

Factors that Motivate Asia Pacific University Students to Pursue Careers in Human Resources

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to identify the factors that motivate university students from Asia Pacific countries studying at an American university to select human resources (HR) as a possible career path. The qualitative research method of focus groups was used to collect data from 37 university students from a private university in the western United States who self-declared HR as their primary or secondary area of study in their bachelor's degree programs. The study's findings revealed the primary motivating factors for Asia Pacific university students to pursue HR as a career were the following: (a) a perception that HR is a career in which participants could help others and make a difference in their countries; (b) an interest in the tasks of HR as a profession; (c) a belief that HR provided a high likelihood of securing employment after graduation.

More university degrees are awarded in the United States in business and management than any other, making business the most popular major at U.S. colleges and universities (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020). One of the most common areas of emphasis for a business degree in the United States is human resources (HR)/organizational behavior. An HR emphasis or concentration for a business management degree typically covers courses in areas such as human resource management, compensation, staffing, employment law, and training and development (Society for Human Resource Management [SHRM], 2019). At Brigham Young University – Hawaii (BYUH), where the Asia Pacific (APAC) region is the target area for student recruitment and admissions, the business management major also happens to be the most popular.

This study sought to identify why APAC university students studying at an American university select HR as a career path. The primary research question that drove this qualitative study was: What factors motivate

Asia Pacific university students to pursue careers in human resources?

This paper is divided into four sections. In the first section, literature will be briefly reviewed related to the current state of human resources in APAC region and why students select particular career paths. The geographical definition of the APAC region includes the western Pacific Ocean and not those in North and South America. The second section will review the methodology followed in the study. The third section will highlight key findings from the focus groups in which data were collected. The fourth section will discuss implications and limitations of the findings, including areas of further research.

Literature Review

The HR industry in APAC countries has lagged, historically, behind that of Europe and the United States where HR has matured over the past few decades (Hossain, 2016). Major human resource management (HRM) practices include recruitment, selection, compensation & benefits, employee relations, HR information

systems, and strategic HR operations. Many of these APAC countries still adopt the now-outdated “personnel management” approach to HR (Hossain, 2016). The Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998 and the rise in global competitors have significantly impacted HRM practices in the region since this time (Budhwar & Debrah, 2009; Park et al., 2004).

However, a “highly sophisticated HR has evolved” in economically mature countries in Asia such as Japan, Korea, and Taiwan (Rowley & Warner, 2007, p. 377). A different HR system is evolving in the developing countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand due largely to the fact that many small businesses utilize HR practices far different from multinational companies (Rowley & Warner, 2007). Bae et al. (2011) found that Taiwanese and Korean HRM “have shifted from paternalistic and hierarchical type HRM toward market type HRM” (p. 715). The HR systems in both Taiwan and Hong Kong have been heavily influenced by American HR practices; however, HRM in Hong Kong has been influenced more from multinational companies and international cultures from the U.K. and from North America (Chen & Ahlstrom, 2017).

One of the main challenges to developing a consistent model of HR management in the APAC region is the wide diversity across countries in such areas as culture, language, management practices, and economies (Hossain, 2016; Ng & Ang, 2014). Another is the lack of research about HRM systems across APAC. Most studies have focused on HRM practices only finding it difficult “to identify broad patterns, in the HRM systems within regions” (Ng & Ang, 2014). This tremendous diversity has some researchers arguing that no global convergence is on the horizon for HRM in the APAC region. If anything, hybrid models may materialize (Rowley et al. 2017).

Demand for human resource professionals across APAC fluctuates considerably, largely due to shifting economic needs in various APAC capitals. A 2017 job opportunities report

focusing on the APAC found that Human Resources ranked fourth in the top 5 most in-demand industries in the region, ranking Technology, Finance, and Sales/Marketing in the top three and Consultancy/Management ranked fifth. The proportion of vacancies in HR in Singapore, Hong Kong, and Kuala Lumpur was around 14% in each location, with Tokyo and Mumbai coming in around 4%. Entry-level jobs in HR were most plentiful in Singapore, with 54% of HR jobs being offered in 2017 for entry-level candidates (Expatriotfinder.com, 2017).

Major Choice

Also relevant to this study are articles in the literature that identify factors that motivate university and college students to pick particular majors and areas of study. While this study emphasizes the selection of HR as a career path, each participant interviewed in this qualitative study first selected HR as an academic area of interest in the pursuit of his or her bachelor’s degree.

A brief review of pertinent literature reveals that students select majors for a variety of reasons that align with personal and professional interests and ambitions. One such study was conducted by Li and Thomsen (2011) who surveyed business students at a medium-sized university in the United States, asking them to rate the importance of eight possible factors of why a student may select a particular major. Of these, anticipated salary ranked the highest, followed by “personal interest in the subject matter” (p. 111). Rounding out the top five were job security, projected occupational growth, and perceived prestige of the profession.

Interest in the subject matter was the most common reason given by 788 business students at a U.S. university for why they selected their major. In this study by Malgwi et al. (2005), females listed aptitude in the subject as the next highest factor, while men focused next on career advancement potential and the anticipated level of compensation in the field. Snyder and Slauson (2014) similarly found that students select information systems as their academic

major “due to personal interest, employment outlook, and salary levels” (p. 63). The primary reasons students did not choose information systems as their major was personal interest and requirements to complete courses in math.

In another study, Keshishian (2010) surveyed 215 freshman and sophomore students in a doctor of pharmacy program in the United States to determine the motivating factors to pursue pharmacy as a career choice. Female students in the program listed a desire to help others as a stronger motivating factor for pursuing pharmacy than male students reported. The author stated that this finding was not surprising because “affective behaviors, such as empathy and compassion, have been stereotypically ascribed to women and are also needed in patient-centered pharmacy” (p. 4).

While not a comprehensive summary of the literature, this brief review indicates that students select majors at the university for a variety of reasons which includes salary, interest in the profession, job prospects, and a desire to help others.

Methodology

Participants

This study was conducted at BYUH in Laie, Hawaii, on the island of Oahu. BYUH is a

private undergraduate university, with a diverse student body that represents more than 70 countries. Students were purposefully invited to participate in the study who met the following criteria: (a) were international students from the APAC region; (b) were enrolled in an introductory human resource management course; (c) had self-declared human resources as their primary or secondary area of study in their bachelor’s degree programs. The specific age of the participants was not collected data; however, all participants were within the traditional age group of an undergraduate college student.

Participation required time outside of course work, and during an ongoing school semester. The students were identified during the study by the country they represented, their gender, and individual names. For the purposes of this report the individual names are not disclosed. A total of 37 students participated in the study, representing 12 countries in the APAC region. The country with the highest representation in the focus groups was the Philippines, with 10 students in total. Next highest were Tonga and Fiji. (See Table 1 for a breakdown of the country of origin and gender of the participants.)

Table 1
Country of Origin of Participants

Country	Participants		
	Males	Females	Total
Philippines	8	2	10
Tonga	3	4	7
Fiji	1	3	4
Samoa	0	3	3
Japan	3	0	3
Hong Kong	0	3	3
China	2	0	2

Taiwan	0	1	1
Tahiti	0	1	1
Indonesia	0	1	1
Mongolia	0	1	1
Thailand	0	1	1
Total Participants:	17	20	37

Focus Groups

This study targets a specific demographic, that of an undergraduate university student, from the APAC region, studying in the United States. According to Fossey et al, (2002), focus groups are advantageous where participants are selected because they share social or cultural experiences. Furthermore, the researchers' goal was to derive responses to questions that were authentic. Qualitative research, including focus groups "aim to give privilege to the perspectives of the research participants" (p.723).

Data was collected through four focus groups. The focus groups were moderated by the researchers. The first two focus groups were conducted in person, in a classroom setting. The first focus group lasted 70 minutes. The second took 65 minutes. The two groups were incentivized by food to participate in the study. At the end of their focus group, the participants were treated with pizza and drinks. No additional compensation was offered or tendered.

The third and fourth focus groups were conducted over the online platform, Zoom. This change to Zoom was made due to the impact of the Covid-19 global pandemic at BYU-Hawaii, and guidelines requiring instruction to be online at the time of the last two focus groups. The third focus group lasted 45 minutes. The final focus group lasted 60 minutes. There was no food incentive, or any other type of compensation offered or tendered to the last two groups. All four focus groups were video recorded and later

transcribed by a student research assistant. Each transcription was reviewed for accuracy by the researchers.

The majority of participants expressed their intention to return to their countries of origin upon graduation from BYU-Hawaii in order to establish their careers. This emphasis to return to their home countries is a key component of BYU-Hawaii's mission to "prepare students with character and integrity who can provide leadership" in their families, communities, and chosen fields (BYU-Hawaii, n.d.).

Research Questions

This study was guided by Krumboltz's (1975) Social Learning Theory of Career Development (SLTCD). According to the SLTCD, career choices are influenced by four factors: (a) genetic endowment and special abilities; (b) environmental conditions and events; (c) task approach skills; (d) instrumental and associative learning experiences. In line with the SLTCD, six questions were asked of the Asia Pacific students in the focus groups. The questions primarily sought to identify the participants' environmental conditions, events, and learning experiences that influenced their choice of HR as a career path. These six questions were as follows:

1. What is motivating you to consider human resources as a career?
2. What challenges do you expect to face in your home country if you work in HR?

3. How has your decision to pursue HR as a career been perceived by your family and your friends?
4. What influence has your national culture had on your decision to pursue HR as a career path?
5. What experiences or mentors have you had in your life that caused you to choose HR as a possible career path?
6. What would cause you to change your mind about pursuing a career in HR?

The findings of this study focus on responses to the first research question, however, responses to the other questions that related to motivating factors are included. The focus group moderators asked follow up questions for clarification to improve the clarity and follow the threads of information shared.

Data Analysis

The focus groups were recording and the data coded and analyzed using first- and second-coding methods described by Saldaña (2013) to identify themes and patterns in the transcriptions. Because data were collected from four focus

groups at different days and times, congruence of the opinions shared by the participants across the four focus groups was of utmost importance in the coding process, as these represented perspectives shared by all participants.

The coders were the two researchers, and the four separate recordings were transcribed by the same research student. Each transcription was reviewed by the researcher moderating the focus group session in order to check the data. Through the use of the codes, themes were identified, and participant quotes that succinctly and clearly illustrated each theme were selected. The themes and selected quotes will be shared in the following section.

Findings

In preparing for the focus group interviews, questions were organized to uncover the environmental conditions, events, and learning experiences of the participants involved. The number of times a participant listed a particular motivating factor during one of the focus groups is identified in Table 2.

Table 2
Motivators Stated by Participants and Frequency of Occurrences

Motivators	Country of Origin											Total:	
	Philippines	Tonga	Fiji	Japan	Hong Kong	Tahiti	China	Taiwan	Samoa	Indonesia	Thailand		Mongolia
To make a difference/help my country	7	4	4	2		1	1		2	1	1	1	24
Particular tasks of the HR profession	7	2	2	1	2	2			2				18
Likelihood of securing an HR job after graduation	1	1	1	1				1		1			6

Factors that Motivate Asia Pacific University Students to Pursue Careers in Human Resources

18

Is a position of influence in an organization	1	1	1	1	4
Desire to gain particular skills	1	1			1 3
To pursue a unique/different career path than others	2	1			3
HR is not established in my country	1	2		1	4
HR is a "stable" job/field	2			1	3
HR skills will make me more successful in business	1			1	2
A job in HR will not be replaced by technology or artificial intelligence				1	1
Compensation				1	1

Three key themes emerged from the participants' responses as to what factors motivate them to pursue a career in HR:

1. Help others and make a difference in their countries.
2. The particular tasks of the HR profession.
3. Job opportunities in the field.

The themes were ranked based on the number of responses gathered among the participants (see Table 2), all of which were similar across nationalities. It is noteworthy to highlight that the first two themes received a significantly higher number of responses.

Help Others and Make a Difference in Their Countries

The motivation to help others and make a difference in their countries was articulated in several ways, including a fundamental desire to

help make others' lives better. A female Fijian participant stated that HR allows her to "make people's working lives better" by "helping people cooperate in an organization." Another female student from Fiji admitted that she intended to study nursing in college, only to discover that BYUH did not offer a nursing degree. A friend suggested the HR program instead. It resonated with her. "One of my greatest motivations for taking this major is that I believe HR helps a Fijian better understand his or her people," she said. One female Filipino participant clearly stated in her response that there was a real sense that a career in HR can change entire communities.

Being instrumental in improving human interaction in the workplace came across as a strong motivation to help others. A female

participant from the Philippines discovered her love of being around people and working with people while studying HR. “My passion is to help people develop capabilities. I want to see people succeed, and I enjoy seeing people succeed.” Similarly, a female student from Indonesia described the challenges her uncle faced as an HR recruiter. She described how hard it was for him to connect people to jobs. Her uncle’s struggle drives her to help others develop professional connections, and to be the middle person to link people looking for jobs with companies looking to hire qualified candidates. She stated that she perceives her HR education will be a tool to be able to do this effectively.

Focusing on making a difference, participants from the Pacific raised the issue of nepotism, and how they are motivated to change this behavior in their communities. A female participant from Samoa shared that she wants to make a difference and effect change by implementing fair and impartial hiring practices. This desire stemmed from her frustration of seeing friends and relatives apply for jobs for which they believed they were qualified, only to lose out on those opportunities to perceived lesser-qualified candidates with deeper connections to the hiring managers. Another participant from Samoa expressed the same concerns about nepotism and bias in the selection of candidates for positions. She stated that she considers nepotism to be a major concern in her country, and she wants to return to her country with the HR skills to strengthen and implement fair and impartial hiring practices. It is worth noting that the Pacific countries differ significantly in population size compared to the Asian countries in this study. These Pacific countries having a smaller population size, and therefore smaller recruitment numbers, and may contribute to, or even amplify, perceived bias and unfairness.

One participant credited her experience as the oldest of six children growing up in Tonga as inspiring her to pursue a career focused on

helping others. Her upbringing taught her that it is her responsibility to look after her siblings, and everyone else. A male participant from the Philippines confirmed that during his youth he witnessed people who were industrious in their life but lacked experience in applying their skills in the workforce where they, and their skill set, could be valued. This motivated him to consider a career in HR where he believes he can help change this.

A male Japanese participant shared that his father is the vice president of a large corporation in Japan that oversees the Asia Pacific division. The participant was encouraged by his father to pursue HR to help fix some of the managerial issues his father saw in global offices throughout Asia Pacific. A female Mongolian participant said her motivations to pursue HR were prompted in part by her desire to better manage the unpaid overtime and unpaid double time so common in Mongolia. She also hopes to correct the way people are judged in job interviews in Mongolia.

A phone call answered during her HR internship inspired a participant from the Philippines to continue studying HR. An employee called the HR department where the participant was interning to report that his ill child could not receive medical care from the local hospital because of insurance problems. This resonated with the participant, who came to realize that HR serves as an important resource for employees and their family members. This phone call heightened her desire to be helpful, but more importantly to be “a link to the chain,” as she stated.

The desire to help people develop HR skills was also connected to this theme. A Fijian participant shared that she is convinced that a career in HR will afford her the opportunity to make people’s working lives better. This includes not only existing staff, but also recruiting others into the organization. A Mongolian participant said she is motivated to pursue a career in HR so she can help others learn specific HR functions. This participant

sees HR as the department best equipped to retain employees and help them “be their best.” This sentiment was echoed by a Tongan participant who said her motivation to pursue HR stems, in part, from a desire to help managers and supervisors have the relevant skills to make their employees feel like they belong in the company.

The Tasks of the Human Resources Profession

A second motivator for the participants was the work of human resources itself. Participants recognized that the skills and competencies of an HR professional are the same skills and competencies of other successful business professionals. A male student from the Philippines said he believes HR to be a “career for leaders,” because HR is not just about learning to work with people and how people behave, but it also involves elements of marketing, finance, and operations. A male participant from China said he is enthusiastic and confident about how studying HR will make him a successful business person. He stated, “If you want to put yourself in the management position, HR is a necessary skill for you to operate your company and to interact with the people around you.”

The requirement within the HR field to interact with other people appealed to several participants in the focus groups. A female participant from Tonga said she discovered in an HR course that she likes training, and that she is good at communicating information to others. This personal awareness has fueled her desire to pursue a career in HR where she will focus on helping people qualify for better jobs. A male Filipino student self-identified as an extrovert, someone who loves to be around people and to learn their cultures and backgrounds. He stated that his desire to pursue HR is fueled by his belief that HR will allow him to be around people consistently. Similarly, a female participant from the Philippines acknowledged that “HR is really the heart of the organization

because you are managing humans, and not just managing systems.”

A majority of participants stated that their family, friends, and associates simply do not understand what a career in HR involves. A female Tongan participant who recently added HR as her primary area of study stated that her family does not understand what it means to study HR at the university level. Another female Tongan participant said she has resorted to explaining that she is studying to be a manager in order to appease family members’ questions about her educational pursuits. This lack of awareness also is prevalent in Mongolia, as a female participant expressed her dismay of having to repeatedly explain her area of study to her family and friends. She said she is driven by the personal satisfaction of succeeding as an HR professional as her way of demonstrating that she has made a good choice in pursuing this career path.

Several participants identified HR as the means to help them reach their long-term goals. For example, the Taiwanese participant considers developing skills in HR as essential to his aspirations of being in a managerial position. A female participant from the Philippines shared that she worked for two American-based companies with offices in the Philippines before attending the university. Although both companies had HR departments, neither was as organized as HR departments in the U.S. she was learning about during her university studies. She said she considers HR as a growing industry in the Philippines, and is motivated to pursue HR so she can educate corporations and companies in a significant way.

Job Opportunities

The third often-stated factor for pursuing HR as a career was the perception that HR would provide plentiful job opportunities upon graduation. The female Taiwanese participant shared that an HR position in Taiwan is considered stable work. Having an understanding that nearly every large company has an HR department, a female participant from

Indonesia said she is motivated to study HR because of the high likelihood for employment upon graduation. A male participant from China shared a unique perspective on job security when he offered his assumption that HR is a profession safe from being replaced by artificial intelligence. He stated that “artificial intelligence can read through your resume and everything, but at the end, there has to be a human to interview the candidate.”

Several participants perceived HR in the Asia Pacific region as a “growing industry” with many opportunities. As one Filipino male participant stated, “there are a lot of things you can do when you work in HR.” His perspective of HR as a growing industry is based on his perception of a lack of HR practices in his country, and his experience of seeing industrious people struggle because they lack skills to increase their value in the workforce. He sees an opportunity to provide these skills to his people through HR. This perception of opportunity was shared by a participant from Japan. He said that because Japanese companies are adding separate HR departments, following the example of Western companies, he believes there will be more future employment opportunities in HR fields within Japanese companies.

Implications and Limitations

Although the research highlighted three key themes that motivate participants to pursue a career in HR, the two motivating factors of helping others/making a difference in their countries and interests in the particular tasks of the HR Profession clearly emerged as the primary factors for pursuing HR.

Based on the responses, it was noticeable that participants from Asia had a clearer insight into the role of an HR professional and the career opportunities within the major compared to participants from the Pacific. It is unclear why this is the case. This could warrant further research, but perhaps HR as a career is not as established in the Pacific

area, hence the reason for Pacific participants being unclear about HR as a career and profession.

Population size and economic activity may have shaped the perception Pacific participants have regarding HR as a profession, as compared to Asian participants. It is our assumption that most Pacific participants originated from smaller and more rural communities where employment opportunities are concentrated in primary industries such as agriculture, fisheries, the public sector, and the hospitality industry. We also assume that Asian participants come from more established economies where careers and employment are focused in industries such as manufacturing, technology, logistics, and business. Future opportunities for further research in the areas of population size and economic activity may be required to substantiate whether they have impacted the development and perception of HR.

An implication of the research is that colleges, like BYUH, can utilize this data to better market the HR major to APAC students. Reviewing and understanding APAC participants and their responses has given us useful insights into their decision making with regards to majors and what influenced them to choose HR as a major and or why HR has become their major of choice. Although responses were gathered from participants only within the HR major, it would also be useful to research and gather response from APAC students who chose not to major in HR and what influenced their major choice at an American college.

The study has at least two limitations worth noting. First, the study encompasses participants studying in an American university from 12 different countries throughout the APAC region. Therefore, the sample size of the participant base is not large enough to draw statistically significant conclusions about the motivations of participants from a particular country. On a similar note, no attempt has been made to compare the responses of students from

different countries in order to draw generalizations or conclusions specific to a given country.

Additionally, this study brings to light key perceptions held by APAC university students about pursuing a career in human resources and the HR discipline itself within APAC. No attempt was made in this study to verify the accuracy of the participants' perceptions to conditions in the HR field in APAC; rather, the focus was on gathering the perceptions and seeking commonality in the responses. More focused research is needed to address these two limitations.

Conclusion

The primary findings of this study are that APAC university students perceive HR to be a career in which students can make a positive difference in the lives of others, the particular tasks of the HR profession are interesting to them, and it offers job opportunities upon graduation. This study provides us with insights into what motivates APAC students at an American university to pursue a career in HR.

The findings align with recent research by Paukert et al. (2021) in which younger millennials and postmillennials, who have recently entered the workforce or will soon enter the workforce, carry a largely positive view of a human resources department's function in an organization. Respondents in this study used terms such as "helpful," "approachable," "caring," "compassionate," "informative," and "employee centric" to describe HR. Paukert et al. (2021) argued that younger millennials and postmillennials see themselves as "capable contributors and change makers" who seek such aspects in a profession as "meaningful work," "the ability to make a difference," and "career-growth options" (p. 47). Our study supports these findings in relation to APAC university students.

Consistent with Li and Thomsen (2011), our findings establish that APAC students also select majors that line up with personal and

professional interests and ambitions. However, is it only APAC students who would place helping others and making a difference in their countries as the top motivating factor? Li and Thomsen (2011) found that salary ranked the highest of the most important factors to the students in their study, followed by personal interest. Further research is necessary, and it would be interesting to know if there are common cultural values held by APAC students that compel their desire to help others.

The findings highlighted the diversity of the knowledge of HR as a profession in the APAC region through the experiences, perceptions, and expectations expressed by the participants. The spectrum ranged from participants with a strong knowledge of the role of an HR professional, for example a participant whose family member works in HR, to those who have never heard of HR, but have a desire to work in a job that helps people. This opens a door for further research, perhaps starting with the assumptions made that APAC HR industries are impacted by population size and economic activities.

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