



Identifying and Categorizing Industry Recruitment Display Materials at a 4-year Construction Management Degree Program's Career Fair Events

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As the construction industry continues to grow, there is an increased demand for recruiting students from construction management programs. Many companies implement effective recruiting strategies and company branding at career fair events. However, there is no definitive research that objectively identifies the characteristics a company portrays at career fair events for construction management programs. This research identifies how companies define their character by: (1) the visual materials they select to display and (2) the use of space and surfaces they have available at a construction career fair. In order to accurately identify these characteristics, photographs were taken during two career fair events of each company participant's booth space. In the Spring 2019 and 2020 career fair events, 107 total photos of 80 companies and 159 photos of 97 companies were analyzed respectively. The analysis identified six categories of display materials with examples in each category. The six categories include: vertical surfaces, horizontal surfaces, industry related props, technology related props, information handouts, and giveaways. The analysis also identified how companies differentiate themselves by the written content and images they choose to display on the vertical surfaces and the use they make of horizontal surfaces.

Key Words: Career Fairs, Recruiting, Hiring, Human Resources, Construction Industry, Workforce

Introduction

The construction industry is continuing to grow resulting in a high demand for professionals to join their companies (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). All across the United States, Associated Schools of Construction (ASC) are experiencing the high demand companies are placing on their students. This high demand simply means that companies are heavily recruiting students out of the program to fill positions such as project engineer, project manager, and virtual design coordinator (Ghanem et al., 2016). Currently, the ASC website says, "there are 143 4-year Construction Management programs of member universities and nine 2-year member schools" (Associated Schools of Construction, 2020).

For many students the construction career fair provides the first point of contact with their future employer (Burt, 2001). Many ASC programs hold their own career fair events to which they invite industry representatives to come to campus and recruit students. These events are convenient for the students, and provide the opportunity for companies to have a large selection of candidates in one location. The desire of companies to attend career fair events is quickly growing due to: (1) the demand of personnel, and (2) the increased interest of students entering the profession (Koch et al., 2009). Without strict stipulations of what companies can use as display materials, there are specific practices companies employ to stand out among the other companies (Dutta, 2014). The understanding of company display choices at their booth for construction management program career fair events poses an interesting gap in the literature.

Observations at career fair events, primarily the McWhorter School of Building Science career fair at Auburn University, through photographic data collection have identified variations in the characteristics of the physical display materials among companies. However, there is a gap in defining and understanding these characteristics. This research seeks to identify and categorize the characteristics companies use in their display materials to attract potential hires at career fair events at 4-year construction management degree programs in the United States. By thematically categorizing and understanding these characteristics better, companies can then analyze and align their strategy of recruitment to make their display materials more appealing to students. This will ultimately provide a better recruiting experience for the student and the company.

The research study was planned to be conducted in two phases. The first phase, presented in this paper, focused on the attributes of display materials used during career fair events. The second phase will be student focused. Interviewing, surveying, and observing students about their career fair experiences. The second phase will provide insight as to what characteristics used in display materials influence students to interact with a company at a career fair. This research not only has the potential to change the way companies recruit students, but also has the potential to help students better understand what characteristics to look for in a company they will ultimately agree to work for. The second phase of this longitudinal study is not incorporated in this paper.

Literature Review

The construction industry is rapidly growing and the demand for employees is rapidly rising. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Construction Manager job growth is expected to increase by eight percent by 2029, this is much faster than the average for other occupations (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Hiring job-ready, entry-level construction managers is a crucial process for construction companies with the current workforce.

When a construction career fair at Texas A&M University was studied in a similar strong construction economy, Burt (2001) identified there were over three jobs available for every graduating student. In that recruiting environment, the researcher postulated that the characteristics and behavior of employer representatives at the career fair would become more important as they attempt to attract students to interviews. Companies must strategize the best methods to attract potential hires. Collins and Han (2004) link job seekers to consumers in that they are more likely to choose a product in which they have knowledge. This can better be described as “the added value of favorable employee response to employer knowledge is generally expressed as ‘employer brand equity’ or ‘recruitment equity’ in a pre-employment context” (Theurer et al., pg. 156, 2018). Therefore, job seeker interest is

linked to how well the company or organization brands themselves through providing information about the company or organization to the job seeker.

Dutta (2014) defines recruitment as “all the activities undertaken by an organization to enhance its employer brand which helps it to attract both active and passive applicants to the organization for current and future job opportunities and which influences them to apply, maintain interest during the selection process, and join at the appropriate time”. This definition accurately describes what the recruitment process entails for potential employees and the employer. Barber (1998) categorizes recruitment in three phases: outreach, interest, and selection. These three phases are critical in the recruitment process. However, the last two are not feasible without successful implementation of outreach practices. Phase one, or outreach, is a systematic attempt by the employer to attract employees to apply for a job opening (Barber, 1998). Although phase one is the most crucial in attracting job seekers, phase two and three still play a critical role. Phase two is the effort by the company to keep interest high in the job seeker until a decision is made and phase three is the process of offering a job and persuading a job seeker to accept through the use of benefits, salary etc. (Barber, 1998; Dutta, 2014; Van Hoyer and Saks, 2011). In a competitive environment of recruiting, the employer has to implement a successful outreach program that not only attracts potential hires, but also increases the knowledge and understanding of the employer’s practices (Dutta, 2014; Ganesan et al., 2018).

Recruiting efforts can take place in various ways. Collins and Han (2004) evaluated two of the most common ways employers attract job seekers: low-involvement and high-involvement recruiting. Low-involvement recruiting is using discrete means of attracting job seekers by providing information, such as a poster, picture, or brochure in an academic setting, which can lead to an increased awareness about their company to a job seeker. High involvement recruiting involves an interaction between the company and job seeker. This method of recruitment provides additional and detailed information about the company. Low-involvement recruiting is most effective in recruiting job seekers who may not have prior knowledge about the company or organization. High-involvement is most effective when the job seeker already has prior knowledge about the company or organization. Thus, the findings allude to the fact that not all recruitment practices are effective in every situation. The recruiting practice is unique to each individual and each organization.

At any career fair or employer seeking opportunity, companies and organizations have to brand themselves in such a way to be attractive to job seekers. Wilden et al. determined “employer branding in the context of recruitment is the package of psychological, economic, and functional benefits that potential employees associate with employment with a particular company” (2010). The most beneficial asset to any company or organization is its people (Stapley, 1996). Companies need to develop holistic strategies to ensure their recruiting efforts are effective and beneficial to themselves and the job seeker. However, this is a challenging task for companies due to the necessity of remaining consistent. As the employer brands itself to job seekers, there has to be assurance that the same brand is consistent across all other brands within the company (e.g. consumer, stakeholders, and the employer) (Wilden et al., 2010).

Methodology

The McWhorter School of Building Science holds career fairs during the spring, summer and fall semesters. The spring and fall career fairs consistently attract close to 100 companies nationally, with an obvious concentration of companies having a corporate office located in the southeast region. In

order to accurately identify and document the characteristics of display materials, photographs were taken of each career fair company participant's booth space. An appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB) review was executed and approval was acquired by the researchers to complete this study during career fair events. The Spring 2019 career fair event resulted in the researchers capturing 107 total photos of 80 different companies. The Spring 2020 career fair event resulted in 159 usable photos captured of 97 different companies total. The goal of the photographs was to capture one clear photo of the table setup and the entire booth of each company with the goal that all attributes of the display could be identified. Most photos captured the entire booth in one photo; however, at times multiple angles of a singular company were necessary to accurately recognize the entire booth and its attributes. A total of 266 photographs were analyzed to identify unique attributes that differentiated the characteristics of each participant's display materials.

The first step was to analyze each photograph to identify the materials that made up a career fair display. The aim with this step was identify all examples of materials. A typical construction company career fair display is shown in Figure 1. This particular company is displaying a number of display materials such as; banners, technological props (iPad), informational handouts, industry related props (hardhat) and giveaways (cups, koozies etc.). The next step involved identifying how major display surfaces were created and what information the company elected to display on those. The display shown in Figure 1 shows a company utilizing both vertical and horizontal surfaces.



Figure 1. A typical construction company career fair display

The vertical surfaces in Figure 1 have been created using multiple flat floor mounted banners. The horizontal surface in Figure 1 has been created using a branded table drape. The vertical banners are used to convey information and images about the company. The information and images included are an attempt by each company to portray their brand and differentiate themselves from other attending companies. For example, this company (Figure 1) has chosen to include only information about the sectors of the industry they work in and the open positions they hope to hire (intern and full-time).

They have also included images that show both completed projects and projects under construction. Lastly, this company included an image that shows employees outside of their work environment that alludes toward the “culture” of the company on their vertical banners. The horizontal surface is used mainly to display technical props, informational handouts, industry related props and giveaways. Good use has been made of this surface, where almost all the available space has been utilized. This company has also used the opportunity to reinforce its brand by covering the surface with a company table drape. The final step is to categorize the display materials and their various attributes.

Results

Display Materials

All 266 images were analyzed in order to identify and categorize the various display materials that construction companies brought to the career fair. The photos represented a total of 177 booths (80 companies in Spring 2019 and 97 companies in Spring 2020). The researchers looked for commonality between company displays and only included categories that had a significant number of examples. The researchers identified six categories of display materials: vertical surfaces (banners); horizontal surfaces (tables), industry related props, technology props, informational handouts & giveaways. Table 1 sets out the six categories identified and provides examples of how companies differentiate themselves in these categories.

Table 1

Display material categories with examples

Category	Examples	
Vertical Surface	Flat Banner	Table Mounted
	3D Banner	Easel Mounted
	Floor Mounted	View Partially Obscured
Horizontal Surface	Provided by host	Provided by construction company
Industry Related Props	Personal Protective Equipment	Tools
	3D Models (prototypes & toys)	Toolboxes
Technology Related Props	Virtual/Augmented Reality	iPad
	Goggles	TV (Monitor)
	Laptop	UAV's
Information Handouts	Pamphlets	Folders
	Brochures	Advertising
	Flyers	USB drives
Giveaways	Sunglasses	Lanyards
	T-Shirts	First Aid Kits
	Koozies	Mouse Pads
	Bags	Footballs
	Cups	Hats
	Mobile Phone Accessories	Pens
	Carpenter Pencil	Water Bottles
	Candy	Bottle Opener
	Chip Clips	Tape Measures
	Notepads/Notebooks	Post-it-notes

Industry and technological props were noted in the data as a stimulating resource, or an attractive addition, to a company booth. The use of monitors in particular for video clips of an ongoing project or a slideshow highlighting company information added distinct visual interest. Nineteen percent of the companies included a monitor to display virtual information, while 4% of the companies had a tablet (or iPad) available for students to interact with in various ways. Over 75% of the companies did not include any technology related props at their booth. The most prevalent industry related prop documented was personal protective equipment (PPE) items at 25%.

Vertical & Horizontal Surfaces

As can be seen in Table 1, companies participating in a career fair event can distinguish themselves by the way they create vertical and horizontal surfaces. They can further differentiate themselves by the content they choose to display on the vertical surfaces and the use they make of the horizontal surfaces. Analysis of the display materials identified that content displayed on vertical surfaces was mainly in the form of images, written information about the company, and/or career information. The differentiation identified on horizontal surface was mainly due to how companies chose to cover the surface and made use of that surface to display materials. Table 2 identifies how companies differentiate themselves by the written content and images they choose to display on the vertical surfaces and the use they make of horizontal surfaces.

Table 2

Written content and images displayed on vertical surfaces and the use of horizontal surfaces

Category	Examples	
Written Content Displayed on Vertical Surface	Market Sectors	Career Paths
	Services Provided	Majors Hiring
	Office Locations	Positions Hiring
	Company Ranking (ENR)	Social Media
	Company Statement	Website
	Career Statement	Benefits
Images Displayed on Vertical Surface	QR Code	Culture
	Projects Completed	Company Culture
	Projects Under Construction	Technology (BIM models)
Use of Horizontal Surfaces	Employees Working	Location Maps
	Primarily Used for Giveaways	Uncovered
	Horizontal Surface Fully Utilized	Covered Unbranded
	Covered Branded	50% Utilized
		Under 50% Utilized
		Empty

The display shown in Figure 2 illustrates a national construction company's use of its vertical and horizontal surfaces. The company has utilized a predominately flat, table mounted vertical display. The images included in the display are extremely diverse, including a photo of a completed project, a project under construction that includes employees, a virtual construction image (BIM) and an image of employees. They have also included the company's logo and website URL. Additional information is provided in the notification of nationwide offices, although specific locations are not given. There are also several services the company performs listed.



Figure 2. A company career fair display showing the use of vertical & horizontal surfaces

Horizontal surface usage broadly appeared to be important for companies and was one of the visually revealing factors of their strategy to engage at the event. Out of the 177 booths total analyzed, over 40% of the companies used the table surface to hold giveaways only. The company shown in Figure 2 has also made use of its horizontal surface. First of all, they have chosen to cover the table in a branded tablecloth. They have then utilized slightly less than 50% of the surface to display predominately giveaways and a technical prop in the form of a hard hat. Compare this with the use of the horizontal surface in Figure 1, where a much more efficient use of the space has been made. This lack of space utilization has also resulted in non-display materials starting to accumulate in the form of a student's resume, an iPhone and a bottle of water. The consumables displayed predominantly have an industry application, such as note books and pads, scale rules and conversion wheels. There are also some non-industry related items such as hard hat stress balls, koozies, key fobs and hand sanitizer.

Images were the most prevalent finding on vertical surface(s) by each company. Photographs of completed projects represented 59% (145 out of 177 booths) of the imagery chosen to be included, while photographs capturing technology usage (BIM, drones, augmented reality, presences of computers, etc.) only represented 5% (5 out of 177 booths) of the imagery displayed on banners. Photographs illustrating company culture also was low (11%). This study shows over 87% of companies graphically focus their vertical surfaces on the "what" they build (completed projects)

verses highlighting technology innovation and company culture. One interesting result of the analysis found 40% (69 of 177 booths) vertical display banners were partially or significantly blocked by the horizontal surface usage. This may diminish the opportunity of the vertical surface content to influence students approaching a company's booth.

Discussion and Conclusions

This research study set out to identify variations in the characteristics of display materials among construction companies at a construction career fair with the objective of categorizing these characteristics. A proposed follow up study will observe and survey students regarding their experiences with these display materials with the objective of seeking to better align their display materials to students' expectations. This will ultimately provide a better recruiting experience for the student and recruiters.

The results suggest companies have significant latitude in display materials they bring to a construction career fair. Companies can choose from a range of equipment for creating and positioning vertical display surfaces. They can also characterize their company brand by the choice they make of the imagery and text they choose to include on these displays. The results of this first phase of the longitudinal study show over 87% of companies graphically focus their vertical surfaces on what they build (completed projects). Highlighting technology, innovation and company culture are areas companies may want to consider including more of in the imagery they select for their vertical displays.

Each company at the career fair was provided with the same size horizontal surface (table). Companies can further distinguish their company by bringing "props" that are industry related for the horizontal surface such as: promoting a safety culture with branded safety equipment, or promoting the use of technology within the industry with Virtual/Augmented Reality (VR/AR) goggles. Safety and technology are topics on the rise in the construction industry. The authors were surprised to find less than a quarter of the companies analyzed included technology related props at their booth. Ghanem et al. (2016) stated virtual design and construction (VDC) roles are commanding more hiring attention in the industry. The findings from this study indicate companies are not maximizing the opportunity to communicate their innovative technologies and safety culture in the career fair setting with 25% or less of companies including those categories of props in their displays at career fair events.

Finally, companies have a significant choice in the items they choose to bring that are intended for consumption by the students attending the career fair. Branding and the person remembering the brand as the literature suggests is a critical factor in a student's next step in the recruiting process (Theurer et al., 2018). The research identified two categories of consumables companies were offering at career fair events. Products that provide additional information about the company in either a paper format such as a brochure or in a digital format on a USB drive and giveaways. Giveaways are viewed mainly as a gift for attendees visiting a company's space. There were many different examples of giveaways, many of which have a practical application to the industry such as tape measures, while others are simple "fun" items such as company branded koozies.

Barber (1998) found the career fair event as part of the first phase, outreach, in the recruitment process. The various ways companies represent themselves in the outreach phase is critical. Company culture (Burt, 2003) is a particular topic companies are not currently featuring in the visual display

materials on the vertical surfaces in career fair events. This is a possible area companies may want to explore adding to their displays in the future.

Even though the results come from observations recorded at two career fairs at one institution, the companies attending these fairs were regional and, in some cases, national companies. It is highly likely therefore, that companies will use similar displays and layouts at career fairs at other institutions.

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