle complex situations in the workplace.

When evaluating the outcomes of graduates, a key question to ask is this—“what is the extent of work readiness among the graduates in the workplace? In this study, work readiness refers to the extent to which graduates are equipped with the attitudes, skills and knowledge that prepare them to be successful in the workplace (Caballero & Walker, 2010). Work readiness is increasingly gaining importance because it is used to predict the graduate’s potential job performance and career advancement in the workplace (Atlay & Harris, 2000; Gardner & Liu, 1997; Walker, Yong, Pang, Fullarton, Costa & Dunning, 2013).

To prepare students for work readiness, polytechnics have implemented internship schemes in their curriculum to provide opportunities for students to apply learnt knowledge and skills from school in the real world situation and to gain real-life practical experience. Few studies have examined the comparison between undergraduate interns and internship supervisors’ evaluation on internship performance (McDonough, Rodriguez, & Prior-Miller, 2009) and internship perspectives and expectations (Daugherty, 2011), and these studies were conducted in discipline-specific internship contexts such as media or public relations internships. However, not much is known about supervisor evaluation and student interns’ perception of the work readiness of polytechnic interns in Singapore at an institutional level. This study therefore seeks to fill this gap in the literature.

Objectives of Study
This study aimed to (a) investigate differences between interns’ self-perceptions of work readiness and supervisors’ evaluation of the interns’ work readiness; (b) examine if there is a relationship between students’ academic achievements, as measured by their Grade Point Average (GPA), and their level of work readiness as evaluated by their internship supervisors; and, (c) determine the extent to which interns’ abilities and skills, attitude and teamwork influence their overall performance, as evaluated by their supervisors.

Method
The sample of this study consisted of 485 final year students, 219 (45.2%) males and 266 (54.8%) females with a median age of 20 years, from all Schools on their internship during the second semester in a polytechnic. The study employed a quantitative study using questionnaires, with data collected from two sources, namely, the internship supervisors and interns using similar work readiness performance attributes. At the end of the internship in the second semester of the academic year, all final year students were invited to complete an online questionnaire, where they self-rated their work readiness in terms of their abilities and skills, attitude, teamwork and overall internship performance. Data were also collected from the 355 company internship supervisors who evaluated the interns on abilities and skills, attitude, teamwork and overall performance.

A 7-item questionnaire was employed in the study, and consisted of three items on abilities and skills (i.e. execution of tasks, problem solving or analytical skills, and communication skills), two items on attitude (i.e. work interest and learning, and initiative), one item each on teamwork and overall performance. The students were asked to evaluate each item on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 being “Never” and 5 being “Always”. To further examine the work readiness of different academic ability groups, the sample of the study is categorised into the high academic ability group (80th percentile) and the low academic ability group (20th percentile) based on their GPA scores. Ethics approval was sought and obtained from the Institution Ethics Review Committee.

Results
Independent-sample t-test results indicated that the supervisors’ evaluations of interns on work readiness are significantly lower than interns’ self-perception ratings on execution of tasks ($t(926)=4.96$, $p<0.001$), problem solving or analytical skills ($t(924)=4.28$, $p<0.001$), communication skills ($t(965)=2.46$, $p<0.05$), and initiative ($t(933)=4.53$, $p<0.001$). Conversely, supervisors evaluated the interns significantly higher than the interns’ self-perception on work learning and interest ($t(965)=-3.17$, $p<0.05$). No significant difference was found for both supervisors’ evaluation and interns’ self-perception on teamwork ($t(952)=-0.22$, $p=0.83$). Using the independent-samples t-test again, the results showed that the low academic ability group had significantly lower supervisors’ evaluation ratings compared with the high academic ability groups on all 6 work readiness attributes and overall performance (-3.19≤$t(192)≤-2.08$, $p<0.05$). The relationships between the work readiness attributes and overall performance were analysed using path analysis. The test path model produced the following model fit indices: $\chi^2/df=2.09$, RMSEA=0.048, and CFI=1.00, which are indicative of a good model fit. The path analysis also revealed that interns’ attitudes had a relatively strong and significant relationship on overall performance of the interns (standardized $\beta=0.56$), as evaluated by their supervisors.
Conclusions
In conclusion, the findings of this study had provided insights on the gaps that existed between (a) students’ self-perception and supervisors’ evaluation of work readiness, and (b) supervisors’ evaluation of high academic ability and low academic ability groups of students on work readiness attributes. As the results of this study had established a baseline on work readiness of interns, it is imperative for the polytechnic to conduct a longitudinal study in the future on a yearly basis to examine the trend on the extent to which the gaps on work readiness have improved or declined. Strategies on strengthening the tripartite working relationships of students, schools and industry partners to enhance student intern’s work readiness will be discussed in the paper.

References


