

STUDENT EMPLOYABILITY AND COMMUNICATION DURING THE JOB RECRUITMENT PROCESS: THE OPINIONS OF STUDENTS AND EMPLOYERS

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Abstract. *The Career Centre of the University of Latvia undertook a comprehensive study regarding the issues of student employability and mutual communication with employers during the recruitment process. The study was conducted in two parts – 923 students from various higher education institutions in Latvia were surveyed during May-June 2015. The survey was used to inquire the current employment situation of the students of various study disciplines, determine the most popular types and choices of students in search for jobs and traineeship places, study the communication of the employers and given feedback to job seekers. The survey results outline the problems in mutual communication between the employers and employees and giving and receiving of feedback, as well as an explanation of the reasons for refusal of the job. In continuation of the study 84 employers were surveyed in spring 2017 regarding the experience of their company/institution in regard to employment of students, as well as communication with students as job seekers in the recruitment process. The outcome of the study show that employers are seeking students for a job position through job advertisement portals, but they try to recruit them also through social networks; in general they rate students as convincing during interviews, but also having excessive ambitions, expectations and not always an adequate appraisal of their own skills. The employers explain the problems noted by the students in regard to the employer communication during recruitment by being too busy, lack of time and a high number of applications per competition.*

Keywords: *communication, employability, feedback in job search, human resource management, personnel recruitment.*

Introduction

A shortage of personnel in many industries of the national economy has been one of the most pressing issues for the economy and business over the last years. This situation induces employers to adopt a more active and creative approach to looking for new employees, which goes so far as to involve contracting students at the initial stages of their studies. However, the competition for numerous specific vacancies remains rather high, and job applicants have to struggle to prove themselves as the best experts to fill the proposed vacancy. Even though employers are much interested in contracting the best students for their

companies, opinions expressed by students through university and college career centres make it clear that mutual communication in the course of personnel selection procedures is not always successful – it is not uncommon for new applicants to receive no answers regarding the results of job interviews, explanations for denial or replies to their applications. Considering the results of organisation culture studies, positions of human resource managers in respect of job interviewing, the experience of university and college career centre consultants and the findings made in the course of consulting students in their search of on-the-job training and employment opportunities, as well as the general applicability of the issue of youth employment in Latvia and Europe, researchers of the Career Centre of the University of Latvia have carried out a two-stage study in 2015 and 2017, having surveyed students about their relevant experience in looking for practical training and employment opportunities and communicating with employers and studied the employers' experience as pertains to interviewing and selecting students to fill the job vacancies in their companies.

Method and Participants

The study was carried out in two stages. In 2015, an online survey was arranged in order to summarise answers from 923 students (78 % women, 22 % men) from different higher education institutions. The most represented educational institutions were the University of Latvia (65 % respondents), Riga Stradiņš University (11.3 %), Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences (9 %), Riga Technical University (4.4 %), etc. The survey audience mostly consisted of the students studying social sciences (N=209, 23 %), management and economics (N=182, 20 %), healthcare and sports (N=127, 14 %), engineering sciences (N=117, 13 %), humanitarian sciences (N=93, 10 %), education and culture (N=69, 7.5 %), natural sciences (N=60, 6.5 %) and other disciplines (a total of 7.5 %). Most of the students reported that they were full-time (43.8 %) or part-time employees (23.9 %), whereas 5.5 % respondents reported that they were undergoing on-site practical training at the moment. The survey included questions regarding student employment, vacancy selection and the employee selection procedures, with an emphasis on questions regarding communication with employers and the provision of post-interview feedback. The second stage of the study, implemented in 2017, was an online survey of 84 employers, who were asked to provide their opinions regarding the experience of their company / institution with student employment, and the communication with students as job seekers in the process of personnel selection. The survey pool was mostly comprised of companies operating in the domains of service provision / trade (25 %), finance (14.3 %), banking (10.7 %), and a share of 9.5 % consisted of IT companies, government institutions and production enterprises.

Results and discussion

Vacancy proposal and choice

In order for a company to find the most appropriate employee and ensure successful organisation of the personnel selection process, it is essential to identify the optimal way to draw and assess adequate candidates (Boitmane, 2006). Employers have to keep in mind that the young people currently entering the labour market are the so-called Generation Y, characterised by their own thinking paradigm, their own values, ethical criteria, special features of perception and communication (Daliba, 2017). These young people are oriented towards rapid learning of new skills and abilities, ceaseless change, diversity in work, elasticity and a knack for new technologies (Dawn & Thomas, 2013), which is an important factor to be taken into consideration while selecting the methods for addressing employees and communicating with them. The study also involves a comparison of methods employed by companies for finding and attracting their future student employees and those used by students themselves to look for jobs. The employers pointed out that students mostly looked for jobs using job seeking portals (90.5 % did that frequently or occasionally), following personal recommendations from their friends or relatives (companies said that 72 % of students did that quite often), as well as through good contact within companies established during their on-the-job training (64.3 %) – see Fig. 1. These opinions perfectly match the replies provided by the surveyed students – 77 % respondents stated that they looked for jobs using job seeking ads, personal recommendations and social networks. The students also tended to be active in terms of their own initiative – both the employers and the students said that they showed their own interest in employment opportunities with specific companies. Statistical data and comments obtained through student surveys identify the initiative of job seekers themselves as a crucial factor in finding a job, e.g. personal contact with a company (*“I just went to the institution I wanted to work for and asked them if they needed an employee”*, *“I was sending my CV to different companies and succeeded eventually”*, etc.), proving oneself as a good trainee (*“I was offered a specific position upon completion of my on-site training”*), as well as creative and professional self-presentation, mostly through social networks (*“Employers contacted me through LinkedIn”*, *“I’ve carried out my individual campaign through social media”*). It is to be noted here that the students did not use the databases provided by university and college career centres too often – about 58 % respondents stated that they never used these portals at all, and just 20.4 % used those frequently or occasionally. This trend could be due to the fact that career support systems in different higher educational institutions are developed to considerably different extents (Šmitiņa, 2011).

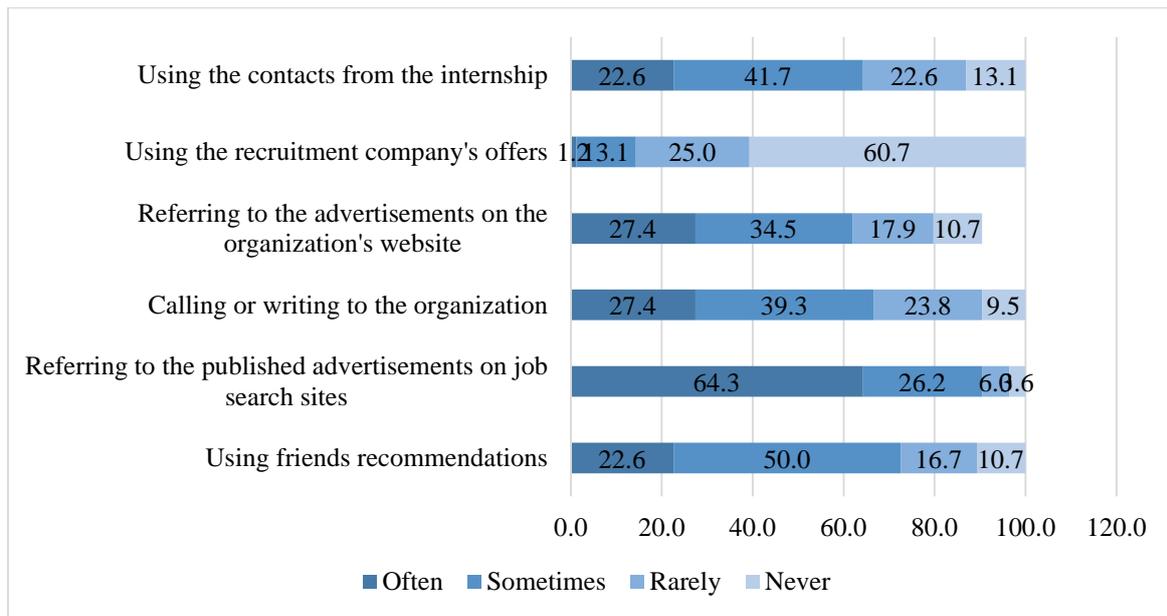


Figure 1. **Most popular methods used by students to find a job in your organization: employer opinions, % (N=84, created by the author)**

Results of the study indicate that employers mostly adhere to the classic personnel selections scheme, publishing their vacancies at tried-and-true job seeking portals in order to address their potential employees (Joshi, 2013). One could infer, however, that employers tend to develop a more formidable idea of social media as an important and potent tool for finding ideal employees, though not without a certain degree of cautious criticism towards social networks – generally, companies do publish advertisements on social media themselves, yet the proposals published by young people themselves are not analysed that scrupulously and do not get enough attention in general: 20 % employers used social media to see opinions about potential employees, 28 % company representatives said they used those for the assessment of an employee's personality, whereas 30 % used social networks to assess the interests and hobbies of a potential employee. Similar trends have been confirmed by a number of other studies, which goes to show that employers mostly use social networks to see if the information provided by an applicant matches the data available online and assess the ability of an applicant to present his/her personality through social media (Davidson et al., 2012). It stands to mention here that both workforce experts and theoretical studies emphasize the trend for more active use of new technologies to draw employees – it is the ability of a company to adjust itself to technological development and develop a detailed understanding of an employee's needs that can be the decisive factor in the competition for qualified personnel (Archana et al., 2014). The students did point out that finding job proposals adequate to one's abilities and preferences was in no way an easy task – only

24.7 % found it easy, with another 33.1 % agreeing with this statement to a lesser extent; 40 % students stated that the demand for young specialists was insufficient in their domains of interest, with another 26 % agreeing with this opinion in part (see Fig. 2). According to the obtained feedback, finding a job in the appropriate domain was, by comparison, most easy for those studying engineering sciences (45 % completely agreed / agreed). On the other hand, 58 % humanitarian students, 49 % social students and 47 % management and economics students disagreed with this statement. Engineering science students also were less inclined to agree with the opinion that the proposed remuneration level was inadequate to their requirements (21 %). Even though most students claimed that they did select vacancies very diligently, 38 % businesses reported that application documents were often inadequate to the vacancy or submitted rather carelessly. The aspect to be mentioned here is that the employees pointed out that CV and motivation letters were only important at the initial stage of selection (71 %), so the crucial factors for a student's further career were his/her performance at job interviews and demonstration of his/her skills through the completion of test assignments. Several employer opinions provided by answering open-ended questions reflected a certain degree of new applicants' negligence as pertains to the preparation of documents – *“Very weak CVs, copy-paste motivation letters, an abundance of grammar errors, inappropriate selfies and terrible impressions from social media investigations. Receiving an application of proper quality is an infrequent piece of luck, and yet it still does not mean that the candidate is going to prove appropriate.”*

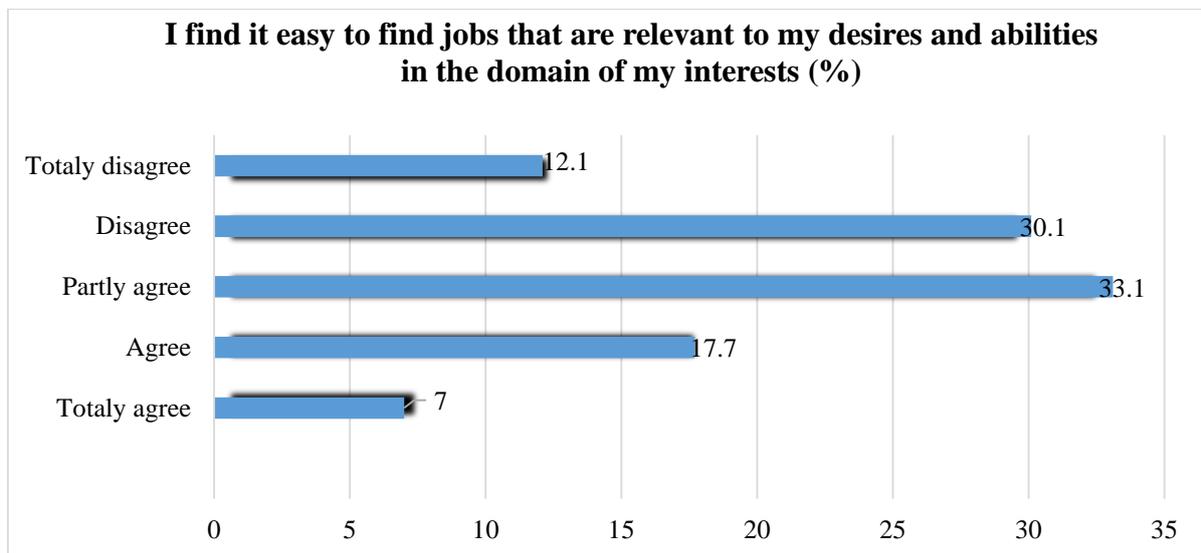


Figure 2. Chances of finding appropriate job proposals in the domain of interest: student opinions, % (N=923, created by the author)

Communication and feedback in a job interview

Within the boundaries of the study, the employers were also asked to assess students' self-presentation skills at job interviews (Fig. 3). In general, the employers did assess students' self-expression at job interviews in a rather acclamatory and positive manner – almost 50 % employers said that the students behaved in a convincing manner at interviews, ~70 % employers rated the students' mode of dress as appropriate, 92 % companies confirm that the students arrived on time, 44 % agreed that the students premeditated the potential questions rather diligently, but only 15.4 % employers would agree that the students tended to comprehend and study information about the company they wanted to work for. As to the students, they did state in their replies that they prepared for interviews with special diligence, considered the potential questions that could be asked and learnt the essential information about their potential employers before interviews – 59.6 % students agreed/completely agreed with this statement, and another 28.4 % agreed therewith in part. This could show that students do take their job interviews seriously, but, on the other hand, these answers could be a case of wishful thinking.

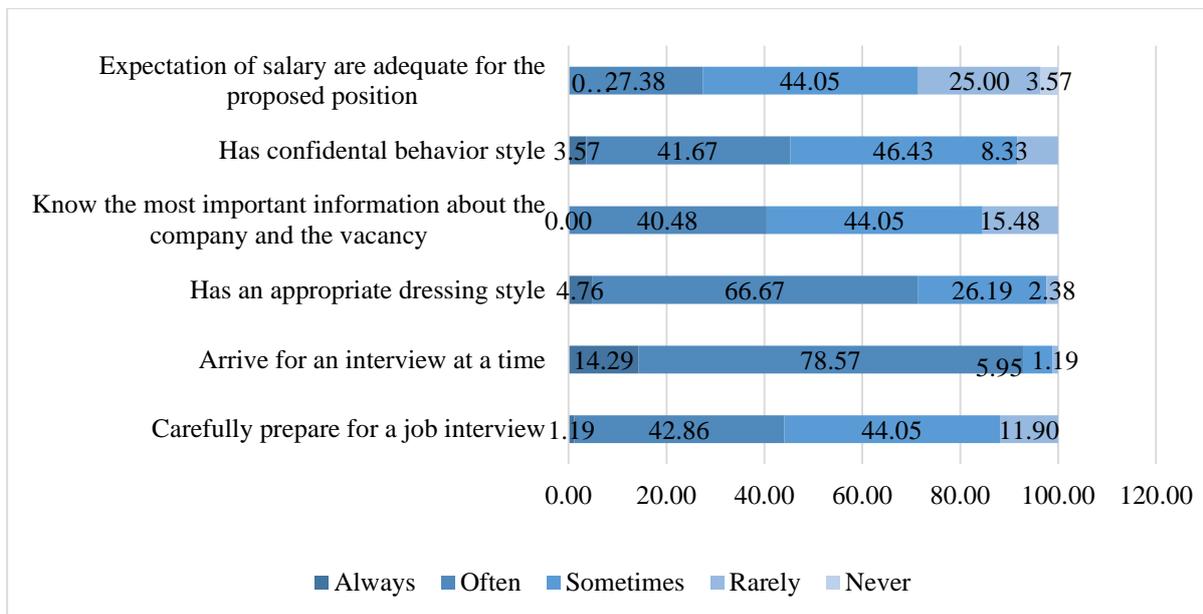


Figure 3. **Students' self-presentation at job interviews: employer opinions, %** (N=84, created by the author)

The employers' responses to open-ended questions also contained more critical comments regarding students' readiness for job interviews, such as this one – *“Different students come to do their practical training or respond to job advertisements. Some students come to interviews 100 % sure that they do meet*

all job requirements, but have no idea on the company's field of operations or the current developments therein. Another frequently mentioned issue was that students often had groundless ambitions regarding their job or remuneration – “Students are willing and inquisitive, but their own demands are made without studying the current market situation”, “The general impression is that students wish to get a job in their domain at once and have respectively higher salaries.” Another aspect identified as an essential difficulty for young job seekers in particular was the problem of disproportion between desired and actual remuneration – most students agreed (58 %) or partly agreed (30.4 %) that the requirements set for job applicants were rather high, whereas the proposed remuneration mostly failed to meet such requirements (Figure 4). The students of social and humanitarian sciences, as well as healthcare and sports, were the most sceptical in respect of the disproportion between requirements and remunerations. However, in the employers' opinion, about one third of young applicants sought remunerations too high to be adequate to the proposed vacancies. This goes to show that both sides tend to look at the issue of remuneration from their own standpoints – employers not always offer adequate salaries, whereas students as employees tend to have unrealistic ideas and expectations as pertains to remuneration

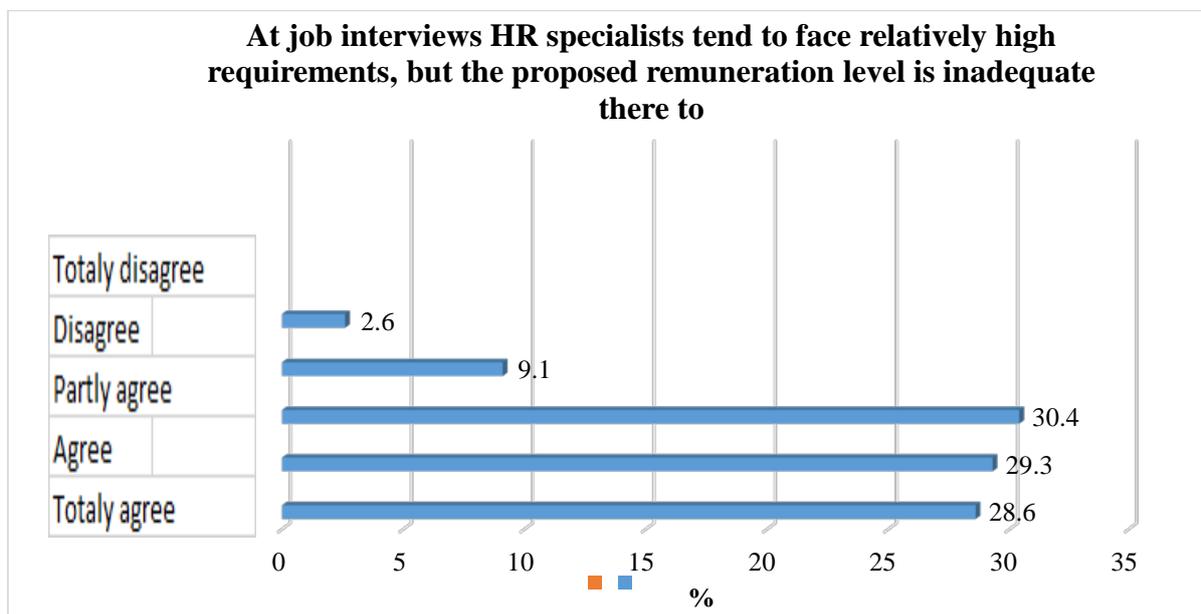


Figure 4. **The issue of requirements and remuneration: student opinions, %**
(N=923, created by the author)

The study shows that the students' experience with job interviews was greatly diverse – almost 40 % respondents said that there were job-unrelated and personal questions asked at interviews (27 % never had such experience), 15 % had to face

aggressive communication on part of the interviewer (54.7 % – never), 19.2 % students often or sometimes had the feeling that they were lied to regarding the course or results of the personnel selection procedure (52 % – never), 36 % students also stated that interviewers often or sometimes promised that they would provide a response about the results, but failed to do it afterwards. Comments show that interviewers sometimes stated additional requirements that were not mentioned in the job advertisement – this is often associated with language skills, for example: *“Even though the job advertisement does not require any knowledge of Russian, the interview was in Russian”, “It was stated at the interview that knowledge of Russian was required, even though it was not mentioned anywhere”*. Applicants are also selected by nationality – *“It was unpleasant to hear that people of Russian nationality would be preferred”*. The students also remembered cases of unprofessional behaviour on part of interviewers, for instance, *“The employer behaves too familiarly”, “Improperly dressed interviewer”, “Setting up confusing situations, flirting on part of the employer and negligence in the questions asked at the interview”, “Minding other business in parallel”, etc.* The students pointed out that some interviews featured overly complicated tasks that had nothing to do with the proposed employment, e.g., *“I do not understand those interviews that feature several selection stages and require dealing with lots of tasks in order to pass a stage. This could only be justified in case of an adequate position and remuneration.”* Human resource management experts point out that the provision of feedback regarding an applicant's self-presentation at an interview, results of interviews and subsequent selection stages is of special importance within the process of communication between employers and employees. It is assumed that timely provision of feedback helps a job applicant feel more confident at subsequent selection stages and provides an insight into the culture of an organisation and the mode of communication in general (Manuel L., 2015). However, experts of Latvian university and college career centres mention that students often complain about the way companies provide or fail to provide such feedback. Roughly one third of the students surveyed within the boundaries of the study (36.5 %) stated that they always or often received information regarding the further selection procedure or final decision after the initial submission of documents to the employer, 24.3 % students received such information occasionally, whereas 27 % students never received such information or only received it on very rare occasions. At this stage of the selection process, feedback mostly consists of just a standard message confirming receipt of documents. A more positive picture as pertains to feedback from employers can be observed after the first job interview (Figure 5) – over a half (53 %) students said that they always or often received further instructions regarding the subsequent stages of the selection process. Such information was provided after

the final interview to 46 % respondents. It should be noted here, however, that there was a number of respondents who said that they did not receive such feedback at all or received it very rarely, even after the final interview – that is, 16 % of all the students participating in the study.

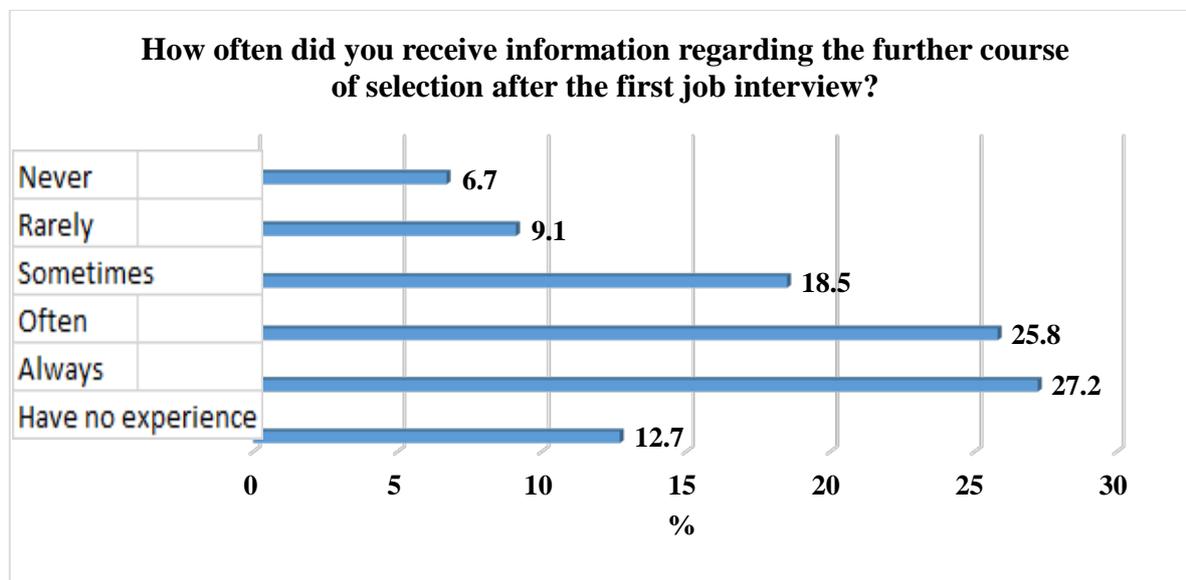


Figure 5. Receipt of feedback after the first job interview: student opinion, % (N= 923, created by the author)

Comments on feedback reflect both the positive examples of feedback and negative students' experience and feelings. Many students said that feedback to applicants was provided during selection already – *“Personally focused denial, with a (later fulfilled) promise to offer a job within a different project that was better suited for me”*, *“It was made clear at once whether there was a chance to get the job or not”*, etc. Sometimes, job applicants have to act at their own initiative in order to know the selection results – *“Usually, I had to call and ask about the results myself”*. Most respondents said that feedback was of a great importance when seeking a job; 82.5 % agreed with the statement that an employer's explanations for denial could help a job seeker understand and analyse his/her mistakes in the process of looking for employment, as well as identify the skills that required improvement. Almost a half of the audience, i.e. 48 % respondents, agreed that this could also help overcome the disappointment caused by denial (with another 31 % respondents partly agreeing with that). Apart from that, most job seekers agreed that a substantiated denial from an employer would help them prepare themselves better for future contests and gain a more positive outlook on future career prospects in general. Only 10 % of the respondents thought that such feedback would not give them anything and would therefore be unnecessary.

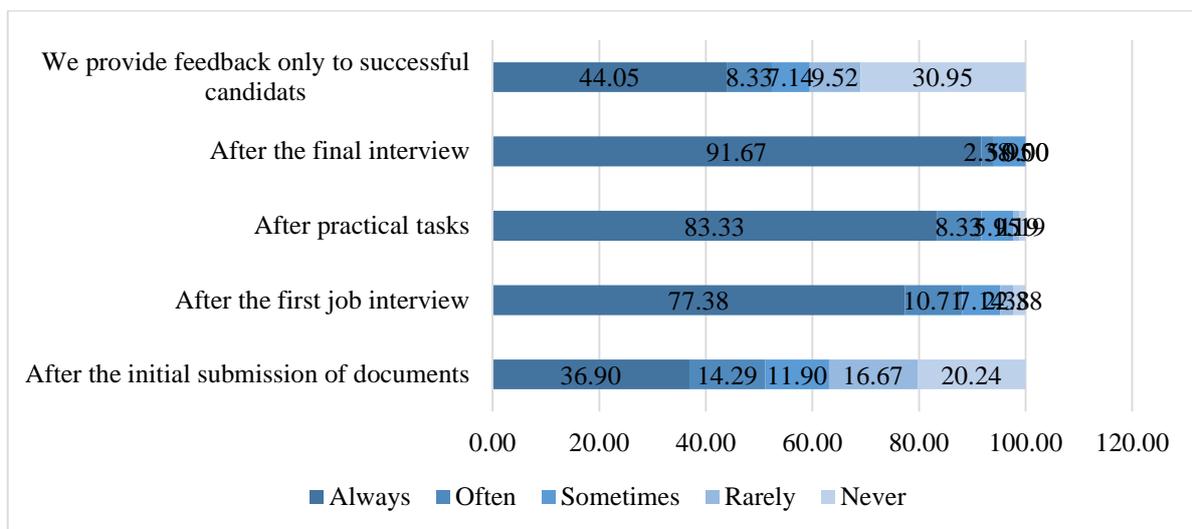


Figure 6. **Feedback provision frequency: employer opinion, %**
(N=84, created by the author)

The employers themselves pointed out that they did provide feedback regarding interviews to applicants in 92 % of the cases. Feedback was also provided in 83 % of the cases after the completion of practical tasks. Contrary to the students' opinion, 87 % employers said that they always or often provided feedback after the first job interview. It is much less common for employers to provide feedback after the initial receipt of documents – only a half of the employers did it often or always (Figure 6). Most commonly, the employers provided feedback in the form of a letter or a call confirming that the respective applicant was hired. The most frequently mentioned reasons for leaving job applicants with no reply, as specified by the employers in the respective open-ended question, were the shortage of time or busyness with daily activities, too many applications to reply to, errors in the process of communicating with an applicant (“*Sometimes e-mail addresses and phone numbers are specified incorrectly, an e-mail could remain as an unsent draft due to human error*”), as well as an applicant's own non-compliance and responsibility for the correctness of the selection procedure (“*The applicant's abilities, knowledge and experience are totally inappropriate for the proposed position*”). In some situations, the decision was made during the interview already (“*If we both understand during the conversation that we will be unable to cooperate in the future*”). Answers provided to the open-ended question regarding the improvement of communication with student job seekers showed that many employers had a very positive experience and outlook on future prospects – (“*We would gladly have students working with us. Key recommendation: if you are interested in the IT industry and strive to do something for real, it is not the official work experience that matters, but rather the fact that you have been doing something in practice.*”).

The employers' advice was to treat each other with respect. *“The main thing is to behave honestly and respectfully, and have all communication based on these core principles”*. It was also recommended to adhere to the boundaries of interviews both at an interview and in the provision of feedback, as well as to improve the electronic environment. *“I would recommend that companies should develop a section at their websites where applicants could view their “status” in the course of selection themselves. Names and surnames of applicants could be replaced with certain ID codes only known to the employer and the respective applicant.”*, *“Implement a system that would notify applicants as the selection procedure progresses. This, however, requires investments.”*

Conclusions

1. Both students and employers use similar channels to find a job/employee. Traditional methods, such as job ad portals, recommendations of friends/relatives, activity and initiative of job applicants remain the most popular channels for seeking employment. In the meantime, however, self-promotion through social media keeps growing ever more relevant due to the diverse use of social networks by students for proposing themselves on the labour market. At that, employers retain a more cautious attitude towards seeking employees through social media and mainly use these to assess the personality, hobbies and interests of a potential new employee after the receipt of application documents. Resources of higher education institutions, such as career days or faculty recommendations, are used comparatively less frequently.
2. The most essential difficulty encountered in the process of job seeking, as reported by the students, was that job advertisements required several years of experience. Another major problem reported was the imbalance between the amounts of remuneration and the requirements set by employers, especially as pertains to students who studied social and humanitarian sciences and healthcare/sports. However, businesses stated that new applicants' expectations of high salaries were not always justified and appropriate to their abilities.
3. Most students had no negative experience with interviews – neither aggression on part of the interviewer, nor lies about the selection procedure. However, about 1/4 of the surveyed students had to face the need to answer personal questions not related to their potential job, as well as their interviewers' failure to communicate the results of the selection procedure, even though they promised to do so.
4. Most of the participants pointed out that feedback was of essential importance within the employment seeking process; it could help one realise

and analyse the aspects that they would need to improve in their progress towards finding a job, overcome the disappointment caused by denial and gain a better idea of the results. Besides, it would be much indicative of the company itself, its values and culture.

5. Only a half of the students who participated in the study received feedback, i.e., denial or instructions for the further selection procedure, from the potential employers after the first job interview. Even after the final interview, many respondents stated that they seldom received any feedback. Usually, letters of denial received from employers did not explain the reasons for denial; by and large, explanations for denial were formal and did not necessarily reflect the true reasons. The employers explained their failure to provide feedback with a shortage of time, busyness and large numbers of applications for vacancies.

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