

Discrepancy Between Employment Expectations and Realities Among College Students in the Post-Pandemic Era: Psychological Adaptation

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Abstract: This paper delves into the gap between college students' job expectations and realities in the post-pandemic era, assessing the psychological toll and adaptive strategies. The pandemic has deeply shaken the global job market, heightening uncertainty and difficulties for students. Mismatches between their job aspirations and actual opportunities can trigger anxiety, depression, and self-esteem issues. This study scrutinizes this employment gap's psychological impact, highlighting the significance of psychological resilience and social support networks for coping with job-related challenges. Lastly, we explore how universities and students can collaborate to enhance students' job market adaptability.

This research aims to gain a deeper understanding of the psychological state of college students when facing employment challenges in the post-pandemic era and how to provide support and resources to help them better cope with these challenges. This is significant for universities, governments, and society at large to ensure that college students can achieve career success while maintaining their mental well-being.

Keywords: Employment Discrepancy; Psychological Health; College Students; Post-Pandemic Era

In the post-pandemic era, college students worldwide face unique employment challenges. The pandemic's impact on the job market has led to economic instability and uncertainty, affecting students' career development. Challenges include reduced job opportunities, increased costs, limited job-seeking channels, higher job-related stress, and lower job quality, resulting in both "job scarcity" and "hiring difficulties." A survey conducted by the "PSCUS" project team at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in late March 2020 among 3,030 recent graduates from 19 higher education institutions found that approximately three-quarters of recent graduates were not actively engaged in job hunting. When compared to survey data from late November 2019, it was found that by late March 2019, over three-quarters of recent graduates had already received job offers from employers^[1]. The economic recession triggered by the pandemic and job market uncertainty may result in a significant gap between their employment expectations and the actual reality.

Therefore, understanding the gap between college students' employment expectations and realities and its impact on their well-being is crucial. Studying their adaptation strategies and the role of social support can inform better support systems. This research explores these aspects to enhance students' career development and mental health, providing guidance and support^[2].

1. Background and Impact of the Discrepancy between Employment Expectations and Realities

1.1 Impact of the Pandemic on the Global Job Market

In the current post-pandemic era, the job market has undergone significant transformations on a global scale. The pandemic has triggered a series of economic and social impacts, including business closures, a surge in layoffs, and instability in many industries. This uncertainty directly affects the employment prospects of college graduates.

1.2 Discrepancy Between College Students' Employment Expectations and the Actual Job Market

College students often acquire extensive knowledge and skills, anticipating careers matching their education. Yet, pandemic-induced employment challenges can create gaps between expectations and reality. Securing desired jobs, salaries, and industry alignment can be challenging, impacting career satisfaction and self-esteem.

1.3 Association between Psychological Well-being and the Discrepancy between Employment Expectations and Realities

This gap between employment expectations and reality not only affects college students' career development but also has far-reaching implications for their psychological well-being. College students may experience anxiety, depression, and self-esteem issues as they struggle to find job opportunities that meet their expectations. These psychological impacts can have negative effects on their academic performance, social interactions, and life satisfaction, subjecting them to additional psychological stress.

2. Psychological Impacts and Adaptation Strategies for Coping with the Employment Discrepancy

2.1 The Relationship Between Employment Expectations and Anxiety and Depression

Job market uncertainty and anxiety and depression: College students are often more prone to feelings of anxiety and depression when facing an uncertain job market. They may worry about not finding jobs that match their expectations or experiencing long-term unemployment, leading to increased anxiety. Research indicates a positive correlation between job market instability and anxiety and depression.

Career and economic expectations impact mental health: College students' expectations about future careers and finances can influence mental well-being. Pessimism relates to higher anxiety and depression. Low job expectations correlate with more anxiety and depression.

Social support and self-efficacy: Social support and self-efficacy are crucial factors in mitigating the relationship between employment expectations and anxiety and depression. If college students feel they have sufficient social support and confidence in their job-seeking abilities, they are more likely to cope with anxiety and depression. Social support can come from family, friends, mentors, counselors, or mental health professionals.

Gender differences: Some studies have found gender differences in the relationship between employment expectations and anxiety and depression. Women may be more prone to anxiety and depression when facing job challenges, influenced by social and cultural factors and gender roles.

2.2 The Relationship Between Employment Expectations and Self-esteem

Self-esteem can lead to high job expectations. Some people with inflated self-esteem may expect exceptional jobs and salaries. When reality doesn't meet these expectations, it can lead to feelings of inadequacy and frustration.

Self-esteem issues may exacerbate the negative impact of the gap: When an individual's self-esteem is threatened, the gap between employment expectations and reality may lead to more severe psychological effects. They may feel they have not met society's expectations, potentially triggering emotions such as anxiety, depression, and self-deprecation.

Self-esteem and coping strategies: Self-esteem problems can shape one's approach to handling the disconnect between employment expectations and reality. Some individuals opt for proactive coping strategies, like seeking career counseling, skill enhancement, or pursuing further training to address the gap. Conversely, others may resort to negative coping methods, such as avoidance or self-doubt.

2.3 The Role of Psychological Resilience in Coping with Employment Challenges

Psychological resilience refers to an individual's ability to maintain mental health, positive coping, and adaptation when facing adversity, stress, and setbacks in life. Psychological resilience plays a crucial role in coping with employment challenges. Here are the relationships between psychological resilience and coping with employment challenges:

Positive outlook: Those with strong psychological resilience stay positive amid job challenges, seeing them as opportunities for growth, not threats. They cope better with setbacks and view them as chances to learn. Job market instability often relates to anxiety and depression.

Adaptability: Psychological resilience enables individuals to adapt to change and uncertainty better. In situations of job market instability, those with psychological resilience are more likely to flexibly adjust their employment expectations, proactively seek new opportunities, and explore different career paths to better adapt to market changes.

Emotional regulation: Psychological resilience helps individuals effectively manage their emotions. When facing employment challenges, individuals with psychological resilience can better control anxiety and depression, reducing the negative impact of

emotional stress.

2.4 The Role of Social Support Networks

Social support networks are crucial in addressing employment challenges. They offer emotional, informational, and practical help, encouragement, and networking opportunities. These roles help individuals cope with stress, make informed decisions, and find support during tough times.

Emotional support: Social support networks provide emotional support, helping individuals deal with anxiety, depression, and setbacks. Sharing emotional experiences with friends, family, or other trusted individuals can alleviate psychological stress, making individuals feel understood and supported.

Informational support: Social networks provide job market insights, career opportunities, and job search advice. Friends, colleagues, or mentors share industry trends, interview tips, and career guidance, enabling individuals to grasp the job market and make informed choices.

Substantive support: Social support networks can provide substantive assistance, such as job referrals, resume improvements, recommendation letters, or training opportunities. This substantive support helps individuals pursue and secure job opportunities more effectively.

3. How Universities Can Support College Students in Job Seeking

Career Counseling and Guidance: Universities can establish career counseling centers to provide personalized career planning and job-seeking guidance. This includes assisting students in setting career goals, crafting resumes, preparing for interviews, and searching for internships and job opportunities.

Offering Practical Experience: Universities should collaborate with industries to provide students with internships, co-op programs, and job opportunities. This helps students gain real-world experience, enhancing their competitiveness in the job market.

Mental Health Support: During the job-seeking process, students may experience stress and anxiety. Universities should offer mental health support services, including psychological counseling and support, to help them cope with emotional challenges.

Addressing Individual Needs: Students' job-seeking needs vary, and universities should focus on personalized support. Some students may require more skills training, while others may need more career counseling. Additionally, tracking graduates' job outcomes and assessing the effectiveness of support programs based on feedback allows for continuous improvement.

4. How College Students Can Navigate Job Seeking Challenges

Cultivating a Healthy Job-Seeking Mindset: To cultivate a healthy job-seeking mindset, college students should set realistic goals, face challenges positively, maintain patience and perseverance, engage in self-assessment positively, adapt flexibly to changes, establish support systems, focus on physical and mental health, learn from failures, seize learning opportunities, and maintain a positive attitude. This positive mindset helps them navigate job challenges and achieve career goals.

Seeking Support Actively: College students should proactively seek various support resources, including career counseling and mental health support. Career counseling can help them clarify career goals, plan their career paths, prepare resumes and interviews, and find suitable positions. Moreover, mental health support is essential because job challenges can lead to anxiety, depression, and stress. Working with professional mental health experts can help students effectively deal with emotional challenges while ensuring their mental well-being.

Accumulating Practical Experience: Practical experience is essential for college students entering the job market. Internships, part-time work, and volunteering offer opportunities to convert theory into skills, build networks, and grasp industry needs. It boosts competitiveness, making them ideal hires.

Continuing Learning and Skill Development: College students should view learning as an ongoing process to adapt to the constantly evolving job environment. Lifelong learning can include participating in professional training, online courses, workshops, and obtaining relevant certifications. Continuously improving skill levels helps them adapt to new job requirements and technological trends, increasing their career opportunities.

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