

The Impact of Industry Certifications on Hiring Practices in the Four-State Area

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## Abstract

The objective of this study is to determine the impact of industry certifications on hiring practices in the local four-state area, with a particular focus on Joplin, Missouri. An industry certification is a type of credential, common in many different industries, that proves an individual meets a set of guidelines, requirements, or standards in a given area or field. This study will be done by examining local statistics and moving beyond merely explaining the possible reasons that certificate-holders may be preferred for hiring. Research for this study will include conducting primary research by a survey of the hiring preferences of local human resource professionals in regards to industry certifications. The data will then be analyzed to examine and identify trends in local hiring practices based on industry certifications and the preferences and perceptions that hiring professionals hold about applicants who hold such a certification. These results will be used to draw conclusions about the hiring market in the local area.

### The Impact of Industry Certifications on Hiring Practices in the Four-State Area

Finding out what influences local hiring practices was the goal of my study, with industry certifications as my main focus. Industry certifications, also known as professional certifications, exist in a variety of fields and are applicable to almost any hiring situation. I chose survey local hiring professionals to determine what effect, if any, industry certifications held by potential job applicants had upon the preferences of the hiring professionals.

The Joplin, Missouri area is rebounding from the May 2011 Tornado, that destroyed over 550 businesses, according to B. Oskin (2013). This recovery has been a steady effort and just driving around the city offers proof of this. Additionally, the job market in Joplin is doing very well, due in part to the tornado. According to the Workforce Investment Board of Southwest Missouri, employment in July of 2012 was 84,000 individuals, the highest it had been since before the economic downturn in 2007 when employment had been 82,000 people. After the tornado, the unemployment rate went down by nearly five percent. While many jobs were in construction or another field related to recovery from the tornado, there were new jobs in many different sectors, including retail, transportation, and manufacturing (O'Brien, 2012). Because of this recovery, Joplin is an ideal focus for a study on hiring practices, and I extended my focus to encompass the four-state area, which includes Southwest Missouri, Northeast Oklahoma, Southeast Kansas, and Northwest Arkansas, with Joplin as a primary focus.

Overall, the goal of this research was to examine a previously-unstudied topic as it relates to the local business environment, with the hopes of revealing the hiring practices of local businesses and how that relates to the holding of professional and industry certifications. An additional goal was to demonstrate how job applicants can best appear on-par with local

competition and make themselves more desirable for positions locally, the end result being improve the quality of local businesses.

#### Literature review

Professional and industry certifications, common in various industries, exist to prove that an individual meets certain guidelines. J. Hale, who researched how to create certification programs and explained their importance, defined several key terms in this area: a credential is “a designation, mark, or stamp given to a person, organization, or program that has satisfied a set of standards”; a certification, what this study will focus on, is a subtype of credential that is “awarded by an employer, a vendor, or an association or independent agency... [and] a designation given to people, products, and processes that have satisfied a set of standards” (2011). Certifications exist in a wide variety of fields, and a worker can choose to pursue certification for a number of reasons. According to Mulkey and Naughton, certifications serve to protect the public from workers who are not competent, and also to promote the professional abilities of the members of an association (2005).

There has been a shift in the demand of different types of workers and this has caused certain skills or certifications to become more useful than they were in the past. For instance, Carter (2005), a professor of management, examined how the United States experienced a transition from a focus on manufacturing towards service-based industries during the 1990s and, subsequently, how this led companies to have an increased demand for highly-skilled employees. Due to this increased demand, various private organizations created a wide range of certifications, which were generally skill-based and attainable in one year or less. These certifications allowed workers to compete with other workers and to make themselves more desirable in the workplace.

Carter also established that the creation of certifications within a given industry was parallel to the demand for employees within that industry (Carter, 2005).

Globally, in September of 2014, there were 625,346 individuals who held the Project Management Professional (PMP) certification from the Project Management Institute (PMI), according to their newsletter, and there are approximately 35,000 individuals who hold other certifications from that institute (2014). Nearly 450,000 individuals have a membership with PMI. The Human Resource Certification Institute has more than 135,000 members in over 100 countries. These institutes hold important positions within the business community and many consider their certifications as a mark of quality. According to "The Value of HR Certification around the World," the single-most valuable credential for those who are looking for a job is an undergraduate degree, as getting a job without such a degree is difficult; however, a professional certification is viewed as the most-valuable credential for those looking to advance their career (HR Certification Institute, 2010).

Several authors have written on the importance and benefits of professional certifications within the Information Technology (IT) field. Some of this information relates to the state of professional certifications throughout various industries. For instance, Phillips, a senior management consultant, explained the benefits of professional certifications within the field of records management and why IT professionals should consider such a certification. One reason is that "certification has tangible benefits insofar as it objectively establishes a base level of knowledge about the profession," and it is to the advantage of the employee to establish his or her professional competency with certification (2004). Supervisors in the field oftentimes believe that certified workers are more competent and have proof of their abilities. Hunsinger and Smith (2009) examined the role of IT certifications in decisions made by hiring personnel and also how

these certifications can affect perceptions about the applicant and the potential future salary of the applicant. They claim that certification can be viewed as an adequate substitute for experience or education and that hiring personnel will frequently use certification requirements to eliminate unqualified applicants from consideration and also to help make hiring decisions between applicants that otherwise have virtually identical qualifications. Additionally, they assert that certain certifications are considered to be comparable to a bachelor's degree in terms of importance to some hiring personnel when selecting an employee among various applicants. Bishop and Frincke (2004) also discuss how professional certificates compare to an academic degree, stating that certificates are valuable because they demonstrate a practical application of specialized knowledge.

Professional certifications not necessarily within the area of IT are also of use to professionals in the field, as Levinson (2010) demonstrated by examining the importance of project manager certification, including the PMP certification, within the IT industry. Levinson found that those who held a certification for project management were more desirable and more in demand than those who did not have a certification in this area. Levinson also discussed the potential impact of a project management certificate-holder on IT projects, which generally have a high failure rate. This work also explored reasons why businesses prefer an employee with a certification, including the idea that clients often prefer or feel more comfortable if the team they have includes those who hold project management certifications.

Most recently, Roussey (2013) examined the reasons that managers prefer workers who have IT certifications. These reasons include that workers with certifications create a better work culture, and they have evidence to back up their experience in a given area. Additionally, managers feel these certifications demonstrate that they are interested in self-improvement and

proving they are keeping up with innovations in the field. Roussey also writes that a 2010 Microsoft Certified Professional (MCP) found that 91% of managers regarded IT certifications as a valid measure of a candidate's worth.

Outside of the IT sector, these professional certifications also serve an important purpose. Twigg (2002) explored these reasons and explained that, perhaps, the reason more employers consider external certifications a method to ensure quality is due to a lack of confidence in how well institutions of higher education are performing, and that, in general, "degree acquisition, graduation, and grades are no longer viewed as adequate indicators of competency" (Twigg, 2002, p. 81). The use of certifications and assessment of learning outcomes is already common practice in many fields, such as law, health care, engineering, and accounting. This is being expanded to different fields, which gives employers different ways to measure the quality and effectiveness of employees. Twigg found that there was a trend towards measuring quality by the assessment of learning outcomes.

Other authors have examined how companies, both nationally and internationally, value certifications. The HR Certification Institute (2010) studied the value of professional certifications and how they compared to certificate programs. They also studied the perceived importance of these professional certifications and how this importance would continue in the future. This study considered the return on investment of these certifications, showing that their value ranged from double the initial investment to as high as five times the initial investment, and also considered the value of these certifications in terms of career advancement and other intangible benefits, including personal benefits and benefits to the company.

Additionally, several authors have recently examined the importance of these certifications and the value they have for job applicants and managers. Forster (2013) discussed

the importance of the PMP certificate, in particular, for project managers who want to advance their career. One of the main advantages discussed is that, in the current business environment, mid-sized and large corporations are more interested in hiring PMP certified workers than they have been in the past, and some employers will not even consider an applicant if he or she does not hold the PMP certificate.

More recently, Baker (2014) discussed the reasons that businesses in the current business environment prefer that their employees have certifications. One reason is that, while college degrees merely demonstrate a worker's academic experience, a certification gives evidence that a worker has particular skills or knowledge within a given field. Some of the benefits that certification provides is demonstrating that the employees are more motivated because they are interested in investing in themselves; certifications also show that employees are motivated to make better decisions because of the increased credibility and recognition given by the certification, and that the certifications provide benchmarks in their industry. Additionally, according to a 2010 MCP study, over 80% of managers interviewed for the study thought that certified IT professionals enhance a team when they are on one and that they are more efficient workers. These certifications are not just useful for current workers, as Mulligan (2014) found when examining the value of professional certification for job applicants. These certificates give applicants various advantages in the hiring process, such as allowing applicants to demonstrate their abilities in a skill set and also to show that the applicant is motivated in learning more about and continuously improving in his or her field. Companies also prefer applicants with certificates because these certificates provide definite and objective evidence that the applicant has experience and knowledge in the field.

## Significance

As there seems to be a limited amount of information regarding hard figures in relation to the effect of certifications upon hiring practices and preferences in the existing literature, I believe that this research is valuable because it gives a glimpse into the local business environment within our community, which has recently rebounded from a large natural disaster. Continuing this recovery and making the community better than before are important topics in continuing to develop our area. Additionally, this research serves to demonstrate the impact and usefulness of individuals within our community who hold professional or industry certifications and the businesses that hire these individuals.

This research assists in contributing to the understanding of professional certifications and their impact upon hiring preferences, through a survey of Human Resource employees and other professionals who are involved with hiring potential workers within the community. This increased understanding may lead to changes in the hiring preferences of businesses in the local area or may provide students and schools with the knowledge to best prepare graduates for employment in their chosen field. In addition, the findings may also benefit companies in selecting employees and assist job applicants in making themselves desirable to employers in the local job market, a vital skill in today's economy.

This research may lead to discovering better hiring methods that local businesses could use, or it could identify the best and most important certifications so that applicants can increase their likelihoods of being hired in an efficient manner. This study may pave the way for an expanded study to explore the impact of these certifications in a different area in order to examine how changes in the local business environment would alter the impact of industry certifications on the hiring practices.

## Method

The purpose of this study is to discover the hiring preferences of local human resource professionals in regards to applicants who hold an industry certification, and to examine how varying demographic factors affect the preferences exhibited. This was accomplished through distribution of an online survey, which was then analyzed to discover local trends.

The research hypothesis is that human resource professionals who hold an industry certification will rank the industry certification as being more important than those who do not hold such a certification. Additionally, I suspect that professionals who do not hold an industry certification will rank prior work experience as being more important than either education or an industry certification.

The population for this study was hiring professionals working at local businesses in the four-state area. I used a convenience sample comprised of several groups. This sample was primarily drawn from local area business contacts provided by the Small Business and Technology Development Center (SBTDC), which has a large range of business contacts. The sample additionally consisted of Missouri Southern State University Human Resource employees and professors in the Plaster School of Business, as well as members of the Tri-State Human Resource Association, which is the local Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) affiliate group, comprising members from Oklahoma, Kansas, and Missouri.

The number of individuals who responded to the survey ( $n=167$ ) determined the exact size of the sample, although I initially anticipated between 50 and 100 participants, based on the number of contacts at my disposal. Initial contact with participants for this study included an email request that included a link to access the online survey. This email request was sent by the SBTDC directly to their contacts and by the Tri-State Human Resource Association to their

members. A similar request to take the survey was emailed to Plaster School of Business professors by the Department Head of Management and Marketing, and distributed by the Human Resources & Workforce Development Manager, Judy Wilmoth, within the Human Resource office at Missouri Southern State University.

I developed a survey instrument to collect the responses of human resource and hiring professionals to a series of questions designed to determine hiring preferences in the local area. The instrument contains twenty-three items concerning hiring practices and preferences, and eleven items designed to collect demographic information (total items=34).

The demographic information section contained mainly multiple-choice questions, as well as a few fill-in-the-blank options for quantitative answers such as time spent at current job, number of employees at current company, and which, if any, certifications the hiring professional holds. These demographic questions allowed analysis of the data from various facets. The primary focus of this was to determine if professionals who have an industry certification have a bias against applicants who do not hold an industry certification. In addition, based on these questions, we were able to examine if other factors, such as the hiring professional's length of work experience, level of education, gender, or age, have an effect upon the preferences he exhibits.

The Likert statements consisted of two groups of statements. The first group, comprising the items concerning hiring practices, used response options of one (*Strongly Disagree*) to six (*Strongly Agree*). The second group, which examined the various factors, used response options from one (*Very frequently*) to six (*Never*). This is a six-point Likert scale (McMillan, 2000). These statements were designed to examine several possible factors that would influence hiring, focusing specifically on education, prior work experience, and industry certifications. The first

five statements, regarding hiring decisions, were designed to gauge how involved the respondent was with hiring decisions at his company and about difficulty of finding and choosing applicants for a job.

The remaining eighteen statements were designed to examine preferences within the hiring process. Six statements are in regards to certifications and hiring; five statements relate to education; three statements focus on the importance of prior work experience, including references; and two statements regarding interview performance. One statement asks the respondent how reputable he considers organizations such as SHRM, and the final statement is in regards to whether the company prefers to hire local applicants.

In order to gain approval through the Institutional Review Board, I created an informed consent statement and a debriefing document through the assistance of my mentor and some model examples. For instance, the University of Massachusetts Amherst suggests that the consent form should explain how the researcher is taking steps to ensure that the data will remain confidential (2013). Additionally, the debriefing should include contact information of the researchers, and a reminder to the participant to print the page for his records (2013). I incorporated these guidelines into my consent form, which required the participant to verify that his age was at least 18, and that he consented to participate in the study, which had to be completed before the participant could proceed any further with the survey. The debriefing page thanked the respondents for their participation, explained the purpose of the study, gave my contact information should the participant have any questions, and reminded the participant to keep the page for his records. After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board, I was able to take my survey to the SBTDC to proceed with distribution.

The data collection method implemented for this study was a self-administered, online survey. I utilized the SBTDC's database and Constant Contacts software for administering and collecting survey responses. In addition, their system guaranteed total confidentiality of the data, as well as allowing their database to remain anonymous. The SBTDC sent an email message to their Human Resource contacts on my behalf, describing the purpose of the study and a link to the online survey. This email included contact information should the participant need any clarification concerning the survey. Participation in the survey was fully voluntary and the participants were given a time span of two weeks to complete the survey.

The SBTDC sent out a similar email later in the study to a larger database of their relevant business contacts, including small business owners, and they were given a time span of twelve days to complete the survey. Melanie Rollins of the Tri-State Human Resource Association emailed a survey request to its members, which allowed them to keep their members list confidential. Their members also had a time span of twelve days to complete the survey.

The data from the survey was then analyzed in order to draw conclusions regarding the impact of industry certification upon hiring practices; how that impact compared to the impact of other factors, such as education and prior work experience; and whether respondents with an industry certification preferred applicants who hold an industry certification. I used the conclusions from this data analysis to make recommendations as to how local businesses may want to consider changing their hiring policies, or how applicants can appeal to companies looking to hire.

## Results

The total number of responses to the initial survey distribution was 16. These results came from a request the SBTDC emailed to their Human Resource contacts list, containing 106 individuals. While the response rate of 15% was very good, the sample was much smaller than I hoped. Therefore, I extended the survey closing date and sent survey requests to a few other groups of contacts, including Missouri Southern State University human resource employees, Plaster School of Business professors, and to the SBTDC's larger database with over 3,000 contacts.

After these responses were collected, I had received a total of 167 responses. The number of fully-completed surveys totaled 144. While I cannot estimate the response rate, because I had to use several different sources to reach new contacts, this number of responses was more than satisfactory for the purposes of my research. The overall breakdown of these collected surveys was as follows.

The demographics questions revealed that the time the respondents had spent in his current position ranged from 3 months to 39 years. The most common response was that the respondent had worked in his current position for around nine years. 58.3% of respondents were female, 39.5% were male, and 6.5% declined to answer.

Most of the respondents, 30.5%, were between 50 and 59 years of age, with 40 to 49 years being the next most-common response at 23.3%. While the majority of respondents were in those age ranges, there was still a broad representation of age groups, with 10.1% between the ages of 20 and 29, 14.3% between the ages of 30 and 39, 14.9% being over age 60, and just 6.5% of respondents electing to skip that question.

The majority of respondents, 44.9%, held a bachelor's degree, with the next most common response being a graduate degree at 25.1%. The majority of respondents, 72.4%, had worked in their field for more than nine years. The next-highest group, zero to three years within the job field, consisted of 10.1% of the respondents.

The respondents held various job titles. "Other" was the most-selected option at 19.7%, and respondents listed a variety of job titles in that section, from "administrative assistant" to "regional director." Among the given choices on the survey, "manager" was the most common single response at 19.1%, followed by 13.1% who identified as an "individual contributor." The size of the companies that the respondent worked for ranged from four, with several responses in the single digits, up to as large as 60,000 employees. The majority of the companies had around 300 to 400 employees, however. In regard to the principal industry of the respondent's company, 19.1% worked in manufacturing, the highest response. This was followed by education, at 17.9% and nonprofit at 8.3%.

Among the respondents, 71.2% were familiar with industry certifications, 16.1% said that they were not familiar with industry certifications, and 12.5% gave no response. Over half of respondents, 55.6%, were familiar with organizations such as SHRM, while 31.7% answered in the negative and 12.5% gave no response. 41.9% of respondents selected that they held an industry certification. The single most-common certification listed was the Professional in Human Resources certification, although several respondents listed Six Sigma certifications or stated that they were a certified public accountant.

The first set of Likert statements, those regarding hiring, received 144 responses per statement. On this question, a response of 1 corresponded to "Very frequently" and a response of 6 corresponded to "Never," with the responses between being 2 for "Frequently," 3 for

“Occasionally,” 4 for “Rarely,” and 5 for “Very rarely.” Respondents agreed overall that they occasionally were involved with hiring decisions in their workplaces, with an average Likert number of 2.6, and that it is occasionally obvious who the best applicant is for a given position, with an average response of 2.5. Respondents said that it was occasionally possible to find qualified local applicants, with an average response of 3.1, and that it was occasionally difficult to choose between candidates for a position, with an average response of 2.7. They responded that, frequently, the best applicant will be hired for a given position, with an average response of 1.8.

The number of responses on the second set of Likert statements was 144. A score of 1 corresponded to “Agree strongly,” 2 corresponded to “Agree moderately,” 3 corresponded to “Agree slightly,” 4 corresponded to “Disagree slightly,” 5 corresponded to “Disagree moderately,” and 6 corresponded to “Disagree Strongly.” Respondents agreed moderately, with a score of 2.0, that their company preferred to hire local applicants. According to the responses, the strongest factor that influences hiring is prior experience with a score of 1.6. Respondents also agreed with the statement “prior work experience is an indicator of work performance,” with a score of 1.9. Education also ranked highly with a score of 2.1 for the statement “my company places a high value on education when hiring,” and a score of 1.4 to the statement “I believe that higher education is worthwhile.”

The statements, “Given two otherwise-equal applicants, the applicant with an industry certification is preferable” and “Organizations such as the Society for Human Resource Management are reputable” both received a score of 2.2. Respondents agreed moderately with the statement “I believe an industry certification is worthwhile” with a score of 2.1. The statements, “Having a higher education degree shows that an applicant is serious about his

career” and “Having an industry certification shows that an applicant is serious about his career” were both moderately agreed upon, with a score of 2.4. Interestingly, although respondents said their company placed a high value on interview performance with a score of 1.8, respondents said they only somewhat agreed with the statement “Interviewing well is a predictor of work performance” with a score of 2.9.

### Discussion

After removing 22 partially-completed surveys that did not provide answers to a sufficient number of Likert statements to be relevant to the study, I was left with a total of 145 surveys that were mostly or totally complete. I used Excel to analyze these 145 surveys from a variety of aspects. First, I analyzed these statements against how involved the respondents said they were with hiring decisions within their company, which was the first Likert statement. Those who ranked their involvement with hiring decisions as “Very Frequently” totaled 48. This group of respondents was my main focus in the majority of the discussion of the survey results.

Of the 22 Likert statements, six specifically inquired about industry certifications. Of the respondents who are very frequently involved in hiring decision, 19 individuals, a total of 39.6%, responded that they “agree moderately” with statement #9: “My company places a high value on certifications when hiring.” Furthermore, one-fourth of those who are very frequently involved with hiring decisions agreed slightly, and 16.7% agreed strongly with that statement. Statement #15: “Certifications are a predictor of work performance” was moderately agreed with by 31.25% of those that are very involved with hiring decisions, strongly agreed with by 6.25%, and somewhat agreed with by 27% of that same group.

Among those very frequently involved in hiring decisions, Likert #17 statement: “Having certifications shows that an applicant is serious about his career” was strongly agreed with by

27%, moderately agreed with by exactly one-third of the group, and somewhat agreed with by 31.25%. Only 6.25% of those very frequently involved with hiring decisions disagreed at all with this statement. Statement #19: "In our industry, certifications are important" was generally agreed with by this group, with 18.75% strongly agreeing, 39.5% moderately agreeing, and 27% somewhat agreeing. Statement #21: "I believe that an industry certification is worthwhile" was strongly agreed with by one-third of this group, moderately agreed with by 43.75%, and slightly agreed with by 16.7% of those very involved in hiring decisions. Statement #22: "Given two otherwise-equal applicants, the applicant with an industry certification is preferable" was strongly agreed with by 41.7% of those very frequently involved in hiring decisions, moderately agreed with by 25%, and somewhat agreed with by 18.75%.

To compare with these results, five of the Likert statements related to education. One third of those very frequently involved in hiring decisions, 16 respondents, agreed strongly with statement #8: "My company places a high value on education when hiring." Furthermore, 39.6% moderately agreed with this statement and 20.8% agreed slightly. Those that agree strongly with this statement are more than double those who agreed strongly with statement #9, which is the corresponding statement about certifications. The same number agreed moderately with both statements, and a higher proportion agree slightly that education is more important. Overall, respondents who are very involved in hiring decisions agree that their organizations value higher education more than certifications when hiring.

The next statement regarding education is #13: "A high GPA is a predictor of work performance." Only one respondent, or 2%, agreed strongly. "Agreed slightly" and "agree moderately" were selected by 18 respondents each, giving each a result of 37.5%. In comparison, three respondents said they agreed strongly that certifications are a predictor of work experience.

However, a higher percentage of respondents indicated that they agreed moderately or slightly that GPA is a predictor of work performance. Overall, those very frequently involved in hiring decisions ranked GPA more strongly as being a predictor of work performance than certifications.

Statement #16: "Having a higher education degree shows that an applicant is serious about his career" was agreed with overall. Among those very involved in hiring decisions, a total of nine, or 18.75%, agreed strongly, twenty two agreed moderately, and thirteen indicated that they agreed slightly. Additionally, only 6.25% of those very frequently involved with hiring decisions disagreed at all with this statement. To contrast, more respondents agreed strongly with statement #17, the corresponding statement about certifications, than those who agreed strongly with this statement. However, this statement ranked higher on moderate and slight agreement.

Statement #18: "In our industry, a higher education degree is important" was slightly agreed with by one-fifth of those very involved in hiring, moderately agreed with by 43.75%, and strongly agreed with by 23%. Only 12.5% disagreed with this statement in any way, and this statement was overall more agreed with than the corresponding statement about industry certifications, statement #19.

The final statement about education, statement #20: "I believe that higher education is worthwhile" received very high agreement. Only one respondent in the entire study disagreed at all with that statement. Among those who are very involved in hiring decisions, 79% agreed strongly, 16.7% agreed moderately, and the remaining 4.3% agreed slightly. In comparison, the corresponding statement on certifications, statement #21, was disagreed with by 6.25% of this

group of respondents, and only one-third agreed strongly. It is evident from these results that higher education is rated higher by those very involved with hiring decisions.

The remaining two factors, interview performance and prior work experience, had two and three Likert statements in the survey, respectively. Statement #11: "My company places a high value on interview performance when hiring" was strongly agreed with by one-third of those very involved in hiring, moderately agreed with by 52%, and slightly agreed with by 14.6%. Interestingly, only two respondents out of the 144 total disagreed at all with this statement, and they only disagreed slightly.

There are two related statements regarding education. Statement #7: "my company places a high value on references when hiring" was strongly agreed with by 27%, moderately agreed with by 37.5%, and slightly agreed with by 22.9%. Statement #10: "My company places a high value on prior work experience when hiring" was strongly agreed with by 64.5%, moderately agreed with by 27%, and slightly agreed with by 8%. Not a single respondent who indicated that he was very involved in hiring disagreed with this statement. These statements reveal that one-third of respondents indicated that interview performance and higher education are important to their company when making a hiring decision, more important than certifications. However, in terms of the value that the company has for an attribute, prior work experience is the single most important factor identified in my survey.

Statement #12: "Interviewing well is a predictor of work experience" was strongly agreed with by 12.5% of those very involved in hiring, moderately agreed with by 37.5%, and slightly agreed with by 31.25%. There was one corresponding statement on prior work experience, statement #14: "Prior work experience is a predictor of work experience," and was strongly agreed with by 43.75%, moderately agreed with by 45.8%, and slightly agreed with by a mere

2%. To compare with the prior factors, interview performance is overall less important than education. However, interview performance is ranked as being more indicative of work performance than certifications are. In the end, though, prior work experience was chosen to be the most important factor.

Another area I wanted to explore with this survey was to see if respondents who hold a certification had a bias towards applicants who also held a certification. Out of 145 respondents, 77 answered that they did not have an industry certification and 68 indicated they did. Among the 48 who indicated that they were very involved in hiring decisions within their company, a total of 22 answered that they did not have an industry certification, and 26 answered that they did. Here, I have chosen to analyze those that are highly involved with hiring decisions within their company, as well as a broader analysis of all survey respondents, to look for any bias within their perception regarding applicants and industry certifications.

The first statement, statement #9: "My company places a high value on certifications when hiring" was agreed with by 113 participants, which was 78% overall. However, 87% of respondents who hold an industry certification agreed with the statement, versus 70% of those who indicated they do not have a certification. Among those who are very frequently involved in hiring decisions, 81.25% agreed with the statement. However, 88.5% of those who hold an industry certification agreed with the statement, versus 72.7% of those who do not have a certification.

Statement #15: "certifications are a predictor of work performance" was agreed with by 101 participants, or 69.7% overall. However, 80.1% of respondents who hold an industry certification agreed with the statement, in contrast to just 59.7% of those who do not have a certification. Among those who are very frequently involved in hiring decisions, 64.5% agreed

with the statement. However, 69% of those who hold an industry certification agreed with the statement, versus 59% of those who said they do not have a certification.

Statement #17: "Having certifications shows that an applicant is serious about his career" was agreed with by 130 participants, which was 89.6% overall. However, 92.6% of respondents who hold an industry certification agreed with the statement, in contrast to 87% of those who do not have a certification. In the group of those who are very frequently involved in hiring decisions, 91.7% agreed with the statement. Among those who hold an industry certification, 92.3% agreed with the statement, versus 90.9% of those who do not have a certification.

A total of 133 participants agreed with statement #21: "I believe that an industry certification is worthwhile," which was 91.7% overall. However, 97% of respondents who hold an industry certification agreed with the statement, as opposed to just 87% of those who do not have a certification. Among those who are very frequently involved in hiring decisions, 93.27% agreed with the statement. However, 91.5% of those who hold an industry certification agreed with the statement, versus 90.1% of those who do not have a certification.

The final statement regarding certifications, statement #22: "Given two otherwise-equal applicants, the applicant with an industry certification is preferable" was agreed with by 130 participants, which was 89.6% overall. However, 92.6% of respondents who hold an industry certification agreed with the statement, versus 87% of those who do not have a certification. Among those who are very frequently involved in hiring decisions, 85.4% agreed with the statement. However, 88.5% of those who hold an industry certification agreed with the statement, versus 81.8% of those who do not have a certification.

In every statement regarding certifications, certificate holders had a higher preference or rating than the respondents who answered that they did not have an industry certification. This

preference ranged from just a very small gap on some statements to as high as a difference of 20 percentage points.

#### Recommendations

Within my survey, my goal was to examine the influence of industry certifications upon hiring practices. In addition to the statements regarding industry certifications, I also inquired about several other factors, including education, prior work experience, and interview performance. I found that, overall, industry certifications were not ranked as highly as I had expected.

Respondents did agree that industry certifications were a positive attribute for a job applicant, but not as vital as some other aspects. Based on the data I collected during the course of this study, education and prior work experience are the most important factors for job applicants according to the responses of the respondents who indicated they are very frequently involved in hiring decisions at their workplace.

Additionally, I found that the respondents who indicated they had an industry certification agreed more overall with statements on the survey in regard to the importance of certifications. In addition, the group of those respondents who are very frequently involved in hiring decisions also followed this same trend. The respondents who have an industry certification agreed more than the respondents who said they did not have an industry certification on every statement involving certification.

However, it cannot be ascertained if this apparent preference is due to an unfair bias or prejudice that exists among professionals who hold an industry certification, or if the higher importance assigned to these statements is, instead, merely due to the fact that the respondents

who hold some type of industry certification are more aware of industry certifications in general, or of the benefits they hold.

### Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence that industry certifications have upon hiring preferences exhibited by Human Resource and hiring professionals in the four-state area, encompassing Joplin and the surrounding counties. This study examined the local business environment, using a survey instrument, and analyzed a variety of factors from that survey to discover what preferences were evident. The results revealed that, locally, industry certifications are ranked lower in importance to education and to prior work experience from an overall viewpoint.

However, respondents who hold an industry certification ranked every statement involving the importance of industry certifications higher than respondents who did not indicate that they hold an industry certification. These results are of interest to those in the local business community. Additionally, knowledge of these preferences may also be useful for job seekers in the local job market. Repeating this study, with a focus on specific industry certifications that are common in the local area, may produce better results and, I believe, is worth further exploration in the future.

The results of this study add to the understanding of hiring practices in the Joplin area and revealed significant results that can be further examined and studied. There are opportunities for further study in this area. The demographic factors can be expanded or combined to further examine which groups of hiring professionals exhibit certain preferences. Also, the study could be expanded to produce higher response rates with more varied demographic groups and a wider variety of local businesses. Expansion and further research on this topic could discover which

demographic differences have the strongest effect on hiring preferences, and how job applicants can use this to their advantage when searching for a job.

### Reflections

Looking back on this process, I have learned a lot about how to conduct primary research. When I first started, writing my thesis seemed like a monumental task that would be impossible to complete within the given time frame. Choosing a topic was nerve-wracking because it felt like such an important step in the process, and there would be no going back from that point. I knew I wanted to focus on something local for my thesis, but I did not anticipate how difficult some aspects of this topic would be. In particular, I learned about the difficulties that can result when generating primary research.

This project taught me a lot about doing research. While I had done research projects in the past, I had never before generated primary research. This is an invaluable skill for anybody to possess, but it will be especially useful for me as a business student. When I choose to attend graduate school to attain my MBA, this will be a very important experience to have had. It is something I can use when applying for admittance to graduate school, and it will continue to be useful for my entire graduate school career. Additionally, being able to conduct primary research such as a survey is a useful skill in a business career. It is something I can put to use in any business field I may decide to enter in the future.

If I choose to continue with this topic, there are several different ways I could do so. As my mentor mentioned in the fall semester, when I first began working on my proposal, this topic could very well become the basis of a published paper. If I chose, I could theoretically continue work on this topic with her assistance and become the co-author of a published article.

Alternatively, I could choose to pursue this topic in graduate school as a further research project.

It would be possible that I could make some revisions to my survey and redistribute it in order to further narrow down and determine what precisely drives hiring in our local, four-state area.

Additionally, it would be possible to distribute this survey in another area to compare the results to the results from the Joplin area. I would be interested in perhaps tweaking my survey and distributing it in Joplin and in Springfield to a select list of businesses to be able to compare how hiring practices differ in our area versus around Springfield, which is geographically not terribly far, but also possesses a rather different business environment. I believe that the survey, especially after it has been reworked a little bit, could easily be transferred to another location anywhere in the United States. It would not be difficult to transfer a survey of this type to another geographic location; the main difficulty would be getting the right contacts to distribute the survey.

Another direction that I could take with continued research in this topic would be to do one-on-one interviews with hiring professionals. This is something I mentioned as a possibility in my thesis proposal, but there just was not enough time to complete my data collection and also schedule one-on-one, in-person interviews with upwards of a dozen hiring professionals. However, I believe that interviews would be able to give a lot of insight into this area, and I would like to have the chance to examine the perceptions about industry certifications within an interview format. If I were to pursue this topic further, I would like to incorporate personal interviews, as I had initially wished to do.

Completing this project has given me the skills to tackle another research project such as this. In the future, I would be interested in researching other topics, especially in the Human Resource field. In particular, I would like to look into one of the topics I had been considering

for my thesis, which is how bilingual language abilities affect hiring decisions. Looking into other topics closely related to this idea would be of great interest to me.

As someone who studied languages in college, including a foreign-language intensive internship, I am interested in topics such as how hiring professionals test bilingual language ability and if there is an ideal way to test language abilities during hiring. Additionally, as I am bilingual, with the goal of acquiring fluency in a third language, I would like to look into how much languages are of an advantage to an applicant, and if there is a difference in hiring rates depending on how many foreign languages an applicant can use. While languages are primarily a hobby for me, I am very interested in how knowledge of a foreign language impacts hiring decisions, especially as business is becoming more global in nature, and certain languages, such as Spanish and Chinese, are very useful in a business context.

If I did this project over again, there are several things I would perhaps do differently. For instance, I would redesign my survey, taking into account some suggestions that I received from some participants in the study. In particular, one gentleman provided me with some excellent feedback, calling to my attention some things that I honestly had not considered or realized when I created my survey. The most important comment I received was that allowing comments would, in his opinion, be much more effective and accurate than restricting the participant to just being able to choose from 1 to 6 on the Likert scale. While this would have made it a lot more difficult to interpret the data, it perhaps would have allowed for the participant to explain why he chose a certain answer or to say why he disagreed with a statement. In addition, as the gentleman pointed out, I mentioned The Society for Human Resource Management in two of my questions. There is a chance that, perhaps, the participant of the survey may not be familiar with that organization. In retrospect, I perhaps should have

mentioned several different professional associations in that question, from a broad variety of fields, to increase the likelihood that the participant would be familiar with one or more of the listed organizations.

Something that this gentleman also brought up that I had not necessarily considered is that these hiring preferences and related aspects, such as industry certifications, are different depending on whether the hiring is for a professional level position or for blue-collar or trade work. Naturally, the answers to the survey questions would be rather different for a supervisor hiring for a blue-collar position than for someone looking to hire for a professional office position. Another suggestion I received is that I should have made mention of the National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC) in my survey. The NCRC is a type of certification that an employee can use to demonstrate his skills in applied math, location of information, and reading for information, which are useful skills in many job positions.

During these past months, there have been some unexpected challenges along the way. The most difficult part of my thesis has undoubtedly been the data collection, which was an ongoing struggle throughout the process. Initially, the survey creation took longer than I expected. However, the step of the process that took much longer than I had anticipated was the data collection. The snow days that we had this semester interfered somewhat with meeting with my mentor and with the SBTDC for follow-up conversations, which was also an unexpected problem, although not a major difficult, overall.

Once my survey had been distributed the initial time, I expected for my data collection to be completed within a two week period. During my conversation with the SBTDC, they said that their database included a list of only Human Resource professionals. This was the ideal target for my survey, as someone working in the Human Resource field would be perhaps more used to

hiring and more aware of the topics in my survey. contact list, at the time, had 106 individuals, and they were anticipating another list of 300 to 400 more contacts to be delivered to them within the time frame of my survey. However, the initial distribution only went to 106 individuals, as the larger list was not delivered to them as they were expecting. This was a setback that resulted in my completed survey numbers being very low initially.

Once I learned that only 16 surveys had been received, I realized I would need to explore some alternate avenues for my data collection, although making sure they were from relevant contacts was very important. After speaking with my mentor, she suggested I should speak with Terry Marion, a business professor who is also a member of the Tri-State Human Resource Association. He was kind enough to direct me to the contact that is in charge of sending emails to the members, which gave me access to a large number of local Human Resource professionals in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Missouri.

To further increase the response numbers, my mentor and I decided we should request that the SBTDC repeat the mailing to their contacts with a larger database. This larger database included a wide variety of business contacts, not just focused on Human Resource. However, since we were interested in surveying people who make hiring decisions and the survey asked about hiring preferences, anybody who has done hiring was a good candidate for the survey. Therefore, we chose to expand the scope of our sample to more than just Human Resource contacts.

While I would have preferred being able to survey only Human Resource contacts, it was not possible to get the volume of responses that we desired; and, furthermore, I do not think that the decision to send the survey to a wider group had a negative impact upon my study. In the future, however, if I wanted to continue with research in this area, I would perhaps try to survey

two distinct groups, one of Human Resource professionals and one of non-Human Resource professionals who have still made hiring decisions, to be able to draw definite comparisons and contrasts between how these two groups make hiring decisions.

Additionally, looking back, if I had realized that the data collection would take so long, and perhaps have a very low initial yield of response, I would have decided to begin my data collection back in early November, perhaps as soon as my proposal had been approved, rather than choosing to wait until the beginning of the spring semester. The data collection has been the largest uncertainty in this process. If I had allowed myself more time for data collection, I believe I would have been able to enjoy this process a lot more, rather than being concerned about getting a sufficient number of responses.

Overall, however, I have been very pleased with the entire process. My mentor has been supportive and been very helpful in guiding my research. The SBTDC has been indispensable, both in hosting my survey using Constant Contacts and in distributing my survey twice to their local contacts.

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## Appendix A: Survey

1. What is your age?

- 18-20
- 21-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60 or older

2. Are you male or female? (Circle one)

Male      Female

3. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

- Less than high school degree
- High school degree or equivalent (e.g., GED)
- Some college but no degree
- Associate degree
- Bachelor degree
- Graduate degree

4. What is your job role?

- Individual Contributor
- Team Lead
- Manager
- Senior Manager
- Regional Manager
- Vice President
- Management / C-Level
- Partner
- Owner
- Volunteer
- Intern
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

5. About how long have you been in your current position?

Years (\_\_\_), Months (\_\_\_)

6. About how many employees work at your organization?

(\_\_\_\_\_)

7. Which of the following best describes the principal industry of your organization?

- Advertising & Marketing
- Agriculture
- Airlines & Aerospace (including Defense)
- Automotive
- Business Support & Logistics
- Construction, Machinery, and Homes
- Education
- Entertainment & Leisure
- Finance & Financial Services
- Food & Beverages
- Government
- Healthcare & Pharmaceuticals
- Insurance
- Manufacturing
- Nonprofit
- Retail & Consumer Durables
- Real Estate
- Telecommunications, Technology, Internet & Electronics
- Transportation & Delivery
- Utilities, Energy, and Extraction
- I am currently not employed

8. About how long overall have you worked in this field?

- 0-3 years
- 3-5 years
- 5-7 years
- 7-9 years
- 9+ years

9. Do you hold any certifications? If so, please list.

( \_\_\_\_\_ )

10. I am familiar with industry certifications. (Please circle one)

Yes      No

11. I am familiar with organizations such as the Society for Human Resource Management.

Yes      No

For each of the statements below, please circle the response that best characterizes how you feel about that statement, where: 1 = Very Frequently, 2 = Frequently, 3 = Occasionally, 4 = Rarely, 5 = Very Rarely, 6 = Never

	Very Frequently	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Very Rarely	Never
12. I am involved in hiring decisions in my company.	1	2	3	4	5	6
13. It is obvious who the best applicant is for a given position.	1	2	3	4	5	6
14. It is easy to find qualified applicants in the local area.	1	2	3	4	5	6
15. The best/most qualified applicant will be hired for the position.	1	2	3	4	5	6
16. It can be difficult to choose between candidates for a position.	1	2	3	4	5	6

For each of the statements below, please circle the response that best characterizes how you feel about that statement, where: 1 = Agree Strongly, 2 = Agree Moderately, 3 = Agree Slightly, 4 = Disagree Slightly, 5 = Disagree Moderately, 6 = Disagree Strongly

	Agree Strongly	Agree Moderately	Agree Slightly	Disagree Slightly	Disagree Moderately	Disagree Strongly
17. My company prefers to hire local applicants	1	2	3	4	5	6
18. My company places a high value on references when hiring.	1	2	3	4	5	6
19. My company places a high value on education when hiring.	1	2	3	4	5	6
20. My company places a high value on certifications when hiring.	1	2	3	4	5	6
21. My company places a high value on prior work experience when hiring.	1	2	3	4	5	6
22. My company places a high value on interview performance when hiring.	1	2	3	4	5	6

	Agree Strongly	Agree Moderately	Agree Slightly	Disagree Slightly	Disagree Moderately	Disagree Strongly
23. Interviewing well is a predictor of work performance.	1	2	3	4	5	6
24. A high GPA is a predictor of work performance.	1	2	3	4	5	6
25. Prior work experience is a predictor of work performance.	1	2	3	4	5	6
26. Certifications are a predictor of work performance.	1	2	3	4	5	6
27. Having a higher education degree shows that an applicant is serious about his career.	1	2	3	4	5	6
28. Having certifications shows that an applicant is serious about his career.	1	2	3	4	5	6

	Agree Strongly	Agree Moderately	Agree Slightly	Disagree Slightly	Disagree Moderately	Disagree Strongly
29. In our industry, a higher education degree is important.	1	2	3	4	5	6
30. In our industry, certifications are important.	1	2	3	4	5	6
31. I believe that higher education is worthwhile.	1	2	3	4	5	6
32. I believe that an industry certification is worthwhile.	1	2	3	4	5	6
33. Given two otherwise-equal applicants, the applicant with an industry certification is preferable.	1	2	3	4	5	6
34. Organizations such as the Society for Human Resource Management are reputable.	1	2	3	4	5	6

## Appendix B: Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in this study. Your participation in this study is completely anonymous and voluntary. Your honest response to the survey questions will help the researcher conduct this study. Your response should take less than 10 minutes.

There are no benefits to you or compensation for participating in this study.

The researchers are Breana Clark and Dr. Nanette Philibert. This survey is part of a Senior Thesis for the Missouri Southern State University's Honors Program. Breana Clark is researching correlations between hiring practices and industry certifications. Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researchers will not use your information for any purposes outside of this study.

If you have any questions prior to taking this survey please contact the researchers:  
Breana Clark - clarkb004@mymail.mssu.edu  
Dr. Nanette Philibert - Philibert-N@mssu.edu

Thank you for participating in our survey. Your feedback is important.

## Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have received answers to any questions I have at this time. I am 18 years of age, or older, and I consent to participate in the survey. (Circle one).

- Yes (Proceed to next page)  
No (Do not proceed)

Appendix C: Debriefing Statement

Thank you for completing my survey! Your participation is greatly appreciated. This survey is part of my Senior Thesis for Missouri Southern State University's Honors Program. I am researching correlations between hiring practices and industry certifications.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, its purpose or procedures, or if you have a research-related problem, please feel free to contact me at [clarkb004@mymail.mssu.edu](mailto:clarkb004@mymail.mssu.edu) or get in contact with my faculty mentor at [Philibert-N@mssu.edu](mailto:Philibert-N@mssu.edu).

Additionally, the research findings on this study will be available upon request via email at the aforementioned addresses.

Please keep this page for your future reference. Once again, thank you for your participation in this study!