PRIMING JOBS AS SKILL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND RESPONSES TO JOB POSTINGS

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Work-integrated learning (WIL) students often don't apply for jobs they feel are unrelated to their interests or academic program. Researchers did a study to test whether students can be "primed" to be more open to job postings that may seem unrelated to their interests or academic program. The study results show that students can be influenced to perceive job opportunities as more relevant through the learning opportunities they could provide (e.g. new skills). In addition, an increase in perceived job relevance was positively associated with an increase in job attractiveness.

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is about ways career education professionals may encourage students to stay open-minded about jobs that may seem unrelated to their interests or academic program. Students may be qualified for these jobs yet overlook them. The researchers argue that job seekers should be more exploratory in their job search, rather than have a narrow focus on jobs aligned with their interests.

Previous research has shown that learning new skills is a desirable trait for student work experiences (which help to make the job "relevant"). Opportunities for skill development may help transform low job relevance to high job relevance. Students may not immediately see the potential for learning new skills in a job that is, at face value, not aligned with their interests or future career goals. In addition, employers may not thoroughly outline opportunities for learning and development in their job postings.

The researchers wanted to know if students could be primed (the method of providing prior instructions to have someone think or feel about something differently) to apply to jobs that might seem, at first, irrelevant to their interests.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

The researchers conducted a study with 122 undergraduate students enrolled in arts, humanities, and social sciences at a Canadian university. The participants completed a demographic questionnaire. Then, participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups—a no prime condition group and a prime condition group:

The no prime condition group read a fictional writing sample from a "peer" that described choosing their academic major (no connection to job applications).

The primed condition group read a different fictional writing sample by a "peer" who applied to a job that seemed unrelated to their interests and academic program, yet they learned skills that were valuable in future co-op terms. The writing sample also described taking initiative to complete tasks and projects where aspects of their coursework could be applied.

After reading their assigned writing sample, the participants were asked to review six job postings and rate their perceived relevance and attractiveness.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

Using statistical analysis, the researchers found that the participants in the primed condition group rated the subsequent job applications higher in relevancy. This finding suggests that those participants were influenced to be more open-minded to potential jobs that at first seem undesirable. Researchers also found that an increase in job relevance resulted in an increase in job attractiveness for that group.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

Educators and WIL practitioners can use this research to develop strategies to encourage students to be more open-minded in their job search, which may result in more skill development opportunities. This research can also be used to encourage employers to outline learning and development opportunities clearly in their job postings, which may increase perceived relevance by students and overall job applications.

KEYWORDS

Social influence, written reflections, humanities, social sciences, experiment

CITATION

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The Work-Learn Institute at the University of Waterloo is the only institute in the world dedicated to research on co-operative education and other forms of work-integrated learning.

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