



Envisioning Career Opportunities in the Fashion Business world

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Introduction. Unlike liberal art majors, seventy-five percent of students majoring in career-oriented fields expect to go to work directly after getting their bachelor's degree (Koc, 2010). Fashion business and management programs emphasize students' preparation for fashion careers and foster students to pursue their fashion business careers upon graduation in the business world. However, there has been little understanding of the specific job-related knowledge, competencies, and skills required for entry-level fashion business professionals in the filed clothing and textile. Additionally, competencies and skills required for fashion business professionals are constantly changing due to rapid development of retail and information technology in the highly globalized fashion industry environments. To keep up with the fast-evolving fashion industry, fashion business and management programs need to update undergraduate curricular by reflecting trends and changes in the job market to prepare students for fashion careers and make them more desirable in the highly saturated and competitive job market of the fashion industry. The purpose of this research is examine the nature of fashion business positions pertaining to buying and merchandising in terms of required qualifications, job-related knowledge, competencies, and skills. The results of this research provide educators in the fashion business and management programs with practical suggestions to facilitate a more industry-aligned curricular development.

Background. Jackson and Wilton (2016) pointed out the importance of nurturing career management competencies in undergraduate education especially through work-integrated learning. Kuijpers and Meijers (2012) identified four career competencies including career reflection, work exploration, career action, and networking and suggested students' career competencies correlate with a career-oriented learning environment. Hodges, Karpova, and Lentz (2010) reported a high level of job satisfaction and appreciation for the knowledge gained in clothing and textile classrooms among female graduates who were in their early career in the apparel industry. Muhammad and Ha-Brookshire (2011) found that US textiles and apparel sourcing jobs require multi-tasking skills, computer skills, and exceptional communication skills as well as on-the-job experience, industry knowledge and bilingual ability with little focus on college education. Given the fast-changing business environments surrounding the fashion industry, this study assesses the current state of knowledge and skill sets demanded from entry-level fashion positions mainly pertaining to buying and fashion merchandising.

Method. Job postings found in the buying and merchandiser categories in the apparel and retailing fields were collected from a fashion job portal site (www.stylecareers.com) for three weeks in January and February 2016. Out of 330 job postings collected, 172 postings were used for further data analysis after the initial screening for entry-level fashion buyer and

merchandising-related positions. Since senior positions typically require at least five-year experience in related fields, the researchers decided to analyze the job positions that require less than five year experience which are more relevant to recent undergraduate graduates in the job market. A coding scheme for required knowledge, competencies, and skills for buying and merchandising-related positions was developed through a conceptual analysis performed by the researchers on the 30 job descriptions.

Results. Twenty-seven different job titles were found including Assistant/Associate Merchandiser, Assistant/Associate Buyer, Merchandising Coordinator, Jr. Planner, Sales Coordinator, Field & Market Coordinator, Assistant/Associate Product Manager, and etc. While 66.9% of the positions required at least one-year experience in related fields, experience with eCommerce counted for 12.8%. Only 10.5% of the positions required experience in related fields for less than a year. Internship was only found in seven positions (4.1%). 47% of the positions required a bachelor's degree; while about 20% of the positions specifically mentioned a degree in fashion merchandising or related majors. Among major-specific knowledge or skills, retail math (36.6%), understanding of the fast-paced environments (27.9%), merchandising (21.5%), sense of fashion trends and aesthetic taste (16.3%), negotiation skills (13.4%), consumer/brand/mark understanding (11.1%), industry process (9.9%), and data/statistical analysis (9.9%) were identified. As computer skills, Excel (64%), Word (31.4%), other softwares (Photoshop, Illustrator, PLM, CMS / CRM softwares) (26.2%), Outlook/email (16.9%) were found relevant to the fashion business positions. Specifically, 19.8% of the positions required advanced Excel skills including pivot tables, Vlookups, and formula functions, or Macros. The most mentioned competencies were written and oral communication (69.2%), organizational skills (48.8%), meticulous and detail oriented (39.5%), multitasking (34.3%), analytical skills (32.6%), being a good team player (32%), prioritizing skills (27.9%), deadline driven (24.4%), entrepreneurial drive (19.8%), working with cross-departments (18.6%), problem solving (18%), being flexible and adaptable to changing environments (15.9%), professional work ethics (14%), interpersonal skills (14%), proactive attitude (13.4%), follow-up skills (11.6%), and time management (10.5%).

Implications. Results of this research indicate that employers in the fashion business value experience in related fields more than college education itself and industry or job-specific knowledge and skills are required for entering the workforce in the fashion industry. Besides emphasizing professional behaviors and work ethics demanded from the industry, developing a learning environment where students can work on their own career management competencies is called for. In addition, further research should be made to examine job responsibilities and requirements for senior positions to develop industry-aligned post-graduate programs.

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