

The Exploratory of Student's Job Selection Factors and Job Candidate Attributes in Luang Prabang, Laos

Nittaya Jariangprasert* and Saranya Kantabutra**

This study is a qualitative research, which aims to explore job candidates' attributes that employers considered when recruiting the university graduates and university students' job selection factors in Luang Prabang, Lao People's Democratic Republic. The data was collected from twenty students, five lecturers, three graduates, and ten employers by interview during the last week of May, 2011. The interview data were analyzed using open coding method by two independent researchers. The results show that knowledge in their field of work is the most important attributes that the job candidate should have in order to get a job. In addition, this study indicates that students prefer secure job, which are hardly to find in Luang Prabang where most of the employers are SMEs (Small and Medium Enterprises) with unclear hiring system, leading to an insecure employment condition. The finding also shows that the new graduates lack of work experience, which worries employers who require urgent solution to be done under cooperative efforts between university, government and private sectors.

Field of study: Job attributes, Job selection factors, Luang Prabang, Laos

1. The Introduction:

Luang Prabang, the capital of Luang Prabang Province, locates in the center of the northern part of Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos), which is notable as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and has become the premier tourist attraction. The city is also an important place for economic development since it is the third largest city in Laos based on numbers of population (Statistics Year Book, 2009). According to the report of Bangkok Bank Ltd. on the 21st March 2008 ("Luang Prabang: World Heritage for Investment", 2011:Online), Luang has been promoted to be a tourist destination in the northern of Laos, with full facilities for tourism including hotels, restaurants, good attractions, etc. In addition, it has received the government support to become the center of religion, education and health care in the northern part of Laos. Therefore, in 2003, Supanuwong University was established by the Laos government, which aimed to develop high quality human resource to serve labor market in northern part of the country

From the above reasons, Luang Prabang has been expanded a lot in recent years. However, most businesses in Luang Prabang are still small and medium enterprises (SMEs) (Jariangprasert et. al., 2011) which, according to prior researches, do not have good or clear human resource management (Wilkinson, 1999; Brand & Bax, 2002). In addition, most of university graduates or students in Asian countries do not want to work for SMEs. This incident leads to the lack of quality employees in SMEs,

* Associate Professor Dr. Nittaya Jariangprasert, Faculty of Business Administration, Chiangmai University, Thailand, Email: nitjariang@gmail.com

** Dr. Saranya Kantabutra, Faculty of Business Administration, Chiangmai University, Thailand, Email: saranya_kantabuthra@gmail.com

which results in loss of business competitiveness (Teo & Poon, 1994, Moy & Lee, 2002) According to prior studies, most SME were unable to offer job factors that match the graduates' expectations such as training, pay, and fringe benefits (Keogh & Stewart, 2001; Reid & Adams, 2001; Martin & Chapman, 2006). The reason might be employers' lack of understanding about what the graduates need or the graduates' lack of knowledge about their future jobs. However, very few previous research had studied job selection factors from both students' and employers' perspective in the same study. This research, therefore, aims to focus on both the students and the employers in Luang Prabang context by answering two main questions: 1) what factors that students use to make decision when selecting their jobs and 2) what job attributes that the graduates should have in order to get the job. The finding of this research should benefit employers in Luang Prabang to recruit and retain the right qualified candidates and Supanouvong University to prepare their students before entering the labor market.

This paper is further divided into four sections. The first section describes a literature review related to job selection factors that students use when choosing their jobs and job attributes that employers would consider when recruiting the job candidates. Next, the methodology for this research is presented, specifically on interview samples and data analysis. The findings from the research are then presented in two parts: student/graduate's job selection factors and employer's job candidate attributes. Finally, the conclusions are provided including implication for SMEs, students/graduates, a university in Luang Prabang.

2. Literature Review

Literature regarding decision of university graduates on job selection as well as hiring decision of employers has been abundant in recent years. Results from many researchers indicated that several factors or attributes had significant effect on individual job selection (Behling et al, 1968 cited in Moy & Lee, 2002). Companies are also looking for the right person to match their requirement in order to improve quality of work life and high level of performance (McGinty & Reitsch, 1992). High caliber employees are increasingly recognized as the prime source of sustainable competitive advantage in organization, particularly SMEs. However, the ability to attract and retain these employees is a challenge of any organization (Hiltrop, 1999).

Numerous previous studies have examined the factors affecting job selection. However, these studies were conducted in various contexts such as eastern/western countries, business/non-business students, students'/employers' perceptions. McGinty & Reitsch (1992) examined job characteristics from students' perspective using business students at Eastern Washington University, USA. Job characteristics that students concerned when choosing their jobs were categorized into five groups, which were job interest, salary, advancement, social responsibility, and location. Teo & Poon (1994) studied perception of accounting and business students at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore towards working with SMEs and MNCs (Multinational companies) in ten job factors, which were pay, fringe benefits, working conditions, long-term career prospects, marketability, job security, managerial quality and relationship, responsibility given, authority given, and involvement in decision making. Their findings indicated that MNCs were the preferred choice of employment, followed by own businesses, SMEs, and government/statutory boards,

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respectively. Moreover, they found that SMEs were generally perceived by students as less favorable than MNCs in six factors, which were pay, fringe benefits, working conditions, long-term career prospects, marketability, and job security. In 2002, Moy & Lee (2002) adapted nine out of ten factors (excluded authority given factor) from Teo & Poon (1994) to study students' perceptions in Hong Kong. They found similar results as Teo & Poon (1994) but more findings about perceptions of SMEs' employer towards job attributes were added. The results showed that SMEs' employers thought that they involved business graduates in decision making to the same extent as MNCs did. However, they agreed that their fringe benefits were not as attractive as MNCs'. More job selection factors were identified in other researches (Hiltrop, 1999; Cho, Woods & Sciarini, 2006; Richardson, 2009) such as teamwork, specialization, family issues, financial status, health problem, job competitiveness, and company reputation. Nevertheless, these researches were studied differently. Hiltrop (1999) studied perspectives of HR managers and personnel officers of MNCs and domestic companies in New Zealand regarding the firms' management policies and practices that could attract employees. The study found that the most effective practices were opportunity for training and development, enhancing in teamwork and participation, and the extent to which the company provides autonomy and decentralization decision making. The results also supported that large firm were better at attracting and retaining talented workers than SMEs. Cho, Woods & Sciarini (2006) examined perceptions of students in hospitality major regarding prospective employers in several hospitality segments. The findings showed that direct work experiences, media experiences, word of mouth, and experiences as a customer could influence students' perception towards working. Richardson (2009) explored Australian undergraduate tourism and hospitality students' views of career choice in the industry. His results indicated that there were a number of factors, particularly pay, promotion opportunities, career prospects, job security, and working environment, on which the enterprise must focus to ensure students' positive perceptions of the industry.

Two prior studies had conducted in Luang Prabang. Sittikorn, Kunrachai & Somjan (2009) explored job opportunity in tourism sector in Luang Prabang, which indicated that people preferred to work in tourism sector due to good pay, their own interest in the job, and good fringe benefit respectively. The study also found that the most important factors for students to choose their jobs were job that had good reputation and high pay. Another research examined opinions of students at Supanouvong University, Lao People's Democratic Republic towards working with small and medium enterprises in 2011, which revealed that students preferred to work with large enterprises than SMEs. Moreover, the top five job factors that students considered when choosing their jobs were pay, job security, fringe benefits, long-term career prospects, and marketability (Jariangprasert et. al, 2011). This study also found that students at Supanouvong University had different perception towards a large enterprise and SMEs in most of the factors, such as fringe benefit, marketability, social responsibility, pay, long-term career prospects, and interest. Nonetheless, this study has not answered the question of why students prefer to work with large enterprises and what attributes of the graduates that employers in Luang Prabang look for. Hence, in this study, we propose the proposition 1 and 2 about student' job selection as follow;

Proposition 1: Students/graduates in Luang Prabang prefer to work with large enterprises more than SMEs.

Proposition 2: Students/graduates in Luang Prabang would consider the same job selection factors as students in other countries but would emphasize on different factors than students in other countries because of different economic and social conditions.

Job candidate attributes that most employers would consider when hiring newly graduates is another interesting issue in human resource management. Organizations are looking for the best candidate to fulfill their jobs but some may fail to find the right person because of the mismatch between organizations'/employers' requirements and prospected employees' expectations. Peppas & Yu (2005) examined job candidate attributes and Martin & Chapman (2006) studied factors that contributed to the employment of marketing graduates. In these studies, job candidate's attributes were classified into 4 categories; 1) work-related skills (e.g. work experience, work in team, leadership, professional commitment, knowledge of company, networking, IT skills, knowledge in their field of study), 2) education (e.g. grades in school, school reputation), 3) interpersonal & communication skills and personality traits (e.g. motivation, self-confidence, honesty, enthusiasms, initiative, adaptability, extroversion), and 4) experiences (e.g. work experience, internship, training). However, Cunningham & Rowley (2007) argued that there might be some cultural influences towards HRM practices among SMEs in different countries. Peppas & Yu (2005) found that Chinese employers and US employers did have different ranking of job selection criteria. US employers ranked enthusiasm as the most important factors while Chinese employers ranked motivation as the most important factors when choosing job candidates. Furthermore, prior researches also indicated that such differences not only existed in the context of countries but also in the context of SMEs and large enterprises (Reid & Adams, 2001; Keogh & Stewart, 2001; Cassell, Nadin, Gray & Clegg, 2002; Tanava, 2003). The evidence can be found in the study of Keogh & Stewart (2001) and Tanava (2003) that most SMEs in Europe did not practice formal human resource management (HRM) such as training and recruitment, which could result in less attraction to qualified graduates to join their enterprises. The study by Szamosi, Duxbury & Higgins (2004) also showed that SMEs in South-Eastern European were not giving their employees what they wanted from their jobs such as career development and participation in decision making. Thus, this study proposed the following proposition 3 and 4.

Proposition 3: Employers in Luang Prabang would consider different job candidate's attributes from employers in other countries.

Proposition 4: Employers in Luang Prabang would use different human resource management (HRM) practices from employers in other countries.

In conclusion, researchers in this field mostly conducted their research in one direction, either job selection factors that the graduates considered when choosing their job or attributes that employers seek from job candidates (Keogh & Stewart, 2001; Moy & Lee, 2002; Martin & Chapman, 2006; Cho, Woods & Sciarini, 2006; Richardson, 2009). Some prior researches compared perceptions between working with SMEs and large enterprises in many countries such as Singapore, Hong Kong, China, USA, and EU countries. However, only two researches conducted in underdeveloped countries like Lao People's Democratic Republic. One of them

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focused on the job selection factors that university students had in their mind when choosing their jobs (Jariangprasert et. al., 2011). Another research studied job opportunity in tourism sector in Luang Prabang (Sittikorn, Kunrachai & Somjan, 2009). In our research, the analysis will be focus in both directions; (1) students'/graduates' job selection factors and (2) employers' job candidate attributes. Additionally, job opportunity in Luang Prabang is explored to support the findings. Conclusion will then be drawn on the relationship between students'/graduates' job selection factors and employers' job candidate attributes under the employment situation in Luang Prabang.

3. Methodology

This study is the qualitative research using group and individual interviews as the method to collect data from the representative sample of the following groups.

- 1) Five lecturers of Supanouvong University from Faculty of Economics & Tourism, Faculty of Architecture, Faculty of Agriculture, and Faculty of Engineering
- 2) Twenty students of Supanouvong University from Faculty of Economics & Tourism, Faculty of Architecture, Faculty of Agriculture, and Faculty of Engineering
- 3) Three graduates of Supanouvong University from Faculty of Economics & Tourism, all of them works for the government and private organizations
- 4) Ten representatives of employers from government departments and private organizations in Luang Prabang

As a qualitative study, the sample was selected using convenience sampling. The sample was very hard to contact, particularly the employers' representatives and the graduates who might move to work elsewhere after graduation.

The interview questions were generated based on research questions and delivered to the interviewees two weeks before the scheduled interview date for preparation. The interviews were taken in Luang Prabang in the last week of May 2011 for three days. Each interview was about thirty minutes.

The interview data were analyzed using three concurrent flows of action: data reduction, data display, conclusion and verification (Berg, 2004) as follows;

- 1) Data reduction: data were summarized by the interviewers after the interview session was over. The coding scheme (the first coding scheme) was then generated based on the main concepts of this study and the context of the interview data, which was called open coding (Neuman, 1994; Berg, 2004). Next, the coding scheme was revised according to the content of the interview and the researcher's knowledge about the situation. A new coding scheme (the second coding scheme) was then generated (Neuman, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data were subsequently coded at this step by two researchers separately (Berg, 2004). A number of disagreements occurred but were resolved by discussion and changes in the definitions of some categories in the coding scheme.

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- 2) Data display: frequency analysis was performed. Data were, at this time, presented in a table and summary of word or quote from interviewed data.
- 3) Conclusion and verification: the relationship and pattern would be the conclusion of what the researchers have found from the study.

The results would show whether the four propositions identified in the literature review section are supported.

4. Results/Analysis

The findings can be concluded in two parts: 1) decision factors that students/graduates use in job selection and 2) job candidate attributes required by employers

Part 1: Job Selection Factors

Data from the interviews indicate that students and the graduates choose to work with the government and state enterprise because of better job security and more attractive welfares and benefits, such as medical welfare, house rental allowance, electricity allowance, and financial support for further education. For students and graduates, working for a good reputation organization such as the government sector reflects individual good image and increased employees' social status in Laos's society. The following statements from the interviewees support this issue.

“Job security is my deciding factor to work with the government. I feel secure financially with this stable position. I should be no more afraid of being unemployed”

“The reason I work with public enterprise bank because the bank offers continuing educational opportunity. I decide to pursue a master's degree”

“I choose to be a government officer because the job is secure, well paid, with satisfying benefits, after-retirement pensions, and, most of all, a good image”

For students who wish to pursue their careers in private firms, data reveal that their major reason is to get well-paid jobs to support themselves and their families to be able to cope with higher cost of livings in Luang Prabang. Students also believe that they would be able to use their knowledge and capacity in their jobs if they work in private company comparing to the government sector. The following statements from the interviewees support this issue.

“Working with private company gets higher salary. The more you work, the more you get paid”

“I choose to work in a business company where it allows and empowers me to achieve my full potential and personal development is actively encouraged”

About students' opinions towards working with SMEs and large organizations, the interviewed data indicate that most students prefer to work for large organizations. This finding supports the proposition 1, although most of the large enterprises in Luang Prabang are government or state enterprises which might pay less salary than private firms. Still, some students choose to work with SMEs to gain know-how

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entrepreneurial experiences, which would benefit them most for their future career plan or self-employed business venture. The following statements from the interviewees support this issue.

“Working with SMEs will be a student’s last choice. They start looking for a job in government or large enterprises first unless they don’t get hired then they will work with SMEs just only to gain some experiences and later this will benefit my next job application ...about 2% of student, will definitely choose to work with SMEs because this is the productive opportunity to put their knowledge to work”

“I start my first job in a small company to gain more experience then will apply a new job at large enterprise later”

“If possible, I would like to start my first career in the large company where, I think, work is structured into system better than in small company. Well, getting a job in SMEs I probably gain more practical experience”

“For the graduates with a major in economics, the top-three preferred workplaces are bank, the government, and big company such as construction or tour companies. Unless I will not be appointed to any position there, I then look for a job in SMEs”

Summary and frequency of major factors influencing students’ and graduates’ job selection decisions are ranked as shown in Table 1.

Table1: Frequency Of Interview Responses for Job Selection Factors of Students and The Graduates at Supanouvong University

Job Selection Factors	Frequency	Rank
Job that pays well	28	2
Job that offers other benefits e.g.welfare, bonus, pension	36	1
Job that provides satisfying working conditions	7	10
Job that offers opportunity for promotion and career advancement	9	8
Job that offers opportunity for further education and career training	14	4
Job that is challenging, interesting, or exhilarating	9	8
Job that can fully use knowledge and skill learnt in university	11	7
Job that is secure, worry-free from job loss	19	3
Job that can live with family	12	5
Job that can gain experience	12	5
Job that has good image and company reputation	7	10
Job that can help strengthen local and national development	6	13
Job that is an obligation from my scholarship granting organization	6	13
Job that my parents want me to apply for	6	13
Job that fosters good working system	7	10
Job with less competition	3	17
Job in an urban or big city	4	16

Data in table 1 indicate that students/graduates in Luang Prabang consider similar job factors as students in other countries. Furthermore, two additional factors are

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found, which are job that can help strengthen local and national development and job that is an obligation from my scholarship granting organization. Data also show that, for most interviewees, job that offers other benefits such as welfare, bonus or pension is the most important factors for students and graduates to select their jobs. This means that, comparing with students in other countries, students/graduates in Luang Prabang focus on some different job factors. Thus, the proposition 2 is partly supported by the results from this study. Additionally, according to the interviews, more than 50% of students/graduates who were interviewed want to work with the government agents or large enterprise. Most employers also said that many students/graduates would choose to work with large enterprise because of high pay and good fringe benefits. This result is the same with previous researches and supports our proposition 1.

Part 2: Job Candidate Attributes

From the interviews with employers from private and public sectors in Luang Prabang for desirable qualities or attributes that employers require from their employees, results are shown in table 2.

Table2: Frequency of interviewed responses for job candidate's attributes for employment

Job Candidate's Attributes for Employment	Frequency	Rank
Level of education, university degree or higher	6	5
Education result (GPA, profile)	4	8
Experiences	8	4
Work training, Internship	10	3
Foreign language ability	13	2
Knowledge in their field of work	16	1
Other knowledge e.g. computers, marketing, IT	5	6
Work engagement	3	9
Local personnel	2	11
Special requirement for particular jobs e.g. good looking	2	11
Interpersonal skills	5	6
Honesty & Patience	3	9
Analytical & Problem solving skill, Practical skill	2	11

From table 2, most interviewees respond that knowledge in their field of work is the most important job candidates' attributes for employment. This finding is similar to results from prior studies conducted in different countries or contexts. However, some attributes are differently identified in this study, such as education results, work engagement, local personnel and analytical, and problem solving and practical skills. The results then support the proposition 3 proposed in this study that employers in Luang Prabang would consider different job candidate's attribute from employers in other countries.

In addition, according to the interviews with employers and lecturers, most students still and obviously lack of some attributes such as work experiences, foreign language ability, and work engagement. However, due to the country development policy and the economic growth, the need for workforces in Laos is still increasing. At present, very few workforces graduate from higher education institutions since the

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country has only 4 universities. Therefore, the graduates are able to select the job that they want. However, in the next 3-4 years when there will be more graduates, it should be more difficult to find good jobs, particularly in tourism sector, which does not require its employees to get a university degree.

Since 2008, employment rate in Laos has increased 20% each year but mostly at the operational level. For the management level, a company might hire only 1-2 persons due to cost saving. Some organizations hire a foreigner to work in management level because of more trust in quality and competency of foreign management than those of local graduates, especially in special works or projects that require in-depth knowledge and recognized experience such as an electricity plant building. However, employment in tourism is always in high demand due to the increasing popularity of Luang Prabang as a travel destination. Most tourism businesses of this ancient town are small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) and family-owned businesses. These businesses commonly hire family members or relatives for key positions and leave insignificant jobs available for outside applicants with English proficiency but no university degree is required. For the hotel, hostel and restaurant businesses, most of the workers are part-time employees, which are students working part-time for extra money and, at the same time, gaining experience for their future work. After graduation, these students tend to return to their hometown to work with families or the scholarship grantors as the obligation. As a result, businesses with part-time employees constantly face high turnover rate, which certainly waste their time and resource to recruit, screen, and train new employees. On average, wage and salary in private sector are higher than those of public sector while fringe benefit varies among different workplaces.

For the government and state enterprises, hiring is based on job candidates' education and the pay is set as an official standard at minimum wage rate, which is equal between these two sectors. However, state enterprises may provide better fringe benefit than the government sector yet it is different among state enterprises. It is possible that, for some positions in the public enterprises, the graduate degrees are required, particularly from abroad.

The above findings then support the proposition 4, which is employers in Luang Prabang would use different human resource management (HRM) practices from employers in other countries. This might be because of social and economic conditions in Laos, particularly in Luang Prabang, which are not the same as other countries even in the Asian.

In conclusion, although job opportunity in Luang Prabang is still good, some major problems exist. Firstly, due to the rising cost of livings in Luang Prabang, it is difficult for employers to attract and retain workforces, especially from the neighboring towns. Lack of labor, therefore, directly impacts tourism business especially for some positions such as hotel receptionists, bellboys, waiters, etc. The problem of workforce shortage exists in other business sectors as well. Hiring local labor seems to be the only solution but a short-term remedy. Secondly, the education approach that focuses on theory memorization over critical thinking and pays little attention to practical training causes students unprepared for their career when entering job market. This is because of limited or insufficient teaching facilities, learning resources, laboratory tools, and even no real-world or real-situation practice at

school. To solve these problems, business has provided on-the-job training and/or other training programs for new employees to make up with the unskilled graduates.

5. Summary/Conclusions

The study found that university students and graduates have kept searching for secure jobs, which can be found mostly in public sector. The findings also showed the private sector, precisely, the SMEs, dominates Luang Prabang economy and contributes to the growth in job market. However, SMEs are not the job choice for the university students and the graduates. This finding is the same as other prior studies. Jobs in large enterprises can better attract quality workforce, especially jobs in industry factories, electronic power plant, and construction companies. Nonetheless, these companies hire very few Laotian due to lack of trust in the local workforces. Thus, SMEs and large enterprises seem to face the challenge of labor shortage. However, SMEs tend to have greater challenges in recruiting high caliber employees since their job attributes do not match with job selection factors that the job candidates consider important, particularly, fringe benefits and job security (Teo & Poon, 1994, Moy & Lee, 2002). However, in tourism sectors, small enterprises might offer a better opportunity than large enterprises (Cho, Woods & Sciarini, 2006; Richardson, 2009). Many job candidates seem to view that large enterprise has good reputation. However, they may not have qualifications that match the job candidates' attributes for which the organizations are expecting. In Luang Prabang, many graduates still lack of foreign language ability, which is an important attribute for employers. This evidence is also presented in previous research that students often do not know about their future job requirements and cannot pursue their career according to their field of study (Cho, Wood & Sciarini, 2006; Martin & Chapman, 2006; Richardson, 2009).

Lastly, recommendations are made for three groups of stakeholders to improve employment situation in Luang Prabang, which are the university, the students/graduates, and SMEs. For the university to produce high quality workforces, it must understand the businesses' need, align university curriculum with job markets, and take academic initiatives to best prepare its students for their career. For the students/graduates, they need to improve their capabilities to become high quality workforces in order to get high-paid jobs. For SMEs, they need to be more aware that human resources are the strategic asset of their businesses, and then they should invest more on human resource management and development.

Nevertheless, this study has two limitations. The first one is language barrier between interviewers and interviewees even though a translator was used during the interview. Secondly, the time limit of the interview (only three days) might affect the quality of the collected data for the analysis.

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