

## **An examination of the job characteristics most desired by accounting students**

Sanjay Gupta  
Valdosta State University

### **ABSTRACT**

Hiring is an expensive process for most firms. Accounting firms spend a lot of resources in terms of advertising, screening candidates, bringing in appropriate candidates for an interview, and then making an attractive offer to the top candidate of their choice. A logical question then is what can a firm possibly do to make the hiring process less expensive, more efficient, and less time consuming? While most prior literature has focused on what characteristic employers seek in an ideal candidate, there has been sparse research that has focused on the characteristics that candidates look for in the firm they are interviewing with. If a firm is aware of the characteristics that are most important to a candidate, they can make themselves more attractive to these candidates resulting in a higher likelihood of hiring the best candidate.

While salary is commonly thought of as the most important characteristic sought by candidates (Van, Hoyer & Saks, 2011), survey results of accounting professionals indicate otherwise (Bagley, et al., 2013). A survey of accounting professionals located in some of the major cities in the Southeastern cities of the U.S. was conducted. Survey results indicate that, for these accounting professionals, salary was one of the less important factors in choosing a job.

Results indicated that the three factors rated as most important were work environment, nature of the work, and potential for long-term growth. The three factors rated as least important were salary, geographical location, and benefits.

Keywords - Hiring, job characteristics, salary, work environment, nature of work

## Introduction

Accounting firms spend a lot of resources in terms of advertising and attracting candidates, screening candidates, bringing in appropriate candidates for an interview, and then making an attractive offer to the top candidate of your choice. In short, hiring a candidate is costly. A logical question then is what can a firm possibly do to make the hiring process less expensive, more efficient, and less time consuming? While most prior literature has focused on what characteristic employers seek in an ideal candidate there has been sparse research that has focused on the characteristics that candidates look for in the firm they are interviewing with. If a firm is aware of the characteristics that are most important to a candidate, they can make themselves more attractive to these candidates resulting in a higher likelihood of hiring the best candidate.

While salary is commonly thought of as the most important characteristic sought by candidates, our survey of accounting professionals indicates otherwise. A survey of accounting professionals located in some of the major cities in the Southeastern cities of the U.S., including but limited to Atlanta, Jacksonville, Macon, Orlando, Savannah and Tallahassee was conducted. The survey, which was anonymous, had respondents rank seven basic job characteristics on importance, using a scale of 1-10. Results indicate that, for these accounting professionals, salary was one of the less important factors in choosing a job.

Results indicate that the three factors rated as most important were qualitative in nature: work environment, nature of the work, and potential for long-term growth “as indicated in Figure 1” (Appendix). The three factors rated as least important were quantitative features: salary, geographical location, and benefits.

This research also examined the responses to determine if the importance placed on job characteristics differed by gender, experience level, or the number of financial dependents. These results can be utilized by a hiring firm to custom fit an offer for their top candidate to match with the characteristics they desire the most, rather than utilizing a standard package for all candidates.

## Gender

Results indicate that men and women may differ in the job characteristics most important to them (Kaye, 2014; Boudarbat & Montmarquette, 2009)). This finding is especially important as the accounting profession has shifted from being male dominated to having a more even split between the genders (Schiavone, 2013; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). While respondents were evenly divided between genders for those with less than 20 years’ experience, for those having over 20 years’ experience, there were significantly more male than female respondents. This resulted in limiting this analysis of the effects of gender on desired job characteristic to those with less than 20 years’ experience. For this subset of respondents, women rated the importance of all job characteristics higher than men except for long-term growth opportunities “as indicated in Figure 2” (Appendix). However, the only significant difference was for Work Environment. There were marginal differences for benefits and job security.

If the top candidate is a woman, a firm can appeal to her by emphasizing work environment. Providing an opportunity for a female candidate to meet and engage with current employees could show the desired candidate the quality of work environment the firm offers.

## Experience

For work experience, respondents were grouped into 4 categories: entry (0-5 years), junior (6-10 years), senior (11-20 years), and experienced (20+ years). While there were no significant differences among the 4 categories for males, females in the senior and experienced categories ranked the importance of job security significantly higher than entry and junior level female accounting professionals “as indicated in Figure 3” (Appendix). Women entering the accounting workforce in the 1960s-1990s were faced with a predominantly male profession (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). This may well have resulted in more difficult job searches and in these professionals placing a higher value on keeping a job once acquired. However, women entering the profession in recent years may have found it relatively easy to find a job and therefore may not be as concerned with job security.

Results also indicate that work environment was rated significantly higher by senior level (11-20 years’ experience) professionals versus those at the entry and experienced level “as indicated in Figure 4” (Appendix). If the most experienced group of women is not considered, and we concentrate on the more junior groups, the relationship is a steady increase in the value placed on work environment across experience levels (Laufer & Crosser, 2004). Thus, it appears that as women gain experience and professional confidence, they increasingly value the culture and flexibility of their work.

## Financial Dependents

Survey respondents were asked to indicate the number of people that were financially dependent on them. Results indicate that there was a significant increase in the desire for benefits if the respondent had financial dependents. However, there was no significant relationship between having financial dependents and the desire for job security or salary. Thus, when trying to attract someone with dependents, benefits are more relevant than job security or salary.

## Implications

Hiring can be a recurring process, and the quality of the candidates a firm hires can significantly improve a firm’s performance and morale. A firm would naturally want to hire the best candidate. This research provides information to help you get what you want. Knowing what job characteristics to emphasize during the hiring process can help you improve your chances of attracting the best candidate. Contrary to popular belief, salary is not the most important thing to emphasize during this process. In fact, for the group of accounting professionals surveyed, all but two of the six qualitative factors we examined were significantly more highly valued than salary.

As indicated in the article, job candidates are likely to be attracted to a firm they believe has a positive work environment, interesting and challenging work, and opportunities for future growth. Candidates with both analytical and entrepreneurial personality types can be attracted by emphasizing the interesting, challenging work they would be doing and the long-term growth opportunities available to them. The job can be made more appealing to analytical candidates by also emphasizing salary and geographical location. Those with financial dependents are especially attracted by benefits. Job security and work environment have appeal to women, and women with extensive work experience tend to place an even higher level of importance on job security.

While the offer your firm makes may be standard for a specific position, knowing what firm characteristics to emphasize can make a significant difference in its attractiveness to a particular candidate. This can help a firm focus the job description and interviewing process in a way that will help improve their hiring outcomes and increase the likelihood of being able to hire the best candidate.

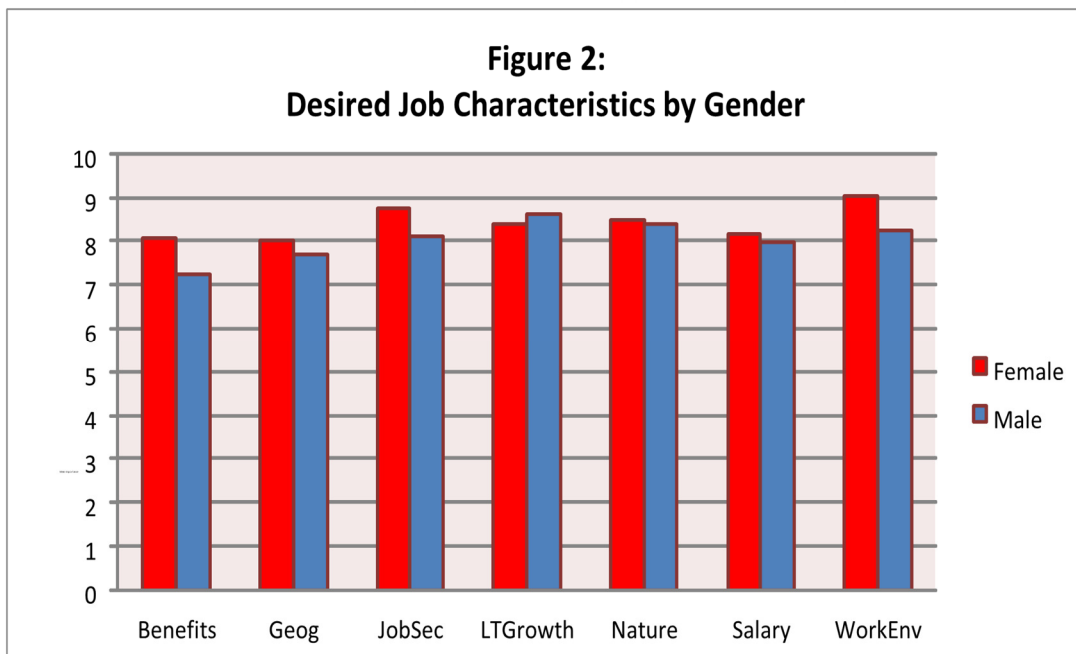
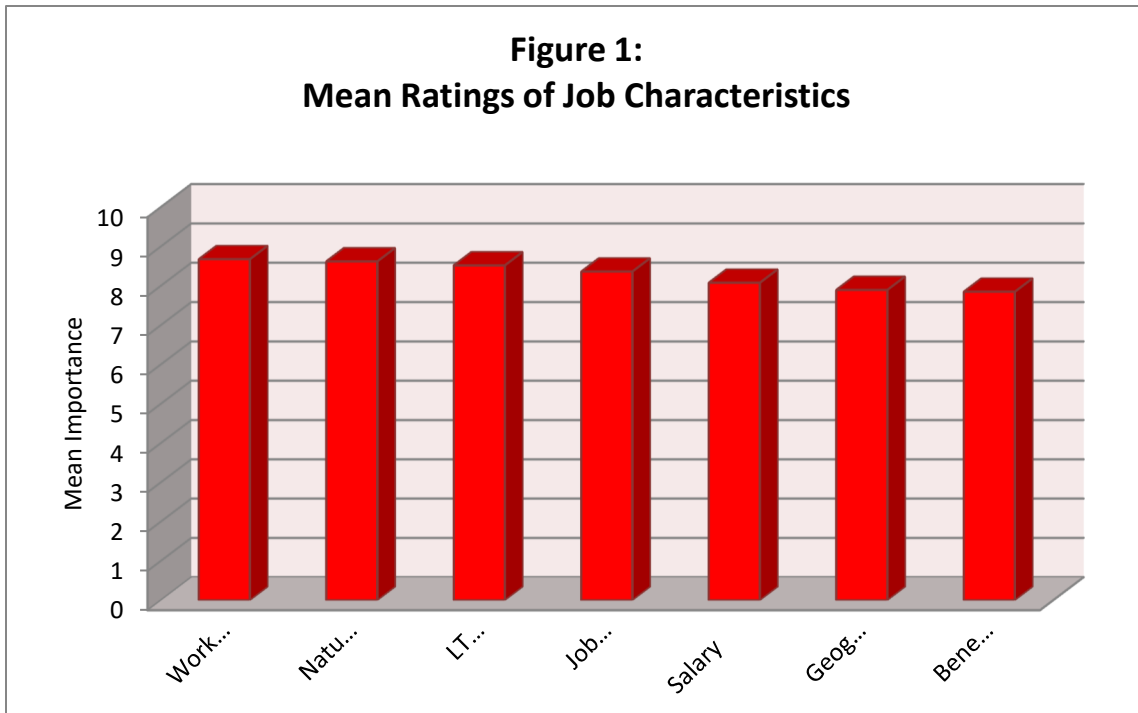
J B  
S B

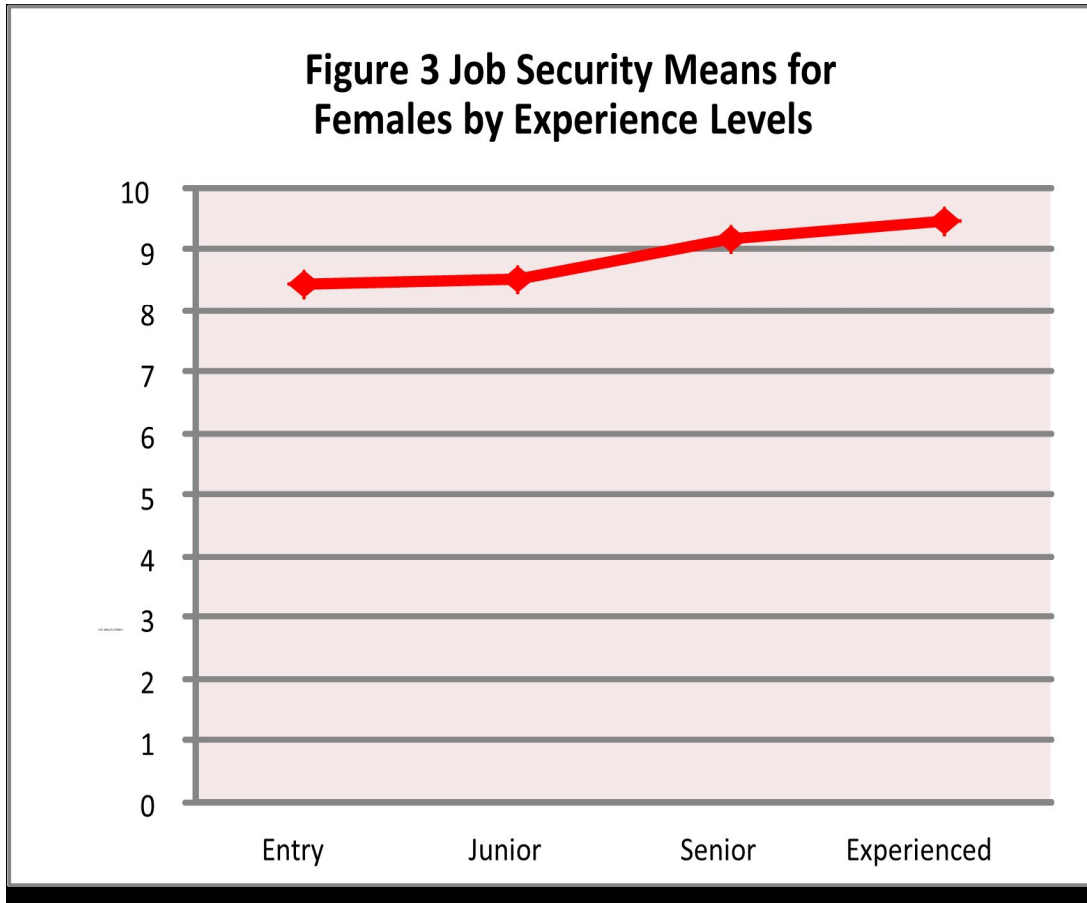
**References**

- Bagley, P.D. Dalton & M. Ortegren (2013). Targeted Recruiting and Retention, CPA Journal, 83(5), 63-65
- Boudarbat, B. & C. Montmarquette (2009). Choice of fields of study of university Canadian graduates: the role of gender and their parents' education. Education Economics. (June) 17(2), 185-213
- Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016). Occupational Outlook Handbook, Accountants and Auditors, from <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/business-and-financial/accountants-and-auditors.htm>
- Kaye, J. (2014). How Much Does an Accounting Professor Influence a Student's Career Path? NJCPA from <https://njcpa.org?stay-informed/topics/article/2014/11/04/how-much-does-an-accounting-professor-influence-a-students-career-path->
- Laufer, D. & R.L. Crosser (2004). Career Information: Helping Accounting Majors Understand Their Options. Journal of Accounting & Finance Research 12(2), 112-118
- Schiavone, J. (2013). Accounting Graduates and Enrollments at Historic Levels, Continuing Upward Trend, AICPA website from <http://www.aicpa.org/Press/PressReleases/2013/Pages/Record-Setting-Demand-for-Accounting-Graduates-AICPA.aspx>
- Van Hoye, G. & A.M. Saks (2011). The Instrumental-Symbolic Framework: Organisational Image and Attractiveness of Potential Applicants and their Companions at a Job Fair. Applied Psychology: An International Review, (April) 60(2), 311-335

J B  
S B

Appendix





S B

