

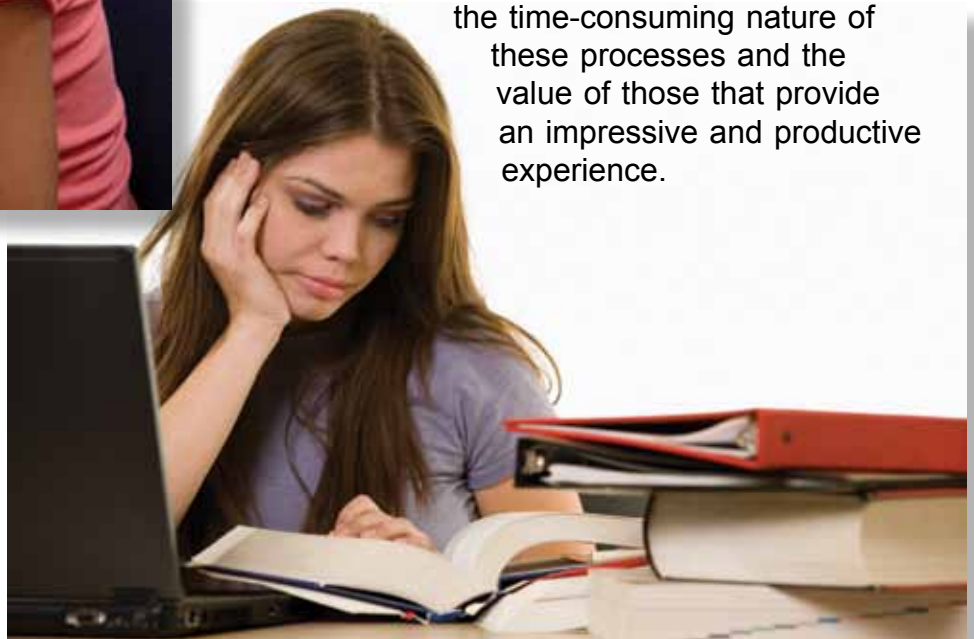
# Online Application Process Issues: Students Speak Out on Current Practices

by Mary E. Scott





Students know that applying for jobs online is part of the current employment process. But they rarely connect success with an employer to complying with the online application requirements, and this relates to students' ongoing frustration about the time-consuming nature of these processes and the value of those that provide an impressive and productive experience.



**Figure 1: Most important factors on a company website, per students**

Factor	BS/BA	MS/PhD	MBA
Learn about available positions	1	1	1
To apply for a job	2	2	3
Information to decide whether to apply	3	3	4
Learn about their products and services	4	4	2
Information to prepare for an interview	5	6	6
Learn about their recruiting process	6	5	5
Learn about employee benefits	7	7	9
Seeing people like me on their website	8	8	7
Watch interactive video, e.g. "Day in the Life"	9	9	8
Take an assessment test to measure my fit	10	10	10

Your online application process has such a powerful impact on your employer brand that students' experience with it measurably encourages—or discourages—their pursuing opportunities with your organization.

What many consider simply a back-room, transactional component of candidate processing is an ongoing cause for students' satisfaction (or lack of same) that influences their perceptions of an organization in ways that extend well beyond the application process itself.

## Project Background

Since 1991, consulting firm Scott Resource Group (SRG) has conducted an annual survey to measure students' needs, expectations, and experiences as regards the college recruitment process. The 2008 study, *Recruitment Technol-*

*ogy Tools*, comprised a broad array of topics, but participating students voiced such consistent unaided commentary about their frustrations with employers' online application processes that the follow-on survey in 2009 focused exclusively on that subject.

As with most SRG annual campus studies, the *Online Application Process Issues* survey (OAPI) was funded by a consortium of employers, which in 2009 comprised Procter & Gamble, Qualcomm, and Schlumberger. Representatives of these three companies contributed to the content design and selected the fielding sites for the study. Undergraduates and advanced degree candidates (ADCs) participated at the following universities: Cornell; Georgia Tech; MIT; Ohio State; Penn State; Purdue; Stanford; Texas A&M; and the Universities of California (Berkeley and LA), Illinois, Michigan, Texas,

and Wisconsin. M.B.A. students at the following graduate schools of business also participated in the survey: Johnson (Cornell); Kellogg (Northwestern); Haas (UC – Berkeley); McCombs (Texas); and Ross (Michigan).

## Survey Methodology And Scope

The OAPI study gathered qualitative data through one-hour focus groups conducted at each university fielding sites, and participating students completed an encrypted online survey to surface quantitative data. Students received a \$25 Amazon.com gift card upon completion and submission of the electronic questionnaire.

The fielding period for the campus focus groups and quantitative data-gathering was February 18 – March 17, 2009. Of the 274 students who contributed to the study, 175 were undergraduates, 49 were pursuing technical advanced degrees (e.g. master's, Ph.D.), and the remaining 50 were M.B.A. candidates.

## Survey Findings

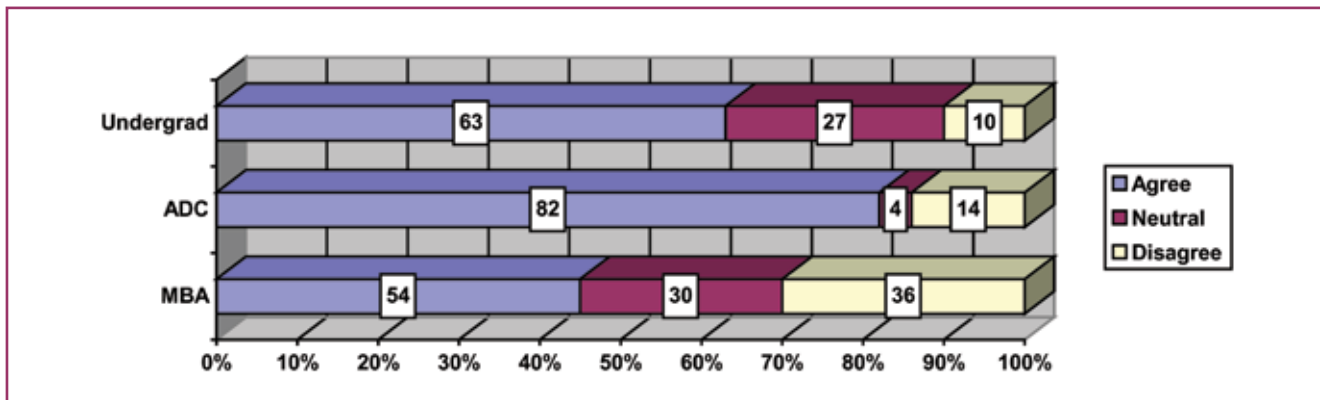
The first section of the questionnaire participating students completed asked them to force rank their reasons for visiting an employer's website, and what their expectations were of its content



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**Figure 2: “I had an experience with an online application process that impacted an employer’s image.”**



and functionality. Not only did students across degree levels by and large agree on their expectations of employers’ websites, but the ability to learn about and apply for jobs ranked among the top three most important considerations for students across the board. (See Figure 1.) This baseline expectation serves as the framework for the comparative factor rating findings presented in the remainder of this section.

The selected findings that follow are organized into four major buckets, consistent with the OAPI report format: website content; interactive elements; features and tools; and applicant interface. The section concludes with findings that measure the impact of employers’ online application processes.

### WEBSITE CONTENT

The sponsoring employers suggested a number of questions for focus group discussion topics and quantitative data gathering that targeted what students valued in career page content delivery, and the degree to which this information helped them to differentiate among competing organizations. Key findings included:

- **Relevant information should be easy to find:** Not only was this factor characteristic of the most impressive employer websites according to students, but the gap with those they deemed *least* impressive was among the most significant. Such expectations in-

cluded “concrete information about what I’d be doing,” rather than “We focus on teamwork,” according to one survey participant. And, as summarized by an M.B.A. student, “On the best sites, you don’t have to look too much to find what you want and need.”

- **Positions for students should be clearly identified:** Not only do students value websites that differentiate college jobs from experienced positions, but they further appreciate those sites that make it apparent which openings are appropriate for undergraduates versus graduate students—and stipulate which opportunities are for interns rather than full-time hires.
- **Websites don’t help students differentiate among potential employers:** Quantitative findings supported this conclusion across all three degree level survey cohorts, with one student commenting, “You learn about a company’s culture from meeting their people and visiting them. You can’t get that online. No one shows the bad stuff.”

### INTERACTIVE ELEMENTS

Then as now, employers were very interested in students’ views on incorporating interactive elements into their website design. Participants’ reactions to three such tools were:

- **Video testimonials from new hires:** Surprisingly, students were

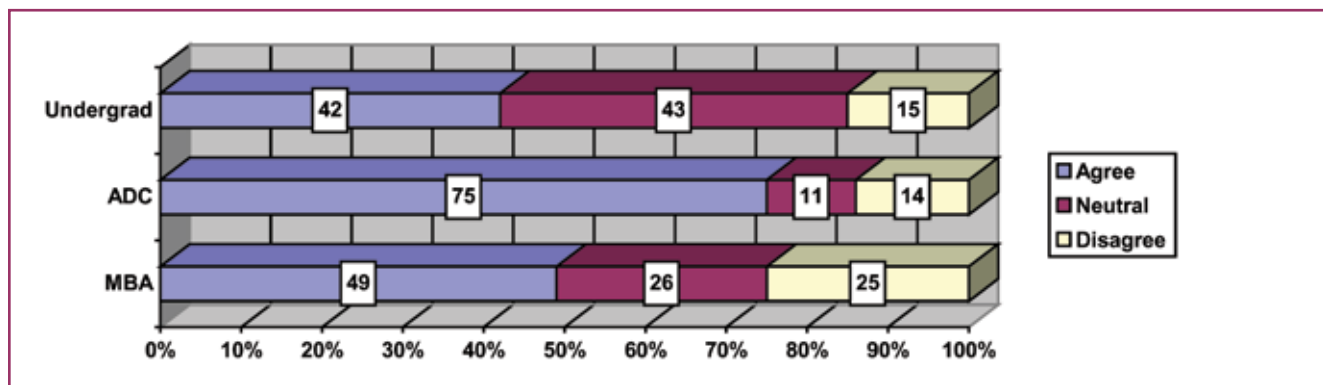
not as supportive of employers’ adding video clips to their websites as the conventional wisdom has suggested. Chief among students’ concerns were the lack of credibility of much of what they had seen online (“So many of them are produced like the ‘Brady Bunch’—you can see right through them.”), and the time-consuming nature of watching the videos.

- **Social media interactions:** Survey participants strongly *disagreed* that they wanted or expected employers to interact with them on Facebook, because they considered this social media outlet to be part of their personal lives. Fast forward to 2011, and students still make the clear distinction with employers’ use of LinkedIn, which they consider to be a professional communication channel, and an appropriate social networking recruitment tool.
- **Avatars:** One interactive element that has largely disappeared from employers’ websites since 2009 is the use of avatars, which students participating in the 2009 OAPI study roundly panned. As one student observed, “If you need to provide an avatar, your website is too complex.”

### FEATURES AND TOOLS

When rating a series of factor statements mapped to online application

**Figure 3: “I was sufficiently confused by/annoyed with an online application to not complete it.”**



process functionality, survey participants were clear in their preferences and expectations, among them:

- Having an easy-to-navigate job-search function:** Employers that fell short on this were a major annoyance to students. In addition to the expressed difficulty in working with many employers’ job-search filtering and accuracy, focus group participants frequently cited their confusion when attempting to apply for the positions career fair representatives had mentioned to them. Instead, they had to sift through reams of jobs that didn’t match, and/or seemed ill-suited to college students.
- Ability to upload resumes without reformatting:** Students across the board complained about online application processes that forced them to reformat their resumes. Or, having to upload *and* complete an online form that duplicated what was on their CV. Parsing software was a welcome tool—when it worked properly.
- Allowing applicants to save their online applications:** In addition, students expressed strong support for another online application feature that “the most impressive employers” used—the capability to save work-in-progress. Because many online application processes are so time-consuming, this was rated a valued characteristic by students in each of the three survey cohorts—and those websites

that lacked such a feature were routinely disparaged during focus group discussions.

### APPLICANT INTERFACE

The final grouping of online application process factors that students evaluated focused on the candidate interface. Rather than targeting specific website elements, these statements were designed to measure the overall efficacy of employers’ online systems from the candidate’s perspective. Three such factors, all rated as characteristic of the most impressive websites, were:

- Easy to use:** Not a surprising finding, given the recurring theme of the value of a simple user experience, but students contributed specific feedback about their expectations of easy-to-use sites—along with a series of characteristics that, in their view, define a site that is *not* easy-to-use: “too many scroll-down menus,” “cluttered with too many job options,” and “a site that’s built for customers, where it’s hard to find the careers section.”
- Reasonable time to complete tasks:** Apart from the self-evident nature of why this factor was of value to students, online processes that didn’t “abuse” their time provided a clue to survey participants about company culture, as supported by the following “impressive” descriptor—and employer extrapolation.

- Treated me with respect throughout the process:** Survey participants provided consistent support throughout the focus group discussions that their experience with employers’ online processes contributed to their perceptions of the companies to which they applied. To wit, an M.B.A. who commented, “If they don’t respect my time [with their online application process], why would I want to work there?”

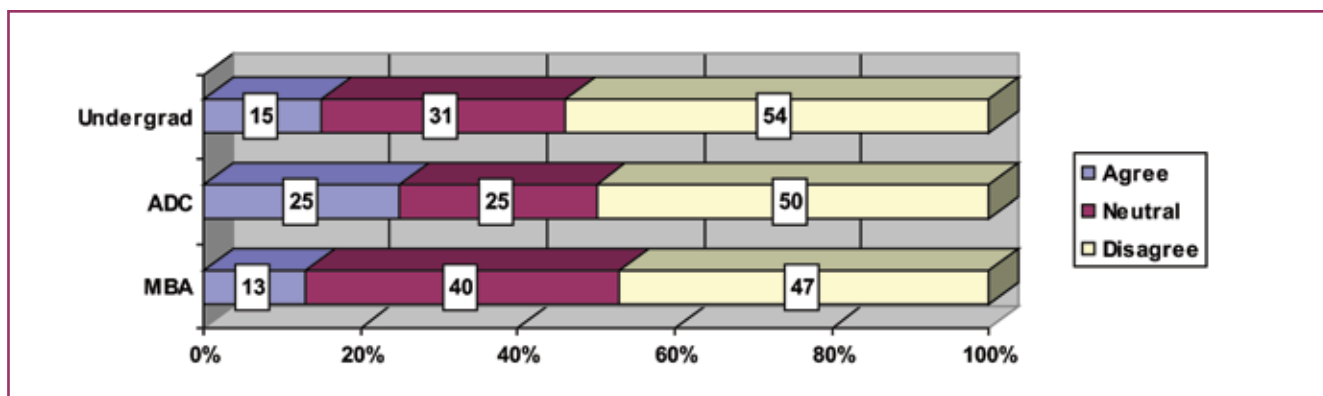
### MEASURING THE IMPACT OF EMPLOYERS’ WEBSITES AND ONLINE APPLICATION PROCESSES

As Figures 2 through 4 show, online application processes did indeed affect employers’ campus brands according to survey participants, for better *and* for worse. For example, students provided agreement ratings in response to the following statement: “I had an experience with an online application process that impacted an employer’s image.”

Comments from participants that underscored these ratings included one who noted that “a really slick and good website and application process gives me a strong image of the company,” and another who concluded “The online recruitment process is an important part of finding out how a company works, and how they treat their employees.”

Of special note, and consistent with a similar data point in Figure 3, is the agreement rating among ADC

**Figure 4: “Most online employment applications are straightforward and efficient.”**



(technical advance degree candidate) population, many of whom were studying computer science or engineering. Their comments during campus focus groups indicated a strong negative reaction to employers’ websites and application processes that did not meet their expectations.

A follow-on question asked students to indicate their level of agreement with this statement: “I was sufficiently confused by/annoyed with an online application to not complete it.”

And as a final data point that offers evidence that more employers than not provided students with a less-than-desired online application experience, consider the level of disagreement with the statement that most online applications are easy and efficient. (See Figure 4.)

As the force rank presented earlier showed, students are much more concerned with their ability to learn about and apply for positions than they are with website content. This was apparent in the focus groups as well: Despite framing the discussions with the running rules that first we’d focus on the website itself, then on the application process, every initial question about design and content immediately veered into application process issues—and remained there throughout most of the hour. This suggests that employers would benefit from investing primarily in the applicant interface experience, and address design and content considerations as a secondary concern. As one survey

participant wrote, “Having an efficient, easy-to-use application process is more important than having a career website that is informative and friendly.”

### Current State Observations

As mentioned earlier, the *Online Application Process Issues (OAPI)* study was conducted in 2009. Since then, SRG has fielded two consortium-funded surveys: *Career Fairs and Information Sessions in 2010* and *Recruitment Attitudes and Expectations: 2011 Reset*. What was striking during the campus focus groups at each of the participating universities over the two years since the OAPI study was completed was the degree to which employers’ online application processes continued to surface as a discussion topic—on an unaided basis. These key themes emerged:

- Students value the ability to learn about and apply for the positions that employers’ representatives describe at career fairs and information sessions.
- Job listings that comprise hundreds of open positions that are not filtered for students remain a source of frustration, and are generally considered a waste of time.
- Representatives who respond to students’ questions at career fairs and information sessions with the advice to “go to our website” are employer brand killers, according to survey participants.

- The more technology plays a role in campus recruitment practices, the greater the importance of personal contact as the key differentiator among potential employers.
- Despite some improvement in this regard, students still consider most employers’ online application processes to be black holes. When one master’s degree candidate recently mentioned that she had actually been contacted by an employer after applying online—an experience she described as a “first” in the six years she had been submitting electronic applications—the other students expressed surprise that this had happened.

Students recognize that applying online is simply part of the employment process landscape these days. But, as just noted, they rarely connect success with a given employer to complying with their online application requirements. And this finding maps directly to the ongoing frustration that persists among campus candidates as to the time-consuming nature of such processes, and their valuing those systems that do provide an impressive and productive candidate experience. To this point, and in conclusion, a composite of students’ best practice expectations for employers’ online application processes continues to comprise the filtering capability of BestBuy’s website; the intuitive design of TurboTax; and the status tracking capability of FedEx, the latter to address the much-maligned black hole syndrome! 📺