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Students' Attitudes towards Business-networking Websites;

An Ithaca College survey sample

Ithaca College

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Abstract

This following paper is an analysis of a research study. The primary goal of the study is to shed light on the attitudes of students towards business-networking websites. The study was focused on Ithaca College students as a starting point for similar research. There is no special sourcing of funding for this research project; the researchers rely on Ithaca College facilities. The researchers designed a self administered instrument with predetermined questions. The questions were designed to get statistical data. This paper includes an overview of the research process, a literature review, the methodology that was used to process data, the results and conclusions, and a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the study.

Introduction

The investigators are researching Ithaca College students' attitudes towards business-oriented, networking websites. These websites are used as a networking tool for individuals in any field, at any level of expertise, and it is in the researchers interest to study its impact on Ithaca College students. The researchers will be studying the users' attitudes, and comparing them to more traditional online business-related websites, like direct job sites (i.e. Monster.com) and/or social-networking websites (i.e. Friendster.com) and/or traditional business-networking methods (i.e. physical alumni databases, or family/friends).

There is no special sourcing of funding for this research project; the researchers rely on Ithaca College facilities for printing and data collecting. The surveys were handed out at the Ithaca College campus center, they are anonymous, and were collected in envelopes.

History

During the dot-com boom of the 1990's, websites sprouted up across the Internet at a breakneck pace. Even before the most popular websites got their start, such as the e-bookstore Amazon.com, there was Monster.com. Monster.com is a website focused on posting jobs for employers and potential employees. The desire for seamless communication, real-time availabilities, and centralized databases was strong, and this sector of the web flourishes today. In another Internet development, a separate phenomenon surrounding personal social networks was started. Two of the more popular online social collectives, Match.com and Friendster.com, are websites produced for the purposes of dating and friendship, respectively.

Sometime in between these two trends, the Internet gave rise to business-networking websites. These are websites that seek to increase ones professional network, through methods similar to those of social networking sites, but with goals somewhat similar to those of job websites. By enlisting trusted professional contacts to also register to a business-networking website, a participant can grow their network for any number of business purposes, including partnerships, product distribution, and consulting. Some goals of major business-networking websites may overlap with those of job websites and social-network websites, but they remain chiefly focused on increasing or maintaining ones professional network.

Purpose

A professional network can be as informal as ones own network of friends and family. Therefore, these sets of connections may benefit college students who seek information on jobs, internship possibilities, industry mentors, or professional advice. While there has been a plethora of media coverage on business-networking websites, there is little relevant academic research available on student's attitudes towards them. There is especially no research that involves Ithaca College students.

Attitudes towards online industries may or may not have been assumed to warrant research. However, the degree to which business-networking websites could impact the professional careers of students has yet to be explored. Developers and participants of these websites may be assuming that students not only use them but that they also have positive attitudes towards them, both on which there exists no data to back up or disprove.

It had been the primary goal of the researchers to shed light on the attitudes of students towards business-networking websites. The study was focused on Ithaca College students as a starting point for similar research. As mentioned, little or no prior academic research on this topic exists. The topic seems significant enough to study, as the number of college students using these websites is relatively unknown, and their experiences and attitudes may be strongly positive or negative. Moreover, the Internet is not only a significant industry in and of itself, but also a prevailing medium of ever-growing popularity. As a result, the authors acknowledge the importance of studying such a phenomenon.

The authors carried out research to learn what students' attitudes towards business-networking websites are, only to discover that no such studies had been performed. To learn more about this area, it was determined that Ithaca College students would suffice as a possible example for other colleges and universities. Thus, the major research question:

What are Ithaca College students' attitudes towards business-networking websites?

Similarly, students' attitudes towards other types of websites had also gone unstudied. It was frequently observed, through informal conversations, that numerous Ithaca College students participated in other such websites, especially job websites and social-networking websites. Their attitudes of business-networking websites may be vastly different, or exactly the same, than their attitudes towards these other websites, and so two sub-questions were posed:

What are their attitudes compared to conventional job-specific websites?

What are their attitudes compared to social-networking websites?

Finally, it was recognized that some students may have some business-networking experience that does not involve websites. A final sub-question is:

What are their attitudes compared to traditional business-networking methods?

Literature Review

Business-networking websites are based on the commercial values of traditional business-networking. The primary purpose of traditional business-networking is to establish or maintain one's personal group of business friends (Schonscheck, 2000). Another reason for many individuals to use this strategy is to expand or further their existing network. Secondary reasons include organizational partnerships, supply-chain management, development of mentor-protégé relationships, and following industry trends. Business-networking can be performed by both individuals and larger groups (Pearson & Richardson, 2001).

Traditional business-networking originally began from small family outfits in the textile engineering industry in early 19th century England (Pearson & Richardson, 2001). Some firms would act as small subcontractors who supplied resources to larger firms, all managed through interpersonal arrangements and referrals (Pearson & Richardson, 2001). Centuries later, the basic model still applies in the world's more complicated modern economies. Business-networking, traditional or online, continues to act as an economic phenomenon that works for market research, competitive trends, and as an influencer on informational costs (Pearson & Richardson, 2001).

It should be noted that while the term 'friendship' is often used to describe these relationships, philosophically, business networks should be used strictly for utilitarian reasons (Schonscheck, 2000). Quite often, networks are put in place for more one-on-one

relationships, such as freelance work or consultancy (Hoke, 2004). By using personal and professional networks, one can connect all kinds of resources to further everyone's own agendas (Hoke, 2004). Individuals can then be considered valuable "social capital", dependant on social factors like trust (McGrath & Sparks, 2005). However, the most successful business networks tend to be those which focus on their professional assets, and not social benefits.

Formal networking

Once business-networking had established itself as a fundamental element in contemporary commerce, formal organizations began to emerge (Pearson & Richardson, 2001). In more recent decades, business-networking techniques have been essential to industries which rely on referrals as a way to increase their business through sales (Feiertag, 2003). These referrals are typically obtained through ordinary, unplanned conversation. As soon as people began to plan actual, large-scale, in-person meetings, they quickly proved beneficial to those involved. Today, there are countless networking groups around the country for all kinds of industries (Feiertag, 2003). For instance, in the hospitality industry, if a hotel is involved in a business-networking group, they can create potentially solid relationships with an amenity supplier, who may be able to refer the hotel to a reputable food service supplier, and so on. Often, people involved in these business-networking groups are atypical, individual resources, such as secretaries (Egodigwe, 2005). Just about anyone can engage themselves in these networks if they can help generate at least one contact for others (Parker 2003). It should be reiterated that these groups should be considered professional socialization only, so members don't stray from their original goals (Egodigwe, 2005).

In-person business-networking groups revolve around somewhat tedious and lengthy forms of communication, such as handwritten notes and physical, irreplaceable information (Slesinger, 2005). Research on these groups has also yielded many precautions (Blick, 2004). For example, required memberships can be of relatively high cost to individuals, so there can be an extremely high risk involved (Blick, 2004). Also, the tenet of 'give and take' can be easily abused by those who have no concern for helping others (Egodigwe, 2005). Business-networking groups are not, however, only as strong as their weakest links. Successful net workers can provide ample information to others, but they can also benefit from just one individual who effectively involves themselves in the process.

Online networking

A seemingly unrelated trend of the past few years has been the rise of Internet-based social networking. These Internet-based groups rely on automatic, online computer networks, in order to make contacts for social purposes (Atkinson, 2003). Quickly, the technologies and principles behind online social networking were applied to business-networking to create the phenomenon defined by the authors as "online business-networking". Whereas traditional business-networking required some element of presence, the advantages of the Internet provide easier and more abundant opportunities for international networks, spread across numerous global locations, and often without every meeting face-to-face (Atkinson, 2003). With online business-networking, through computer technology, individuals are given a chance to meet millions more people than traditional methods ("Five rules for online networking", 2005). In a knowledge management project for instance, the pool of potential contributors

increases a great deal when managed through online business-networking as opposed to traditional business-networking (Atkinson, 2003).

What the two systems have in common is the focus of sharing contacts and ideas through the 'give and take' model (Feiertag, 2003). In each, individuals have to actually be involved to benefit from these networks; more specifically, in a network tailored to the needs of their specific industry ("Five rules for online networking", 2005). A co-founder of the largest online business-networking organization, LinkedIn, claims that by marketing standards, individuals have roughly a 2% chance of receiving a response from an unsolicited phone call, mailing, or email (Bardon, 2004). Statistically, 83% of LinkedIn's personal invitations are accepted; that is, from an existing member to someone else (Bardon, 2004). Research shows that this is due in large part to the idea of personalization, that when someone who knows and trusts someone else is invited to network, their level of comfort is much higher. This is only furthered by the ease of registration and lowered costs involved in online business-networking (versus traditional business-networking). It is clear that online business-networking is a relevant aspect of today's businesses. What is still vague is how the websites that offer these services actually impact college students, individuals who may or may not be considerable contributors to their successes.

Methodology

Research Question

The researchers are curious about how the relatively new invention, business-networking websites, is received by today's college students. These students will, in few years, be the most likely target market for these sites. The researchers wondered if they

had already started to use these sites to prepare themselves for the life after graduation, and if they found them to serve any of their current or future needs.

After some discussion amongst the researchers on how this could best be approached, they decided on the before mentioned research question:

What are Ithaca College students' attitudes towards business-networking websites?

To help the researchers place the attitudes towards business-networking websites, they decided to compare the attitudes with those of other methods for business-networking and other ways to get jobs and contacts through the web. The researchers found that looking at these three sub-questions would help clarify this differentiation:

How do these attitudes compare to attitudes about traditional business-networking methods?

How do these attitudes compare to attitudes about social-networking sites?

How do these attitudes compare to attitudes about job-specific websites?

According to Creswell (2003), a variable is the content being measured in a study, which differs between the respondents. One can divide the variables into independent variables, which may affect the others, and the dependent variables which may be affected by the independent (Creswell, 2003). This study's independent variable is the level of awareness of business-networking websites. The dependent variable is the attitudes towards business-networking websites.

Survey Design

The researchers wanted to compare attitudes towards the different concepts mentioned above. In addition to this, they hoped to generalize the results to the whole Ithaca College student population, and possibly pave the way for future studies on

student's attitudes towards such topics. They needed statistical data in order to make this possible.

To answer the research question, the researchers decided to use a quantitative approach to get the data they need to do a statistical analysis. The researchers designed an instrument with predetermined questions, self administered questioners. The questions were designed to get statistical data (Creswell, 2003).

The survey (See Appendix I) was originally designed by the researchers specifically for this study it was composed of Likert scale, and open ended questions. The survey has 28 questions, 11 of these are Likert scales ranging from 1 to 5 and 1 to 7.

One example of the Likert scale is:

The "Internet" is composed of different elements from the Web, to email, to instant messaging, and more. How often do you use the Web, specifically? (Please circle one)

A few times a day

Daily

A few times a week

Weekly

A few times a month

Monthly

Less than once a month

A different example of the Likert scale is:

I believe business-networking websites have the ability to create long-lasting relationships with other individuals.

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither

Disagree

Strongly disagree

The researchers decided on the Likert scale questions to get the statistical data, and the open ended to make sure they weren't overlooking any important aspects of the topic in question.

The Survey has a tear off cover sheet. (See Appendix I) The cover page is meant for the respondents to keep for their records. The purpose of the survey is stated on it, together with informative statements that the respondent should be over 18 years of age, and not to write her or his name anywhere on the anonymous survey. The tear off sheet also had the researchers' names and contact information.

To lessen the likelihood of unwanted mistakes, or tainted researcher biases the survey was pre-tested amongst colleagues. The researcher asked half their colleagues to look at the test as a survey respondent would, and ask the researchers questions if anything was unclear. The other half was asked to look at the survey as research critics.

The researchers received excellent feedback from their colleagues, and reviewed the survey with the feedback in mind. Simultaneously, the researchers realized that there might have been different assumptions within the project-group about what they were looking for. This review resulted in a drastically shortened survey. From the first draft to

the final survey 20 questions were removed, most of them concerning different ways the attitudes might have been formed. They decided to just focus on the possible usage and attitudes towards the different networking and job-searching methods, and not other factors.

Population and Sample

There are 5,984 full time undergraduate students at Ithaca College, of these 43.2% are male and 56.8 % are female (*Facts and figures*, 2004). The researchers did not sample according to this stratification, but they will use this data to look at the representativeness between their sample and population.

Selection process

The researchers chose to approach students in the Campus Center cafeterias at three different times over a period of two days. They handed out surveys at cafeteria tables and pointed out an envelope in the room for returning them. Creswell (2003), states that a random sample is where every person in the population has the same chance of getting sampled is the ideal selection process. Because of time constraints the sample in the Campus Center was a convenience sample; however the researchers chose this particular place, because this is an area open to students no matter what department they belong to. The researchers only surveyed the respondents at one time. Their collection is according to Creswell (2003) a cross sectional collection.

The researchers decided to strive for between 50-100 responses to the survey in order to be able to generalize the results to the whole population. They handed out 76 surveys and got 70 surveys, some of them with blank questions, back. This is 1.2 % of the population.

Data Analysis

6 of the 76 surveys were not returned. According to Creswell (2003) this can cause a response bias, which means that the results might have been different if the non-respondents had responded. The researchers did not have a strategy for determining response bias: They wished to secure anonymity, and did not sort the surveys after what time they were handed in. Henceforth the researchers can not perform a wave analysis, since there is no way of saying what surveys were handed in last. For the same reason they can not locate anyone in the sample to perform a respondent/non respondent analysis (Creswell, 2003).

The data was processed into spreadsheets in Microsoft Excel. Since the researchers were not looking for the correlation between the individual respondents attitudes, the responses were not cross tabulated. Instead the researchers looked at the means for each separate question.

Results

The survey had a response rate of 70 returned surveys out of 76. This was a successful return in the eyes of the researchers. The researcher's original goal was to receive between fifty and a hundred surveys. The majority of the surveys were thoroughly filled out. There were certain respondents that didn't answer all open ended questions. There was no pattern in the unanswered questions. The decision was left up to the individual according to their own comfort. The respondents were 60% female and 40% male, which is representative of the entire Ithaca College male to female ratios. The age range of the respondents was from 18 years old to 24 years old. There was a good sample from the various undergraduate majors; no graduate students took the researchers

survey. Some of the surveyed undergraduate majors were physical therapy, organization communications learning and design, cinema and photography, business, television and radio, biology education, environmental studies, art, chemistry, drama, vocal performance, music, and exploratory.

The results of the survey were based on Likert scale questions. Some questions start at one and go to five; other questions are one to seven. The researchers also had some open-ended questions in their survey.

There is a fairly high usage of the web for undergraduate students in the sample. On a one to seven scale where one is the most frequent; the average response to question #4 "How often do you use the web?" (N=70) was 1.29. This means between "a few times a day" and "daily". The sum of the job specific website usage were 32 of the 70 respondents have used job specific web sites. The sum of the social networking website usage were 54 of the 70 respondents have used social networking web sites. The sum of the usage of business-networking websites were 4 of the 70 respondents have used business-networking web sites.

The average response to the effectiveness, one being the most effective and five being the least effective, of the three different types of sites was as follows. In question #6 job specific websites (N=32): 3.16; neither effective or ineffective but leaning towards ineffective. In question # 10 Social-networking websites (N=56) were rated as: 2.49; somewhere between "neither" and "somewhat effective". And, in question #16 business-networking websites (N=20): 3.15; were rated somewhere between "neither" and "somewhat ineffective". When asked to compare business-networking websites with

traditional methods of business-networking in question #21 the average response was (N=52) 2.92; "The same" as traditional, with a slight leaning towards "somewhat better".

The following are actual questions from the survey, and the student's average responses to them. A one being the most positive response, a five being the most negative response, and two, three, and four are being everything in between.

(See Appendix II for full survey)

- Question #23 (N=55) "*I believe business-networking websites have the ability to create long-lasting relationships with other individuals.*" : 2.88

- Question # 24 (N=56) "*I believe business-networking websites can result in high-quality business relationships.*" : 2.66

- Question # 25 (N=56) "*I believe business-networking websites require a strong commitment.*" : 2.44

- Question #26 (N=56) "*I believe business-networking websites can fulfill an array of professional needs.*" : 2.34

- Question # 27 (N=57) "*I believe business-networking websites will never replace traditional business-networking methods.*" : 2.52

The last question of the survey question #28 asks the question: “*Before taking this survey, have you ever heard of websites that aims to expand ones business network?*”

(N=64). 35.9% of the respondents had heard of business-networking websites, 32.8% had not, and 31.3% weren't sure. The independent variable of this study is students' awareness of business-networking websites. This response is of interest as it sheds light on the fact that only 31.3% of the respondents are certain that they have heard of business-networking sites, and 31.3% weren't sure. This means that some students were responding to questions about something that they weren't aware existed before this survey.

Discussion

Strengths

A positive attribute of the study was a wide student sample returned the surveys. The researchers study had subject representativeness with many differing genders; ages and majors. There was a great return rate as stated earlier, 70 out of 76 surveys were returned. The researchers tried to increase reliability of the study by controlling as many factors as possible, and developing and following procedures carefully. The survey had thoughtfully honed, piloted and refined survey questions to help control student attitude biases.

Researchers have low ulterior motives for this research study. There was no monetary based incentive for this study to sway the bias in a certain direction of result. Researchers had little prior experience with business-networking websites, which helped maintain pre-formed beliefs and needs about the sites. Researchers have varying

backgrounds in education and experience. This helped the researchers to question each other on assumptions when going through the research process.

Limitations

Some of the limitations of this study are that there is no prior research on attitudes of students towards business-networking websites. There was nothing to compare the research in the study to or against. The researchers had to create definitions of websites to clarify research questions. This may have unintentionally tainted, confused or directed attitudes of students.

The study could have increased its reliability if the researchers could have used comparison testing such as retest, independent coding, or split-half. The researchers were unable to do this because of being under a fairly tight time constraint. It might have been beneficial to the study to have more time to test, pilot, and survey the questions on more students.

The researchers could have given more clear and specific directions to students when handing out surveys. They assumed some basic survey taking knowledge on the student's part, for this reason, some students did not take their tear-off sheets, and some student's identities may have been revealed. It would have been in the best interest of the students and the research study had all of the students taken their tear-off sheet. Some of the survey takers would have no way of getting in touch with the researchers had a concern of any kind come up for them later on. It is also important to try to protect the anonymity of the students when handing out these types of surveys. Students may be less inclined to be honest if they feel that their answers can be traced back to them, and they will be judged accordingly.

Threats to Internal Validity

Towards the end of the data analysis process, the researchers noted quite a substantial error in the directions of the survey. After question #13 they direct the students to question #15 if their response is never. This is a mistake. The students should answer question #14 if they responded never. For this reason the response rate of question #14 was very low. In addition to this the words "Please proceed to question #18." were left by mistake from a previous survey version. These errors may have threatened the validity of the results of question #14-#18.

As noted in question #28 that asks the question: "*Before taking this survey, have you ever heard of websites that aims to expand ones business network?*" Some of the respondents were not certain that they had heard of business-networking websites. This means they the students may have had maturation taking place over the course of responding to the survey. This is an obvious threat to internal validity (Creswell, 2003).

There is no method for all threats to internal and external validity to be eliminated, but they can be acknowledged. There is a chance that detective ego was in place when students were taking the survey, but there is no way to validate this. The students may have been answering the questions in a way that they thought would make them "look good". In addition to this it is possible that motivated forgetting was an active part of students filling out the survey. The researchers had no way at the time of this study to eliminate either of these things occurring.

There are several effects such as the Hawthorne effect, the John Henry effect, and the Pygmalion effect that this study seemed to side step due to the research methods used. The researchers were not observing the students while they filled out the survey, so it was

basically a blind experiment. It would seem that the students were not performing in any way to “beat” the researcher’s, nor would they have tried to behave in a way to meet researcher’s expectations, because they would have no way of knowing what that was.

Threats to External Validity

Only one setting was used in the giving and taking of the survey. Therefore setting representativeness was not used as a way to eliminate threats to external validity. The researchers gave out all surveys toward the lunch hour at the Ithaca College campus center, to try to receive as many survey’s as possible from as many different people as possible. Although, this goal was achieved, giving the surveys at different locations had there been more time would have been beneficial to see if the external location at all impacted the results of the survey. This type of survey taking was convenient to the number of results researchers wanted to receive (Creswell, 2003).

Due to time limitations, the researchers were also unable to test the variable representiveness of the study (Creswell, 2003). The survey was not changed with new operational definitions, or other slight changes. This type of repeat study may have beneficial to test if instrument conveyed any leaning in certain directions. These leanings could have tainted the results of the study, and the student’s answers.

Connivance sampling was used in this study, as the most efficient manor to receive survey results. Campus Center holds the largest amount of assessable students for surveying around lunch time, and this is what the researchers did. Although, it was hopeful that a large variety of students would appear at the campus center, there was no confirmation that would happen. Therefore, the fact that this study used a connivance sample instead of a random sample could be a threat to external validity (Creswell, 2003).

Paradigm Implication

In this study the researchers were looking at students attitudes regarding business-networking websites. The sample was Ithaca College students. This research study is in the Quantitative Paradigm with the results in the form of thin data. For this reason the researchers were looking at the reliability and the validity of the study. The researchers were not trying to holistically understand the situation, they are interested in the what, not the why of the results (Creswell, 2003).

According to Creswell (2003), the study was done through the lens that reality is static, not dynamic and therefore is generalizable to a greater population. The study results are objective, observable, representative, and can be replicated. There is little to no open-ended dialogue in this study (Creswell, 2003).

Conclusions

The authors are researching Ithaca College students' attitudes towards business-oriented, networking websites. The study has a wide student sample. The researchers study had subject representativeness with many differing genders; ages and majors due to random sampling. The survey had a response rate of 70 returned surveys out of 76.

The response from the survey to the authors' research question was that business-networking websites were rated somewhere between "neither" and "somewhat ineffective". When asked to compare business-networking websites with traditional methods of business-networking the average response was "The same" as traditional, with a slight leaning towards "somewhat better".

There is a higher usage in job-specific and social-networking websites from students than in business-networking websites. Regardless of this, the researchers

received many student perceptions about business-networking sites. The sample seemed to feel that business-networking websites were not that effective, but may be slightly more effective than traditional methods of business-networking. The authors feel that this response is generalizable to the Ithaca college student population.

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